3. "For Married Women Only:" Birth Control and Modern Marriage

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Birth Control and Modern Marriage

> Why is Birth Control Necessary? . . . it will give to the home peace, harmony and love and it will, by encouraging early marriage, lessen prostitution and promote morality.
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> —"The Birth Control Primer,"
> *Birth Control Review,* February 1926

Although the March 1914 *Woman Rebel* claimed that "Rebel Women" have "The Right to be unmarried mothers," by the 1920s the birth control movement was operating within a cultural norm that assumed marriage (3). In the 1920s, new ideas regarding marriage and sexuality circulated in liberal circles such as Greenwich Village. Some couples engaged in companionate marriage, a more egalitarian union that rested on the emotional and physical compatibility of husband and wife.[1] The short skirts and bobbed hair of the 1920s symbolized changing rules and the loosening of sexuality from reproduction. Claude McKay's character Rose in his 1928 novel, *Home to Harlem,* exemplifies the extreme sexual freedom that horrified some and delighted others. McKay wrote, "Rose had her friends of both sexes and was quite free in her ways. At the Congo she sat and drank and flirted with many fellows. That was a part of her business. She got more tips that way, and the extra personal bargains that gave her the means to maintain her style of living. All her lovers had always accepted her living entirely free" (113).[2]

1. On "sex radicals" and changing conceptions of marriage, see Simmons, "Women's Power in Sex: Radical Challenges to Marriage in the Early-Twentieth-Century United States."

2. Some writers and critics criticized McKay's celebration of sexual freedom for add-

The New Woman enjoyed increased sexual freedom, and growing numbers engaged in premarital sex and looked down upon traditional marriage. In *Plum Bun*, Jessie Redmon Fauset depicts the protagonist's friend Paulette as a bohemian New Woman who has sexual affairs with no intention of marrying: "I see what I want; I use my wiles as a woman to get it," she tells Angela (105). Paulette views marriage as a burden and asks, "[W]hat's the use of tying yourself up now, while you're young?" (106). Although Paulette's attitude symbolized the sexual freedom of the Jazz Age, she did not represent the statistical norm. As marriage historian Stephanie Coontz notes, "there was no widespread rejection of marriage in the 1920s; indeed, rates of lifelong singlehood fell" (203). The institution of marriage sanctioned female desire, and this desire led, inevitably it seemed, to motherhood and children. The protagonist of Fauset's 1924 novel, *There Is Confusion*, articulates this link to her boyfriend, Peter, when she tells him, "You know perfectly well that for a woman love usually means a household of children" (95). Even the noted sexologist Havelock Ellis, a frequent contributor to the *Birth Control Review*, discussed female sexuality in terms of the "marital embrace" enjoyed by husband and wife ("The Love Rights of Women" 3). Conscious of marriage's social framework as a necessary condition for female sexuality, the birth control movement was inherently embroiled in debates about marriage and motherhood.

How did American advocates of birth control in the 1920s reconcile their arguments with traditional morality after the "red and flaming" years of radical rhetoric? What role did fiction play in changing popular perceptions of female sexuality and gender roles? The antithetical pairings of marriage and prostitution, motherhood and abortion reveal the birth control movement's attempts to gain legitimacy from a wider audience in the 1920s. The table of contents of several issues of the *Birth Control Review* highlights this close association between contraception and marriage. Titles of articles include "Education in Marriage," "Marriage and Birth Control," and the five-part series, "Marriage Today and in the Future," among many others.[3] Advertisements for marriage manuals such as *The*

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ing to the popular notion of black sexuality as primitive. W. E. B. DuBois, for instance, wrote, "Reading it makes me want to take a bath" ("The Browsing Reader"). Other writers of the Harlem Renaissance, however, including Zora Neale Hurston and Langston Hughes, appreciated McKay's frankness.

3. "Marriage Today and in the Future" by John Haynes Holmes; "Marriage and Birth Control" by C. Gasquoine Hartley; "Education for Marriage" by Meyer E. Nimkoff. Other articles on marriage in the *Birth Control Review* included "Birth Control and Early Marriage" by William F. Ogburn, Ph.D. (December 1926); "Harmony in Marriage" by Hornell Hart (November 1927); and "A Research in Marriage" by Havelock Ellis (May 1929).

Sex Technique in Marriage by I. E. Hutton, M.D. and *The Hygiene of Marriage: A Detailed Consideration of Sex and Marriage* by Dr. Millard S. Everett appeared in the *Review.* Margaret Sanger contributed to the genre with *Happiness in Marriage* in 1926.[4] Even though the New Woman of the 1920s was engaging in more premarital sex than before (D'Emilio and Freedman 241), the birth control movement firmly set its discourse into the matrix of marriage and morality.

The argument that birth control was moral rebutted three basic premises: that birth control's purpose was to destroy motherhood and allow women sex without consequence; that contraception was the same as abortion; and that it would allow an explosion in licentiousness and prostitution. This tension is evident in V. F. Calverton's 1929 work, *The Bankruptcy of Marriage*. Calverton, who was generally pro-contraception, depicts birth control as antithetical to marriage. He writes, "an important factor in the growth of the new morality, and the decay of modern marriage, has been the advancing perfection of modern contraceptives. . . . Marriage thus is rapidly coming to lose sexual significance for women as well as men" (118, 121). Birth control was a potential threat to traditional morality because it made public the possibility of female sexuality outside of marriage (without pregnancy). But by the 1920s the birth control movement rhetorically grounded its arguments in traditional morality, strategically invoking a normative ideology of gender and class. These issues were implicated in and impacted by the possibility of birth control, as can be seen in an examination of fictional portrayals of marriage.

"New Woman," Old Institution

The New Woman corresponded with changing ideas about morality and sexuality. As early as 1913 the country was talking about the "sex hysteria and sex discussion" that had "invaded this country" ("Sex O'Clock in America" 113). Increased acceptance of female sexuality was a minor argument for contraception. In her earlier arguments Sanger attacked withdrawal and coitus interruptus on the grounds that they denied female sexual satisfaction and left a woman in a state of "high nervous tension" (qtd. in D'Emilio and Freedman 244). An editorial in a 1915 issue of *The New Republic*, a mainstream periodical, encapsulates this

4. Margaret Sanger divorced her first husband, William Sanger, in 1921 after a long separation and married millionaire Noah Slee in 1922.

tension between traditional morality (female chastity) and the growing arguments for birth control: "The question is whether earlier marriages, the reduction of illegitimacy and abortion, the prevention of too frequent pregnancy with its disastrous effect on the health of the wife and the morale of the husband, the lightening of economic burdens, the decrease in the birth of the unfit, are not reasons which far outweigh the importance attached to the personal chastity of a minority among women" ("The Control of Births" 115). Although perhaps conventional to twenty-first-century readers, the early birth control movement's critiques of conventional marriage and the double standard placed on female sexuality contributed to shifting ideas about marriage.

Growing out of various social movements, including Victoria Woodhull's nineteenth-century free love ideas and the ongoing movement for women's suffrage, some early birth controllers argued that controlling her body was a woman's right. In 1914 Goldman wrote, "Woman's development, her freedom, her independence, must come from and through herself. First by asserting herself as a personality, and not as a sex commodity. Second, by refusing the right to anyone over her body; by refusing to bear children, unless she wants them" ("Woman's Suffrage" 202). That same year Sanger wrote in *The Woman Rebel,* "A Woman's Body belongs to herself alone" ("Suppression" 25). As Sara Bard Field claimed in the December 15, 1916, issue of *The Blast,* "Birth control is a woman's declaration of right as to the use to which her body shall be put" (7). These ideas of female control removed sexuality, however briefly, from the context of marriage.

Fiction also revealed this shifting morality. In 1913 *Current Opinion* reported that "[a]t the present moment, novels and plays may be said fairly to reek with sex" ("Literary Censorship and the Novels of the Winter" 353). This section will examine a few fictional depictions from the 1910s before moving to works of the 1920s that subtly critique conventional marriage. These presentations function in terms set out by Joseph Allen Boone as tradition and countertradition: ideological structures of belief (such as the institution of marriage) "are translated into narrative structures that at once encode and perpetuate those beliefs" in some works supporting birth control, thus serving a conservative social function, while other works present a "counter narrative" by exploring the tensions and contradictions underlying the social marital contract (2).

While *The Masses* was only published from 1911 to 1917, it appealed to "a wide variety of readers . . . not limited by age or gender . . . [including] working class and immigrant readers" (Morrisson

178). This wide audience, combined with a liberal editorial policy, makes *The Masses* an interesting site to begin examining the New [Married] Woman. Although many of the bohemian Villagers contributing to *The Masses* advocated free love, their work often provided only a gentle critique of marriage or none at all. "A New Woman?" by Dorothy Weil dramatizes this ambivalence, portraying an unmarried mother and the negative public perceptions of her throughout the class structure. The question mark in the title of this 1916 story indicates the skeptical judgment of the New Woman's choices. The first-person narrator laments that her regular cleaning woman, Mrs. Knox, has to take a vacation to have another child. The narrator is surprised since "[h]er husband's a good-for-nothing that she's had to get away from; though she, being a Catholic, couldn't divorce him once and for all" (Weil 17). Mrs. Knox became pregnant when she exchanged sex for her alcoholic husband's financial help, an exchange that equates marriage with prostitution. She is trapped by her poverty, by her dependence on an alcoholic husband, and by her inability to control her fertility.

With the story of Mrs. Knox, Weil seemingly criticizes an institution that traps women in abusive situations, but the narrative focus on the replacement cleaning woman, "a pleasant young thing, but frail and consumptive looking," challenges this interpretation (17). This younger woman, Jennie, has a child out of wedlock. When Mrs. Knox returns to work she refuses to work with "that critter . . . a woman unmarried who has a child" (17). Mrs. Knox, herself the victim of an unhappy marriage, has nothing but contempt for unmarried mothers like Jennie. This traditional morality unites Mrs. Knox and her wealthy employer. Yet Weil does not provide easy judgments of the characters, complicating Mrs. Knox's virtue with the implication that she prostituted herself to her abusive husband and depicting in the "fallen" Jennie a representative working-class figure, a young woman who helped raise ten siblings and who had worked since the age of twelve. In the face of these virtues, Jennie's flaw is acting on her sexual desire: she admits to having "done it, ma'am—because I wanted to" (18). This desire was for sexual intimacy, not a child: "of course we didn't think of that, ma'am. How many people in their goings on do you suppose there is that do?" Jennie represents premarital sexuality and the commonplace ignorance of contraception. Although Jennie is a sterling character despite the blemish of her admitted sexuality and unwed pregnancy, Weil seems suspicious of free love. Jennie is ill and her prospects are very bleak, because no one will help her. The troubled narrator considers calling the authorities, but in the

end, highly conflicted, she fires Jennie. While Jennie is portrayed sympathetically, the story does not provide an inspiring vision of the brave New Woman. Rather, it implies that no woman can be free, within or outside of marriage, when encumbered by unwanted children.

"Usury," by Helen R. Hull, another 1916 *Masses* story, offers a simultaneous reinforcement and reshaping of traditional views of marriage. Like "A New Woman?" "Usury" focuses on the relationship between an unmarried, pregnant servant and her middle-class employer, a narrative pattern that Margaret C. Jones has noted is both frequently and effectively employed by female contributors to *The Masses* (65). In Hull's story, the spinster Cora MacAllister advises her "fallen" maid Lizzie to marry the man who had fathered her dead baby, as "[m]arriage was the way in which such mistakes as Lizzie's were remedied" (5). But Lizzie is engaged to another man, a man who loves her. The idea that female sexuality outside of marriage must be punished remains in Cora's mind even as she agrees that Lizzie can marry the man she loves, as long as she marries. The act of marriage, its institutional ability to cleanse former sins by carefully guarding female actions, transcends the characters themselves. The story follows the traditional romantic plot structure equating marriage for women with a happy ending. However, the idea that unwed sexuality must be punished is somewhat negated by allowing the "fallen woman" to be happy within marriage, to have her marry for love rather than as redemption. Cora confirms marriage as woman's ultimate goal, and those women who did not marry were increasingly "objects of scorn and pity: spinsters were seen as neurotic and unfulfilled because they had not participated in the heterosexual experience now so highly valued by society" (Ware 64–65). By placing traditional views in the mouth of a spinster, Hull further questions their validity.

Writers also used humor to advocate for birth control and to critique marriage. *Wedded: A Social Comedy,* the 1914 play by Lawrence Langner, examines the role of marriage in sanctioning female desire and birth control's place in this matrix. Although the subtitle probably refers to the literary convention of ending a comedy in marriage (Gainor 170), *Wedded* offers an implicit critique of marriage as a social convention while making strong arguments for birth control. Indeed, this is no ideal escape story, despite its comic nature, because class is foregrounded in the setting ("a cheap district of Brooklyn") and the dialogue (a lower-class dialect).

As with countless other fictional and real-life couples, an unwanted pregnancy precipitates the wedding. Janet Ransome is no innocent virgin seduced by an unfeeling villain, but a modern woman with sexual feel-

ings. Pregnant outside of wedlock, she will be socially ostracized, her sin physically written on her body. But Langner complicates social judgment. He does not present Janet as carelessly promiscuous but places his couple in a situation that would have been familiar to his audience, eliciting sympathy: Janet and Bob had been engaged for three years but were too poor to wed. As Mrs. Ransome explains to the minister, "My girl ain't naturally bad. It isn't as though she'd pick up any feller that happened to come along. Hundreds and thousands do it, sir, indeed they do" (13–14). When reprimanded by the minister for not waiting to engage in intercourse, Janet replies, "We did wait. Isn't three years long enough? D'ye think we was made of stone? How much longer d'ye think we could wait? We waited until we couldn't hold out no longer" (15).

The play reveals another common problem, lack of knowledge about birth control and about sexuality in general: Janet's mother asks her, "Are you sure? D'ye know how to tell fer certain?" (9). Prudery and strict morality have prevented frank conversations between mother and daughter, and any discussion of "how to tell" would have occurred after marriage. And the results extend beyond pregnancy. As Mrs. Ransome hysterically announces, Janet will get kicked out of the house and lose her job, which will inevitably lead to prostitution: "That's how they get started on the streets, sir," she cries to the minister (14). This impending tragedy is due to ignorance of birth control methods as much as illicit sexuality, as Janet makes clear: "D'ye think I wanted a baby? I didn't want one. I didn't know how to stop it. If you don't like it—it's a pity you don't preach sermons on how to stop havin' babies when they're not wanted. There'd be some sense in that. That'd be more sense than talkin' about waitin'—an' waitin'—an' waitin'. There's hundreds of women round here—starvin' and sufferin'—an' havin' one baby after another, and don't know the first thing about how to stop it. 'Tisn't my fault I'm going to have one. I didn't want it" (15). There is both humor and pathos in the image of the minister preaching a gospel of birth control. Unlike the grim despair of most radical narratives, Langner's play ends happily enough, with the minister signing the marriage register after being convinced of Janet's contrition. But this posthumous wedding reveals that the social institution of marriage can be a farce.

The controversy over the New Woman, birth control, and marriage continued into the 1920s in mainstream magazines such as *Harper's, The Nation,* and *Outlook.*[5] Magazines aimed at white middle-class women

5. For an overview of early birth control coverage in the mainstream press, specifically the *New York Times*, *Harper's Weekly*, and *The New Republic*, see Dolores Flamiano. Interestingly, Mary Alden Hopkins presented birth control neutrally in a *Harper's Weekly*

grew in popularity from the 1910s through the 1920s and played a significant role in shaping acceptable female behavior and attitudes. While circulation of the *Birth Control Review* fluctuated between 15,000 and 30,000 subscriptions, the *Ladies' Home Journal* and *Pictorial Review,* two of the "big six" women's magazines, reached over two million women each.[6] Unsurprisingly, the ideas they circulated were largely conservative, and the fiction memorialized traditional roles for women within marriage and the home. The *Ladies' Home Journal* established its stance quite early, printing on March 1, 1905, a speech by Theodore Roosevelt, "The American Woman as Mother," which attacked women and birth control for moral degeneracy and race suicide. The *Ladies' Home Journal* published only a few articles on birth control, such as "Alarming Decrease in American Babies" (July 1922), "College Women and Race Suicide" (April 1922), and "What of Birth Regulation?" (October 1931).

Stories in women's magazines differed in tone and purpose from those in politically oriented periodicals such as the *Birth Control Review.* The fiction in women's magazines focused on love, romance, fantasy, and escape, providing entertainment while reinforcing traditional values (Hoekstra 44). These magazines, due to the need for advertising revenue, competition for subscribers, and outside pressure, reinforced women's roles as housewife, mother, and wife. Birth control did not neatly fit into this equation. (The *Birth Control Review* contained minimal advertisements and relied heavily on funding from Sanger's second husband, the millionaire Noah Slee.) Editors of women's magazines looked for stories that promoted consumerism. As Katherine Fullerton Gerould noted in 1936, women's magazines "print a great many serials and short stories calculated to appeal to the same subscribers who cut out the receipts, send for the dress patterns, and write to the sub-editor" (3).[7] Readers tried to copy the fictional heroines, to "consume" the lifestyle, and therefore the stories are both sentimental and "realistic" in terms of object descriptions. The fiction of the *Ladies' Home Journal* focused on "middle class virtues" and a theme of "love" (Johns-Heine and Gerth 109, 111). In style and theme, these stories contrast with the more radical fiction, whose starkly negative melodrama deconstructed complacency and radi-

series in 1915–16: "*Harper's Weekly* feels that whatever the decision, full and accurate information about the controversy, with the arguments on both sides and the important facts in the case, is due to its readers"; however, the articles largely supported the arguments made in the *Birth Control Review* without ever mentioning birth control.

6. Peck provides the approximate figure for the *Birth Control Review* (38), while Zuckerman's excellent history of popular women's magazines provides circulation information for *Ladies' Home Journal* and *Pictorial Review* (105–14).

7. See also Scanlon.

calized readers: readers were not meant to identify with the poor, physically broken women, but instead meant to view them as representatives of a grave social ill.

While fiction in both genres of magazine focused on marriage, their depictions of the stability of love differed markedly. In part, the difference is one of timing and emphasis. In her study of women's magazines from 1900 to 1920, Hoekstra identifies six major plots, including "boy meets girl" (45). These stories "end in marriage; there is no hint of premarital sex, and the final marriage ceremony chastely suggests the physical consummation of love" (45). These narratives explicate emotional rather than physical courtship, ignoring the contemporary social increase in premarital "petting," which was aided by the introduction of the automobile as a private space for young couples. By 1938, a study by Dorothy Dunbar Bromley and Florence Britten revealed that one-quarter of college women had premarital sex with their fiancés. Many of these couples relied on condoms, available in gas stations, for contraception. This greater sexual freedom occurred within the bounds of expected marriage, since "an overwhelming majority of college women in the 1930s saw marriage as the main goal of their lives . . . love, and a clear commitment to matrimony, justified the intimacy" (Ware 66, 63).

This narrative pattern contrasts with stories where premarital sex initiated an unplanned marriage. A character such as Weil's New Woman would never appear in popular women's magazines because she is not the victim of an unscrupulous seducer but a woman with her own desires. The propaganda fiction of the *Birth Control Review* during the 1920s would also be unlikely to sympathetically depict women with sexual desire outside of marriage. Indeed, the stories used rhetorically by the birth control movement always begin *after* the inception of a relationship, whereas the romance stories of the popular magazines emphasize the romantic early days of love. In the women's magazines, marriage is the heroine's ultimate goal, and "[i]nterest in sexuality is forbidden; physical attraction can be expressed only in etherealized romantic love; the only other allowable love is maternal" (Hoekstra 54). Thus these stories ignore the ugly conditions that are central to the radical fiction. These fictional escapes reinforce the idea that marriage is woman's ultimate goal, wife and mother her predestined role, without examining the impending threats to the sanctity of marriage.

The tales of marriage in the radical press exhibit a narrative stability from the 1920s through the 1930s, as the birth control movement attempted to align itself with the moral majority. Fiction in women's magazines offered a more flexible depiction of marriage, shifting their message

slightly to appeal to a growing number of career women. According to Maureen Honey, during the 1920s magazines such as *Ladies' Home Journal* began positively portraying heroines with careers who do not either marry or enter into a companionate marriage. However, these heroines often sacrifice their sexuality for their careers, rejecting both marriage and sexuality. In this way the women's magazines took a small step in opening discussion of women's roles: Marriage is not inevitable, but female sexuality cannot exist outside of marriage without threatening gender norms. Sexuality and the attendant need for birth control remain within marriage. These positive portrayals of fictional career women who sacrificed their sexuality were short-lived, lasting approximately two decades. During the 1940s, especially after the return of husbands from World War II, the fiction of women's magazines returned to glorifying wife and mother roles within the domestic sphere (Franzwa 43).

Mainstream, middle-class women's magazines unsurprisingly did not advocate for birth control, but what *is* interesting is how the contraceptive movement's situating of birth control within marriage aligned it ideologically with the women's magazines. Although the escape fiction of women's magazines ignored the reality of what can go wrong in marriage, and the subsequent need for birth control, the presence of advertisements for "female hygiene" products within their pages demonstrates a tacit acknowledgment that the subject was indeed on many readers' minds. By 1938, in a rare article on the subject, the *Ladies' Home Journal* acknowledged this fact in "What the Women of America Think about Birth Control," which revealed that 79 percent of the women surveyed supported birth control so that they could regulate the number of children they could care for (Pringle 14).

The stories published in the *Birth Control Review* and mainstream periodicals, by turns melodramatic and sentimental, have largely been lost to the critical gaze. Their broad characterizations, thin plots, and dated subject matter relegate them to virtual oblivion. Luckily, the relationship between marriage and birth control transcended their yellowed pages and attracted more canonical authors interested in the changing nuances of marriage and morality. Theodore Dreiser, an author firmly fixed in the literary canon, is one American author who integrated the issues of marriage, female sexuality, and birth control into his work. The public reception of several of Dreiser's novels demonstrates why the birth control movement itself needed to retain a conservative stance.

Theodore Dreiser supported the movement and contributed nonfiction to the *Birth Control Review*. In April 1921 he offered "A Word Concerning Birth Control," and he is quoted in the January 1934 issue

as saying, "If it is necessary, and hence legitimate, for the government to control production and distribution, income and wages, why is it not equally necessary for it to control the number of the beneficiaries of all this? In other words, why is not birth control as necessary to the welfare of the state as any of these others?" (2). Scholars have noted the concordance of Dreiser's biography, beliefs, and fiction. Richard Lingeman argues that "because of the troubles in his own marriage, he shared the ideas on the family, sexual morality, and contraception proclaimed by Emma Goldman, Margaret Sanger, and the Swedish feminist Ellen Key" (292). These comments demonstrate Dreiser's public stance on the issue and illuminate the implicit message of his fiction.

Although Theodore Dreiser's novels don't explicitly give birth control the "unqualified endorsement" of his public statements, they do critique conventional sexuality sanctioned by marriage and imply knowledge of birth control methods (Dreiser, "A Word Concerning Birth Control" 13). Dreiser defied traditional social codes in his work by writing in a naturalistic style about sexuality. He chafed against the same censoring morality that restricted the public distribution of birth control information. Two of his novels, *An American Tragedy* and *The Genius,* were banned in some cities for obscenity. Dreiser and the birth control movement were linked by more than his contributions to the *Birth Control Review* and the restrictions they both labored under. When Boston tried to ban *An American Tragedy* in 1927, "In protest, an anticensorship rally was held, and Margaret Sanger appeared with her mouth taped shut in a gesture of opposition to the city's ban on birth control" (Gogol xiii, n1). Dreiser also spoke at this rally and was an official sponsor of the First American Birth Control Conference organized by Sanger in New York in 1921.

Ideologically Dreiser supported the birth control movement, and a brief examination of his fiction reveals arguments for birth control embedded in implicit critiques of marriage. Dreiser published *Sister Carrie* and *Jennie Gerhardt* prior to 1914, but they offer interesting insights into how Dreiser's fiction was in dialogue with the issues of the movement. Nancy Barrineau remarks, "Certainly Dreiser wrote *Sister Carrie* with an eye tipped toward the forces of Comstock; and in 1911, while he was finishing *Jennie Gerhardt,* the 1873 Comstock Act still prohibited honest discussion and dissemination of birth control information" (59). Thus, while Dreiser could be open within the pages of the *Birth Control Review,* he had to weave his views more subtly into his fiction. *Sister Carrie* appeared in 1900, a time when "[m]arriage was really the only plot women could enact in literature as well as life" (Fishkin 8). Dreiser rejected that plot, which is perhaps why the publisher Doubleday

found the novel objectionable. The novel contains seduction, adultery, bigamy, sex out of wedlock, and, implicitly, birth control. Drouet and Carrie live together for an extended period, and sexual relations are assumed but not described. Drouet promises to marry Carrie but never does, demonstrating the link between marriage and sanctioned sexuality. Later, Carrie lives with and marries Hurstwood, again without becoming pregnant. The logical deduction is that they use birth control. The novel aroused controversy because Carrie's sins remain unpunished and she becomes a successful actress. Carrie is sexually active while remaining free from the burdens of marriage and motherhood. Although the novel lacks an explicit mention of birth control, it is a very definite subtext.

In his second novel, *Jennie Gerhardt* (originally entitled *The Transgressor* as though to emphasize the breaking of social norms), Dreiser attempted to be more realistic about the consequences of sexuality. Nancy Barrineau writes, "Even with the censorship, this novel reveals Dreiser's awareness that to women like Jennie—regardless of their wishes—pregnancy is the probable consequence of sex. Dreiser's ability to imagine and dramatize the full implications of a working woman's sexuality had advanced considerably since his first novel. Here Dreiser acknowledges that, in an age when unhampered access to birth control is still woefully inadequate, women must often pay a high price for their half of the sexual contract" (57–58). Indeed, Jennie is so fertile that she becomes pregnant after a single sexual encounter, symbolizing her innocence and natural fertility. To Jennie's German immigrant father, her unwanted pregnancy transforms her from virgin to "streetwalker" (85). *Jennie Gerhardt,* like *Sister Carrie* and *An American Tragedy,* was heavily edited by the publishers, who excised the only passage with a reference to birth control. Without even mentioning birth control, Lester's statement that a woman "doesn't have to have children unless she wants to" was too threatening. With this brief statement deleted, readers could only deduce, as in the earlier *Sister Carrie,* the infertility of young, healthy women was the result of birth control.[8]

Theodore Dreiser's 1925 novel, *An American Tragedy,* also explores themes relevant to the birth control movement, and indeed Ivan Bloch

8. We now have the restored edition based on the original manuscripts thanks to James L. W. West III. West writes of the extensive editing to the original novel at Harper Brothers: "Some 25,000 words had been cut, and the prose rewritten extensively. Profanity had been removed; slang spoken by characters had been corrected; virtually all mention of sex had been muted or cut. . . . The net effect had been to turn a powerful piece of social realism into a touching love story isolated from much of its context" (West, Introduction to *Jennie Gerhardt* xiv). See also Edward de Grazia, *Girls Lean Back Everywhere*, for a discussion of how Dreiser was affected by censorship.

reviewed it glowingly in the September 1926 *Birth Control Review.* The novel's protagonist, a simple factory worker named Roberta, is seduced and impregnated by Clyde. She attempts to procure an abortion, but when the attempt fails, she pressures Clyde into marriage. In response, Clyde murders Roberta. *An American Tragedy,* like the original text of *Jennie Gerhardt,* refers to birth control. This time, however, it treats ignorance of birth control as explicitly to blame for the evil that follows. Dreiser writes, "But there was this to be said in connection with the relationship between these two, that no time, owing to the inexperience of Clyde, as well as Roberta, had there been any adequate understanding or use of more than the simplest, and for the most part unsatisfactory, contraceptive devices" (368). Critics overlook this reference, but I argue that Clyde's ignorance of contraception is part of his larger moral cowardice. While the novel does depict one man's weakness and failure, when read in the context of the birth control movement Roberta's death and Clyde's downfall are clearly spurred by sexual ignorance.

Theodore Dreiser's depiction of premarital sex was controversial even though one-third to half "of women who came of age in the 1920s had had sex before marriage" (Coontz 200). He goes further in his fictional critique of marriage than the rhetoric of the birth control movement, which was courting widespread social acceptance to enact legal change. Dreiser celebrated "sexuality as the major driving force in life, holding it up as a force of progress endlessly engaged in battles against sexually repressive social conventions and institutions" (Gammel 32). By the 1920s, the birth control movement itself could not so openly forward the idea of sex and contraception outside of marriage without alienating the middle-class support it needed. Dreiser, however, tempered his radical depiction of marriage with a more traditional characterization of women. His heroines are sexually passive, which may be what redeems them finally in the public eye. They retain their innocence and are "good" and "natural" despite their sexual transgressions. Charles Glicksberg perhaps best explains the inherent tension in Dreiser's work between sexual daring and gender stereotype: "[I]t is not surprising that the treatment of the sexual motif in American literature is beset by a number of seemingly irreconcilable contradictions. Shall the writer defy the regnant social conventions and run the risk of not having his work accepted for publication? Then, too, since he belongs to American history and the tradition it has built up, he must reckon with the residual but still active force of Puritanism that has shaped his mind as well as the mind of his people" (6). Dreiser's struggle to push against traditional morality added to the public debate on birth control and marriage.

Two additional texts from the 1920s provide examples of the possibility for a new depiction of women and demonstrate how fiction can push artistic as well as ideological boundaries. In "The Probation in Literature," published in the January 1929 *Birth Control Review,* Edgar Wood Pangborn celebrates a new freedom in American fiction. Making a direct link between the aesthetic and political in literature, he notes, "Writing was invented to influence human minds; that purpose has not changed with the ages. Literature is the voice of life—but a mastering, urgent voice, not an echo" (14). For modern fiction to be vital and viable it must engage with the growing public discourse regarding sexuality, influencing rather than echoing public opinion.

Pangborn singles out Vina Delmar's *Bad Girl* (1928) for its "uncastrated language and expression of honest convictions" (14). He praises Delmar for her realization that "it is now possible, with one restriction, to say just about anything that needs to be said, and 'get away with it.' (The one restriction, of course, is the obscene legal Comstockery which prohibits any statements of contraceptive measures)" (14). In describing a sexual woman in modern courtship and marriage, *Bad Girl* provides an example of the New Woman who ultimately opts for the traditional female life narrative of marriage and motherhood.

Dot is a modern young woman rescued from a foray into unmarried sexuality by a marriage proposal. This traditional turn is bound up with the text's treatment of birth control. The novel's ambivalent stance on contraception corresponds to the inability of Dot and Delmar to consider other fulfilling roles for women. Vina Delmar provides several vague textual mentions of birth control, but it is something that her "bad girl" is too good to consider. When a friend mentions it, "Dot said nothing. She was not anxious to debate the pro and con of birth control" (Delmar 119). This lack of contraceptive practice leads inevitably to pregnancy. The novel devolves into a light comedy, depicting the miscommunication between Dot and her husband. They both want the child but discuss abortion when each believes the other is unhappy with the pregnancy. Birth control is equated with abortion, since the couple discusses it only after Dot is pregnant. This link between contraception and abortion and Dot's happiness with her prescribed role reinforce the plot of marriage and motherhood for modern women. While critics praised the novel for its honest discussion of sexuality, it hid a traditional message in a "progressive" wrapper.

Despite Delmar's conventional plotting for her modern "bad girl," American women were finding new opportunities through increased

access to education and employment. At the same time as the "life plots" of women expanded, modernist writers were transforming the traditional forms of fiction. The modernist impulse to explore sexuality developed simultaneously with and from the same social conditions as the birth control movement. Indeed, calls for freer sexuality added impetus to demands for safe and effective means of contraception. The literary experiments of modernist writers such as Ernest Hemingway and William Faulkner often include the interruption of traditional female life narratives, such as the characterization of Charlotte in Faulkner's *If I Forget Thee, Jerusalem.* While these writers attempt to think beyond motherhood, they often write into another biological trap: death.[9]

A truly contraceptive text would imagine a new story for women, one that ends in neither motherhood nor death. The text would circulate new narrative possibilities for women in public discourse, much like birth control enabled biological control for women. However, since literature mirrors the age and ideologies in which it is produced, any contraceptive text would necessarily display the tensions and contradictions of working against inherited gender roles. One interesting example of such a text is Susan Glaspell's *Chains of Dew,* a play that both deploys birth control as its direct narrative impetus and enacts the textual contraception that I am proposing. Produced by the Provincetown Players at the end of the 1921–22 season, *Chains of Dew* was never published.[10] While Glaspell satirizes an overzealous birth controller in her depiction of Nora, she accurately depicts the inner workings of the movement, including the description of a birth control league office and its official rhetoric.[11] Glaspell does not use her drama as propaganda for the birth control movement, but rather uses the movement to explore new roles

9. This corresponds to the two traditional fictional narratives for women identified by Rachel Blau DuPlessis: motherhood and death.

10. The typescript is held by the Library of Congress; references are to this text. The play was not well received by critics, but rather dismissed as an underdeveloped sketch. Interestingly, the *New York Times* review by Alexander Woollcott does not mention birth control, focusing its brief plot summary on the male poet Seymore and his mother. Whether this odd omission indicates the reviewer's discomfort with the subject, or his gendered identification with the male lead, makes for interesting speculation.

11. Susan Glaspell had many social connections with members of the birth control movement. As a denizen of Greenwich Village and visitor to Mabel Dodge's salon, she would have discussed sexuality, free love, and birth control. She likely met Margaret Sanger at Dodge's salon or in Provincetown, a vacation spot frequented by the Sangers and by Glaspell and her husband, George Cram Cook. Glaspell was also a member of the Heterodoxy Club, a group of liberal Village women, along with birth control activists Mary Ware Dennett and Rose Pastor Stokes. See Gainor for a discussion of *Chains of Dew* and the birth control movement; see Schwarz on the Heterodoxy Club.

for women and the tensions inherent in their choices. As J. Ellen Gainor notes, "Although the movement is certainly important to the play, it is not exclusively a politically or socially motivated work" (186). However, *Chains of Dew* can be read as an artistic response to birth control that integrates a contraceptive ideology into its own narrative plotting.

Set during the birth control campaign, the main character, Nora Powers, is an unmarried birth control activist, a professional young woman who takes her identity not from marriage but from her commitment to the movement. Her maiden name indicates her independently "power"ful position. Nora is representative of the Greenwich Village "free lover," as multiple mentions of her short hair indicate. Her office, complete with posters comparing a mother of nine children to a mother with two, serves as the meeting place for her literary friends, including Leon, the editor of the *New Nation*, and Seymore Standish, a poet. These men are squeamish about birth control, arguing that it should be a private matter, and set up art (rather than politics) as man(kind)'s highest calling. When the two men tease Nora about her dedication to birth control, she responds with typical birth control rhetoric: "Do you wish to give birth to seven children you cannot feed? Have you no respect for children? A child has a right to be wanted. You bring into this world an impoverished, defective, degenerate—but here. I will give you our literature" (*Chains of Dew* 1.9). Thus, Glaspell invokes common birth control arguments to establish her character's values. Nora's work with birth control and her involvement with the married Seymore mark her as outside the realm of traditional values.

In contrast to the vibrant political and artistic life of Nora and the city, Seymore is from Bluff City, a small town where "they never even heard of birth control" (1.17). This lack of knowledge serves as shorthand for a backward, conventional and stifling way of life. In a move that mirrors the birth control movement's spread from urban to rural areas, Nora decides to be a "missionary," carrying the gospel to the wilderness of Bluff City. Here Seymore lives a comfortable life and exhibits conventional attitudes towards women, including his wife, Dotty. Into this world of tea and gossip comes Nora, who promptly convinces Dotty to start a local birth control headquarters. Although upper-class women in Bluff City have been quietly practicing fertility control, they join the public movement because, in their own words, "Birth control is the smart thing in New York this season. . . . The really exclusive people turned to birth control" (2.26). The shallow vanity of the Bluff City social set mocks the superficial lives that these women lead. Dotty, however, finds political purpose in the movement, and Glaspell's explicit stage directions visually mark

Dotty's turn to modern ideas: Dotty has her hair bobbed and replaces a Sistine Madonna image in the living room with Nora's family planning exhibit.

But even as Dotty begins to break out of the traditional wife-and-mother role, her husband's traditional gender expectations restrain her. Although she finds personal satisfaction with her new purpose in life, Dotty gives it up for Seymore so that things can be "just as it was before" (3.39). While this may seem to undermine the idea that *Chains of Dew* enacts the contraceptive textuality I have discussed, Glaspell clearly depicts Dotty as making a conscious decision. While Gainor argues that "[i]ronically, although women of their class may have learned how to control their fertility, they have yet to gain real control over the trajectory of their lives," Dotty cannot be understood as simply resuming her old role (Gainor 190). Rather, her decision to return to the traditional marks the difficulties that new roles bring to individual women and foregrounds the consideration of choice. The birth control movement provides the means for Dotty to come to full subjectivity and raises her consciousness such that her decision to succumb to Seymore's wishes, while deplored by current feminist readers, is in fact a rational one. Although Dotty returns to her traditional role, Glaspell leaves no doubt that the relationship will not be "as it was before." Dotty has begun a process of self-discovery that has altered the power dynamics of her marriage. And through Nora, who leaves Bluff City to continue her contraceptive crusade, Glaspell provides an alternative to the biological plot. Rather than a sacrificial spinster, Nora represents a single career woman who is young, attractive, and vital. Thus, her character presents a potentially viable alternative role, outside of marriage and motherhood, for female fulfillment. Birth control, as a political movement and as a method of biological control, offers a latent choice to women's lives, at least to women not constrained by race and class.

"A HUSBAND . . . A WIFE . . . and her FEARS"

IGNORANCE AND FEAR

Rather than offering a radical feminist message about women's reproductive freedom, by the 1920s contraceptive advocates argued that birth control was necessary to a successful modern marriage. They downplayed what could have been threatening to social norms and presented birth control in the plain brown wrapper of traditional morality: birth control

would only be used by married couples and would scientifically improve marriage and the lives of children. Thus, allowing women control over their reproductive lives was offset by the assurance that reproduction would remain within the institution of marriage and therefore within the frame of male control. This was a change from the earlier radical rhetoric of a woman's right to control her own body. When Margaret Sanger opened her first clinic in the Brownsville section of New York City, she advertised directly to mothers and served only married women. Indeed, not until 1972 did the Supreme Court overturn a law that prohibited the distribution of contraceptives to unmarried people in *Eisenstadt v. Baird*.

By the 1920s official birth control rhetoric presented ignorance of contraceptive techniques as injurious to marriage. This embracing of traditional values was largely in response to claims by opponents that birth control was immoral. Advocates sought to dissipate past public perceptions of birth control as linked to "loose living," especially prostitution and venereal disease (McLaren 232–33). Margaret Sanger herself "was painted as a dangerous radical bent on destroying the American family in order to achieve a subversive feminist agenda" and "blamed for everything from divorce, infidelity, and promiscuity to a lack of work ethic among oversexed men" ("Family Values in Margaret Sanger's Time"). Through careful self-presentation as a wife and mother, and by emphasizing the benefits to married women and children, Margaret Sanger placed birth control within traditional values.

This strategy of alignment with conservative values is much like that used by the movement among African American clubwomen seeking to change public perception of black women.[12] The women of the "New Negro" movement wanted to overcome the stereotype of uncontrolled black female sexuality by emphasizing the importance of respectable black women who followed the "natural" course of marriage and motherhood.[13] Much like their white counterparts, many middle-class African Americans supported the ideal of companionate marriage and saw birth control as a necessary component. Writers such as Angelina Grimke and Jessie Redmon Fauset depicted black middle-class families in their fiction to counter conceptions of black women as sexually licentious. For

12. See Morton on the negative depictions that African American clubwomen were attempting to disprove.

13. Not all African American women agreed on the benefits of birth control. See Berg on the connections between race and motherhood during the Progressive Era; see also Rodrique, "The Black Community and the Birth-Control Movement," and Simmons, "'Modern Marriage' for African Americans, 1920–1940."

instance, Fauset's 1928 novel, *Plum Bun*, describes the protagonist's middle-class black family as "[f]ather, mother and children, well-dressed, well-fed, united, going to church on a beautiful Sunday morning" (22). The white characters in this novel are more sexualized than the blacks, counteracting the portrayal of African Americans as primitive and hypersexualized that writers such as Carl Van Vechten were creating.

Much like their white counterparts, African American women writers sought a balance between repudiating sexualized stereotypes and embracing the benefits of birth control. Many African American women supported the birth control movement for its potential benefit to marriage. According to Johanna Schoen, "African American women were even more dependent on home remedies and abortion than white women were. Until the mid-1940s, the black press printed copious mail-order advertisements for douche powders, suppositories, preventive antiseptics, and vaginal jellies" (45). Viewing contraception as an aid against poverty and abuse, the Harlem Women's Political Association ran an educational lecture series in 1918. "Racial uplift" would occur through education, marriage, and scientific reproduction. But birth control could also be a tool of the modern woman, freeing her from overlarge families. In Fauset's *The Chinaberry Tree,* Melissa, who "had the modern girl's own clear ideas on birth control," rejects her fiancé's dream that they have eight children (132). Melissa wants to adapt the traditional plot for women, marrying but controlling the size of her family.

The goal of the birth control movement was to make information about contraception legal and widespread. Most young women entering marriage during the 1910s and 1920s were ignorant of effective birth control methods (and many of sex in general). This ignorance was a threat to marriage, as was the fear and disinformation that accompanied it. Mary Austin's 1912 novel *A Woman of Genius* provides an interesting look at this ignorance before the birth control movement began. Austin, a novelist, essayist, and feminist, reviewed several books on marriage in the *Birth Control Review* in 1927. In *A Woman of Genius* she describes married life in a small town as suffocating for intelligent women. The novel reproduces the cultural narrative of marital fear fed by ignorance: "nothing that pertained to the mystery of marriage reached us through all the suppression and evasions of the social conspiracy, except the obviousness of maternity" (90). This silence creates "a world all of the care and expectancy of children overshadowed by the recurrent monthly dread, crept about by whispers, heretical but persistent, of methods of circumventing it, of a secret practice of things openly condemned" (219). Taboo knowledge of birth control circulated in whispers to married women

who feared more children, pregnancy signaled by the "monthly dread" of a missed period. The heroine's personal terror is of living a life like her mother: "in the country phrase, so appalling in its easy acceptance, my mother had 'never seen a well day'; and what was meant to be the joy of loving was utterly swamped for her in its accompanying dread" (19). For Austin's narrator, the whispered knowledge of birth control reaches her in time to protect her from her mother's fate. The subtext implies that fear of unwanted pregnancy is detrimental to a healthy marriage. Austin's friendship with Margaret Sanger, Emma Goldman, and H. G. Wells (another frequent contributor to the *Birth Control Review*) reinforces the pro-contraceptive stance of the novel, and Austin contributed articles on marriage and motherhood to the *Birth Control Review* in the late 1920s.

A concrete threat for married women, especially for the poor, was the physical danger of pregnancy. A common narrative thread in these texts is the toll of repeated childbearing on female health and the subsequent damage to marriage. The trope of the physically endangered mother recirculated social values such as a reverence of motherhood and played on the knowledge that pregnancy and childbirth were dangerous health risks. According to Wertz and Wertz, "after World War I women came to recognize that maternity was the second highest killer of women aged fifteen to forty-five, after tuberculosis," and maternal mortality did not improve significantly until after 1930 (155). Many of the propagandistic stories supporting birth control focused on the brave but fragile woman struggling against murderous maternity. These works played on women's fears to argue for lifting the veil of ignorance.

Other genres contributed to the public discussion on marriage and contraception. A rare film on birth control, *The Hand That Rocks the Cradle* by Lois Weber (1917), depicted three married couples (Stamp 286). Dr. Broome and his wife use birth control to limit their family size for the sake of the wife's health, and Mrs. Broome is charged under the Comstock Act with distributing birth control information. A sequence of flashbacks reveals the story of Sarah, a former servant, whose health and marriage had "disintegrated" after too many children. Only Mrs. Broome's contraceptive information saves them from poverty. A third couple are against "artificial" birth control and practice abstinence instead, but their marriage collapses under this method. The film carefully explores sexuality and birth control within marriages across a class spectrum. Ultimately, Mrs. Broome is arrested, tried, and imprisoned but pardoned after a heroic hunger strike (Stamp 286). The Film Board of Review deemed the film "impartial" and educational, but reviewers found

its overt message "too preachy" (Stamp 287–89). The same message and tone, however, abounded in fiction.

While the birth control movement lost its radical rhetoric, it retained the strategic use of pathos in its fiction. These stories, often thinly plotted, complement the rhetorical work accomplished by the factual debate also found in the pages of periodicals such as the *Birth Control Review*. Rather than fully developing plot and character, these stories rely on melodrama to persuade readers that birth control is necessary. Remembering the period, Inez Haynes Irwin, a fiction editor for *The Masses*, stated, "A profound horror of the woman's life filled me. Nothing terrified me so much as the thought of marriage and child-bearing. Marriages seemed to me, at least so far as women were concerned, as the cruelest of traps" (39).

Most of the stories in the *Review* emphasize the destructive effects of uncontrolled reproduction on marriage, including several in which the desperate woman commits suicide rather than bear another child. "A Matter of Life and Death," a 1920 "playlet" by L. L. Pruette, depicts a woman driven to suicide by the despair of poverty and repeated childbirth. The nameless character would "sooner die than have another baby" and threatens to take "the bitter apple," a neighbor's abortifacient, unless the visiting social worker can tell her how to end her current pregnancy (13). The woman already has seven living children, one in jail and another "running wild," and five dead children. As the frantic nurse tries to wake the alcoholic husband, passed out in the corner, the woman drains the bottle of poison and dies. The medical profession and social workers cannot help to assuage the poverty and despair. In "A Holiday" (1921) by Ethel Watts Mumford, a pregnant woman contemplates her troubles—husband newly dead, two children at home, bills unpaid, and the loss of her cleaning job when her condition is noted—as those around her enjoy a patriotic orator in a sweltering city park. With no one to turn to, and the fear that her children would be taken from her if she cannot "scratch and paw the money of a scant wage," Mary is incensed by the public speaker's message of how lucky people are to have freedom. Driven by rage and despair, she drowns herself in the park reservoir (6). The author highlights the disjunction between the patriotic rhetoric of American good fortune and poor widow's reality, rendering the title of "A Holiday" a poignant irony. Both stories demonstrate the conditions that conspire to create situations in which suicide appears the best alternative to bearing another child in a broken marriage. Knowledge of birth control would alleviate these conditions, and thus implicitly save marriages and lives.

Although usually the female character commits suicide, several stories twist the plot by emphasizing marital love and having the husband commit suicide. In "The Magnet," a 1921 story by Mary Heaton Vorse set in an urban tenement, even the children know that pregnancy is not a joy to be celebrated. They play while listening to a woman's anguished cries: "Don't you know what for she cries—she *cries for why she's going to have another baby!*" Reba hissed the last words at Rosie. 'Babies is awful any time, but in lockouts, Jeze! they's fierce.' Reba made this self evident statement without emphasis. Everybody in the tenement knows it's fierce to have babies. Rosie had known that as long as she had known anything. Whenever her mother heard of a new baby, 'Poor thing!' she would sigh" (8). In the mouths of children the stark reality takes on additional pathos. Children grow up fast in the tenement: they know that marriage means babies, and babies mean physical pain and poverty.

Repeated pregnancy, even within a loving marriage, is a "terrible thing to do to a woman." The "anguished breathing of inhuman effort" and tortured screams of a woman in labor create a horrific scene in which to examine the consequences of uncontrolled fertility—broken health, increased poverty, and marital strain. In this story, Vorse depicts a husband who loves his wife and is frantic because "[t]he midwife won't come out unless I pay her—I—fifteen dollars—where should I get fifteen dollars—not a penny—a month too soon—on the street—the landlord—six more days—he won't wait—Oh God" (8). The next day, after the birth of his son, unable to find work or any sympathy from the landlord, the father comes up with his only solution: "There are asylums for orphans—widows with week-old babies—are taken care of," he says, before shooting himself in the backyard (16). An honest man, unable to find work, cannot support his growing family, and the only answer is state charity. The story demonstrates that the working poor deserve (rather than just need) birth control knowledge to sustain a loving marriage.

While location could determine important economic differences, the birth control movement sought to apply its message across geographic boundaries. Genevieve Taggard's sketch "Legend," in the July 1925 *Birth Control Review,* deconstructs in a single page the myth of the hardy, happy rural farm wife.[14] Using a party telephone line and first-person narrative, Taggard revises "the literary legend, started by Glaspell and Frost and O'Neil," by describing a thirty-year-old farm woman who decided

14. Genevieve Taggard was also a contributor to *The Liberator*, successor to *The Masses*. Many of the authors and artists discussed contributed to both *The Masses* and *Birth Control Review*, including Vorse, Floyd Dell, and Cornelia Barns, who joined *The Masses* in 1914 and became art editor and associate editor of the *Review* in 1921.

"[o]ne baby a year. Better die" (199). Her daughter "has vowed never to marry," as she equates marriage with endless childbirth. While this brief sketch does not describe conditions of poverty, it establishes that rural isolation and uncontrolled fertility lead to the same despair. In 1927 a montage of letters and poetry entitled "Four Farmers' Wives" reinforced Taggard's message of rural poverty, isolation, and despondency on married women.

A wife's fear of pregnancy's damage to relationships was one plank in the birth control movement's argument for widespread acceptance. The February 1926 *Birth Control Review,* for example, argued that "Birth Control will increase the happiness of the wife and mother by freeing her from the haunting fear month by month of a pregnancy that is undesired and unprepared for" ("Birth Control Primer"). A story published the same year in the *Review* reinforced this argument. In "The Nation's Backbone" by Louis Adamic, Minnie and Joe were economically successful and in love when they married, but seven years of marriage brought them seven children. Minnie, "her young-oldish face haggard and yellow, her dark eyes large, liquid and sunk deep into the sockets," finds herself with an infant of thirteen months, her newborn twins, and four older children (Adamic 252). Her health is so broken that she can't get out of bed and care for her children. This story is a vivid example of birth controller Frederick Blossom's argument for contraception to protect the health of mother and child: "Unregulated childbearing means a progressive decline in the mother's health accompanied by progressive debility in her offspring" (12). Bereft, Joe determines "that he and Minnie would bring no more children into the world. He knew that there was a method of preventing the birth of unwanted children, though he was unfamiliar with the technique. He had come sufficiently in contact with the sinful world to know that there was a safe and sure way of doing that" (Adamic 253). But abstinence is impossible for the young couple, and nine months later they have "another blessing, their eighth descendant" (289). What is "sinful" and what is a "blessing" take on opposite meanings from the way Joe innocently employs them. Adamic does not need to write the story's ultimate ending, as the reader can complete for themselves the inevitable tragedy of Minnie's death and the family's ruin.

This ignorance and fear affected women of all ethnicities. In her 1928 novel, *Quicksand,* Nella Larsen depicts a mixed-race protagonist coming to sexual awakening while searching for her identity. Helga Crane, whom Hazel Carby has called the "first truly sexual black female protagonist" in African American literature (174), answers a question about her marital status by responding, "Marriage—that means children, to me" (Larsen

103). Helga turned down the marriage offer of Danish artist Axel Olsen, equating marriage with ownership: "I'm not for sale. Not to you. Not to any white man. I don't care at all to be owned" (87). But later, tormented by unnamed sexual desires that cannot be expressed outside of marriage, Helga marries an unlikely man: the Reverend Mr. Pleasant Green, a "ratish yellow man" who takes her to a tiny Alabama town (118). As Allison Berg convincingly argues, "by consigning her rebellious heroine to marriage and motherhood, Larsen disavows Helga's illicit sexuality, mitigating its implications" (104). Marriage is again the expected avenue of female progress, and the only sanctioned outlet for female desire.

Even though Helga's sexuality is contained within marriage, the results are clear. As Ann duCille notes, through Helga's plight Larsen addresses "what having children can mean to a woman's physical and mental health, as well as to her independence" (87). Ignorance of contraception means that, for Helga, marriage is quickly followed by motherhood, which entails pain, resignation, and death. Death in childbirth is not unique to this novel. "The Gentle Lena" of Gertrude Stein's earlier *Three Lives* becomes "more and more lifeless" and dies in her fourth childbirth (Stein 241). Jennifer Fleissner argues that killing the protagonists in childbirth resists that normative maternity narrative (265). However, in reiterating the dangers of childbirth these narratives support an argument for contraception within marriage.

Letters from real women published in the *Birth Control Review* revealed that "husband and wife can be put asunder by the coming of too many children" ("A Menace to Marriage" 144). A series of letters entitled "Breaking Up the Home" contains "Mothers' Letters which show that the lack of Birth Control frequently causes disaster to the home" (208). These letters condemn abstinence, the only recognized form of "natural" birth control, as inadequate and unnatural for married adults. Sexual intercourse was a marital privilege, but if it led to repeated pregnancies in quick succession, it could kill the wife. Solving that problem through "self control" could damage intimacy and lead men to prostitutes and venereal disease. Knowledge of safe contraception, advocates argued, would strengthen marriage and the family on multiple levels. This argument gained force in the accumulation of pleading letters, tragic stories, and logical articles published. Advocates constructed a coherent narrative surrounding marriage and female health from multiple discourses, including articles such as "Family Limitation and Family Health," which argued that the health of the mother and existing children was a strong medical indication for birth control (H. Stone).

Knowledge often circulated in veiled and illicit avenues that fed

women's fears. Although the Comstock Act forbade contraceptive advertisements, some products hid beneath a "plain brown wrapper" of euphemism. Advertisements for "feminine hygiene" products invoked an unnamed stress on young married couples. A series of full-page advertisements by the manufacturers of Lysol, appearing in the popular women's magazine *McCall's* in July 1933, reads:

> The most frequent eternal triangle:
>
> A HUSBAND . . . A WIFE . . . and her FEARS
> Fewer marriages would flounder around in a maze of misunderstanding and unhappiness if more wives knew and practiced regular marriage hygiene. Without it, some minor physical irregularity plants in a woman's mind the fear of a major crisis. Let so devastating a fear recur again and again, and the most gracious wife turns into a nerve-ridden, irritable travesty of herself.

Using Lysol for feminine hygiene would ensure "health and harmony . . . throughout her married life." The restrictions of the Comstock Act and of "public decency" forced contraceptives to masquerade under the aliases of "female hygiene" or "marriage hygiene."[15] Advertisements for these products were widespread: a 1938 article in *Fortune* magazine reported 636 products sold under the euphemism of "feminine hygiene" ("Accident of Birth" 112). Female readers, to whom "irregularity" signals pregnancy, decoded the underlying meaning of "hygiene." Lysol advertised its function as a douche for "vaginal cleanliness," a cleanliness that included flushing the womb of sperm after intercourse.[16] Although the birth control movement carefully distanced itself from these companies, they both "sold" their products "for married women only." The headlines for these products, such as "Can a Married Woman Ever Feel Safe?" and "Young Wives Are Often Secretly Terrified," reveal the concurrent themes of marriage, ignorance, and fear that continued throughout the 1920s (Tone, *Controlling Reproduction* 494).

Both Mary Ware Dennett and Margaret Sanger "publicly condemned contraceptive advertising" (Sarch 38) to align birth control with science

15. See Tone (1996, 2001) and Sarch for a more detailed analysis of the marketing of feminine hygiene products and their relationship to the birth control movement.

16. Ironically, the douching products could also harm female health. As both Sarch and Tone (2002) note, the veiled advertisements for "female hygiene" did not include specific instructions for how to mix a douching solution, and the wrong mixture could be toxic.

and gain the medical establishment's support. Indeed, no advertisements for "female hygiene" products ever appeared in the *Birth Control Review* (which offered the women who bought it no practical advice as to contraceptive methods). Likewise, the fiction it published does not mention or condone feminine hygiene as a form of birth control. The *Review*'s attempts to distance itself from marital hygiene products represent its struggle to gain scientific credibility. This alliance grew in strength during the 1920s and 1930s, as Margaret Sanger focused on convincing the medical establishment to support a "doctors only" bill.

The Threats of Prostitution and Abuse

Even threats from outside of marriage, such as the illicit sexuality of prostitution, could affect women's health within marriage via the spread of venereal disease from an unfaithful husband to his wife. The U.S. government addressed prostitution and venereal disease as threats to public health during World War I, initiating a campaign to educate soldiers about prophylactics.[17] As Jake, the protagonist of Claude McKay's *Home to Harlem*, remembers, "When I was in the army, chappie, they useter give us all sorts o' lechers about canshankerous nights and prophet-lactic days" (206). While critics of the birth control movement argued that contraception would promote prostitution and harm the sacred bonds of marriage, advocates inverted this logic. For example, implying that opponents were dirty minded, Sidney Goldstein argued in 1922 for the natural purity of women, writing, "Women are virtuous not because they fear the consequences of sin, but because they reverence the right. No knowledge that we can place in their hands will shake the foundation upon which their ethical life is built" (196). Contraceptive advocates continued to place themselves on the moral high ground, arguing that birth control would eradicate prostitution by enabling husband and wife to engage in sanctioned sexual intercourse without the constant fear of pregnancy.

The discourse of prostitution as a marital threat also appeared in fiction. In "A Way Out," published in 1922, May Pierce Guest depicts the struggle of a young man who is caught between love for his fragile wife and his own sexual desire. After the birth of their first son nearly kills his wife, Ben is wracked by guilt and sleeps on the sofa, tormented by sexual desire. The passion of the young couple is plagued by the constant worry

17. See Solinger, *Pregnancy and Power* 98, and J. Carter, especially 219–20.

of "What if—What if? Oh no, there must be no chances taken!" (Guest 85). In part 2 of the story, Ben is tempted by prostitutes, but his "moral nature" prevents his sin. In the third installment, Ben is returning home when he meets a young woman selling the *Birth Control Review* on the street corner. He begs her to tell him "how to be happy, though married." "Can you tell me a way out? Can you?" (132). The final installment defies the predominant narrative script of tragedy, ending happily due to Ben's newfound knowledge. Guest paces her story from physical despair to moral temptation to the marital salvation of contraceptive knowledge. The longest, and by far happiest, story to deal with this issue, Guest allows her young married couple to avoid tragedy through the intervention of birth control.

Desperate wives seized upon contraceptive knowledge as a powerful life editor, erasing prostitution as a threat to marriage, just as it was by Guest's young husband. The voices revealed in a series of letters entitled "Family Problems," published in the March 1926 *Birth Control Review,* demonstrate how real women were searching for alternatives to the trajectory of marriage—motherhood—ill health—abstinence—prostitution. One woman's experience poignantly represents this script. Married young, she and her husband had two children in quick succession and now "are so afraid of having more that we have had no intercourse since before the birth of the second child, three and one-half years ago tomorrow" ("Family Problems" 88). This prolonged abstinence has harmed her marriage. "Although my husband says he is still faithful to me (and I have seen no indication that he isn't)," the woman writes, "naturally we are not very happy; we have a good many quarrels and he has told me a good many times that he could divorce me because of my refusing him" (88). Worried about losing her husband, the woman asks for help; she needs contraceptive information so that she and her husband can resume marital relations without the "dread" of more children.

Guest's rewriting of marital tragedy is exceptional and utopian, standing out amidst the despair that characterizes the genre. The majority of texts contribute to the argument for birth control by appealing to tragedy, ending with the continued ignorance of the characters to emphasize the goal of the birth control movement. Angela Oakes's "Nature," published in the *Review* in 1926, exemplifies this plot structure. Marriage for "pure genuine love" was followed by three living children and "those others, those children that couldn't live, those children who never were children at all, only illness and distress and trouble" (Oakes 10, 11). Told that they can't have any more children but not how to prevent them, the couple

practices abstinence. After four years of sleeping in separate rooms and watching her husband grow distant, the wife confronts him only to learn that it is too late—his encounters with prostitutes have rendered him blind from venereal disease. While the story recycles stock characters and highly charged emotion, it adds to the popular discourse by showing that birth control, practiced within marriage, opposes prostitution and prevents venereal disease. The story also reflects a larger social concern with the spread of disease into "respectable" homes. D'Emilio and Freedman note that "prostitutes served as transmitting agents that spread the scourge of venereal infection from red-light districts to respectable households. As long as middle-class men patronized prostitutes, their wives and fiancées would harbor anxieties about the safety of conjugal relations" (183).

Oakes also writes within and against popular conceptions of what is natural. The "Nature" of the title is a natural sex drive, one that can't and shouldn't be repressed within marriage. John is powerless to resist: "I couldn't stand it, so I made believe those other women were you," sobs John. "I couldn't go against Nature" (12). Marriage and sexual desire are both natural occurrences. Why, then, is tragedy inevitable? The story asks, "Is it man's fault or Nature's?" (12). This question aligns birth control with nature and morality, counterpoised against the law and prostitution. When man and wife can enjoy married sex without the constant fear of more children, lustful husbands won't turn to prostitutes. Indeed, the eleventh reason for birth control given in the monthly "Birth Control Primer" (a regular feature of the *Review*) is "The Promotion of Morality," specifically that "Birth Control will attack the institution of prostitution and increase the stability of the family" ("More Reasons for Birth Control" 35).

In addition to prostitution and failing female health, alcohol and abuse also threatened marriage. Birth control advocates argued that the emotional and financial stress put on marriage by unwanted children led to abusive situations. Not only would birth control help husband and wife control the size of their family, but in doing so it would also allow women an easier escape from abusive situations. In a letter from the November 1926 *Review* a woman describes the physical and mental abuse she suffers: "I am 28 years old and the mother to be very soon of my sixth child. I am a farmer's wife. My husband is a drunkard and so very abusive. He tries to kill me and beats at my door. I have to hide the butcher and paring knives and the guns" ("Are These Fit Fathers?" 338). Such letters share the despair of women who are equally trapped by abuse and by their own

uncontrollable bodies.[18]

The *Birth Control Review* set stories of abusive marriages in the context of articles and letters advocating the dissemination of contraceptive techniques. Percy Norwood Stone's 1922 story, "Consummation—The Story of a Woman's Soul," vividly describes an abusive relationship. A woman with "no spirit" sits surrounded by the filth of poverty as her youngest child wails. Her husband shows no interest in her besides a carnal lust. They have been quarreling because "[j]ust like I told you last night, we can't have any more kids." The man responds, "Aw, for Christ's sake, lay off that. You make me sick. You married me didn't you? And you knew what it meant, too, didn't you?" (202, 203). Stone emphasizes the degradation and brutality of the titular "consummation," marital rape on the wife's unresisting body as her four children, told gruffly to "turn over," sleep on the floor beside the bed (203).

The story's grim setting and tone argue that poverty and despair can bleed a marriage of love, making it little more than a prison. Stone transgresses the cultural assumption of mother love to emphasize the extremity of the situation. By linking the death of mother love to the ravages of repeated childbirth, Stone implies that birth control could have prevented the tragedy: "There was no conscious thought of the children already born. Gone was whatever maternal instinct she might have had in the struggle following her marriage six years before. There had been seven children born. Three had died" (203). In an attempt to gain power over her own body, the woman contemplates suicide. How would this marriage have been different if the couple had practiced birth control? When read alongside the letters written by real women, the liberating promise of birth control becomes clear.

Love and Marriage

Do these depictions of unhappy marriages, or marriages threatened by uncontrolled fertility, critique marriage? Perhaps, if only by acknowledging the prevalence of unhappy unions. But any critique is muted by the

18. Sanger received thousands of letters each year requesting information on birth control. In *Motherhood in Bondage* she compiled a representative sampling, broken down into chapters according to themes such as "Girl Mothers," "The Trap of Maternity," "The Struggle of the Unfit," "Marital Relations," "Methods That Fail," and "The Doctor Warns—But Does Not Tell." The January 1933 edition of the *Review* also provides an analysis of the letters received by the American Birth Control League from 1931 to 1932 in "What 7309 Mothers Want" (Boughton).

alignment of birth control with traditional views on the proper place for sexuality, a strategic position that strengthened throughout the 1920s. Examining the fiction that became part of this public discourse reveals the inherent contradictions in this mode of argument, the strain hidden beneath marriage's apparent ability to sanction sexuality. These works not only examined marriage but also implicated birth control as an aid across class and race. This cultural belief in marriage as the road to happiness surfaced in contemporary surveys:

> Presented with three alternatives, three-fourths of young women polled in 1943 preferred marriage and domesticity. Eighteen percent wished to combine marriage with a career, but less than one in ten considered a successful career as a single woman to be a desirable alternative. That most Americans sought marriage is not surprising, but that only 9 percent believed a single person could be happy indicated the power of the marital imperative. Women who failed to conform lived under a social stigma greater than that which had marked their forbearers. (Hartmann 179)

But the fiction of the birth control movement reveals the tension inherent in upholding marriage while changing conceptions of female sexuality, the incipient contradiction between the revolutionary potential of contraception and its strategic location within conservative morality. The fiction discussed in this chapter exhibits many of the contradictions in the logic of the birth control movement itself. The sentimental style of these plots makes birth control less threatening by using accepted and conservative modes. Cover graphics for the *Birth Control Review* reinforced these associations, often featuring classic family or mother and child images, such as December 1931's drawing entitled "Mother and Child" by Warren Wheelock (fig. 8). This tactic allowed the birth control movement to invade the sensibility expressed by many small-town Americans that "God punishes people who deliberately try not to have children" (Lynd and Lynd 124). By presenting birth control as a marital aid, the movement gained momentum and support.

Threats to marriage included the destruction of the mother's health, prostitution, and abuse. Birth control advocates argued that contraception was the cure to these problems, implicitly reinforcing the cultural plot of women's lives (marriage—sex—motherhood). However, in its claims that abstinence and coitus interruptus were "unnatural" and both physically and emotionally harmful, the movement also contributed to the growing acceptance that women also had natural desires. By allowing women

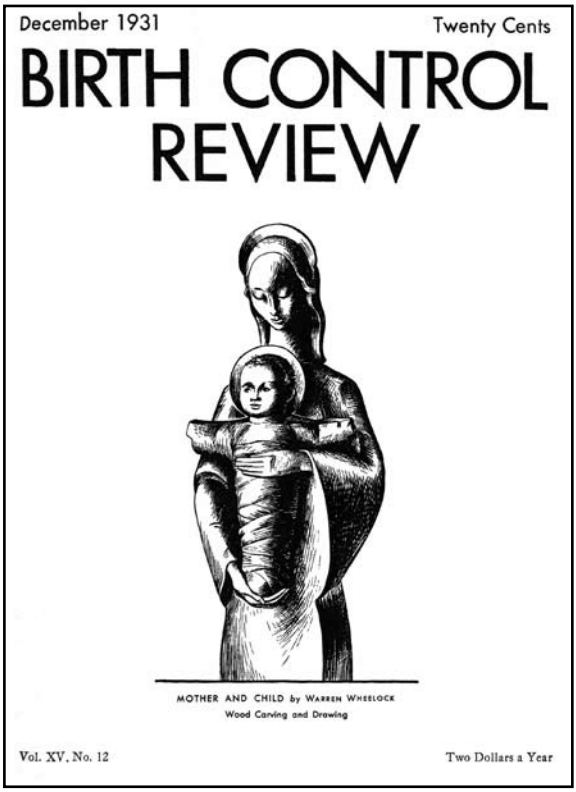

FIGURE 8. Warren Wheelock, "Mother and Child," Cover of *Birth Control Review,* December 1931. Reprinted with permission of Alexander Sanger.

to engage in sex without the risk of pregnancy, birth control implicitly validated female sexuality, even as the movement's rhetoric restricted its expression. While literary critics often consider the fiction discussed in this chapter sentimental and conventional, this mode of presentation was a rhetorical strategy, introducing potentially radical ideas in a plain brown wrapper for public consumption (much as mail-order prophylactics were disguised as innocuous packages).

The critiques offered were not of marriage itself but of problems within marriage. Birth control was not so that women could enjoy promiscuous sex, but to ensure that they were better able to fulfill traditional roles within the home. Although conceptions of marriage were reshaped by greater acceptance of sexuality as integral to normal development, the rhetoric of the movement remained conservative. This is rather ironic, since "[s]exual expression was moving beyond the confines of marriage,

not as the deviant behavior of prostitutes and their customers, but as the normative behavior of many Americans," at least in part due to the growing availability of contraceptives (D'Emilio and Freedman 241). While the efforts of the birth control movement fostered this social trend, and no doubt benefited from the more open discussion, the movement kept itself rhetorically situated within conventional morality.

By depicting the psychological, physical, and economic consequences of involuntary reproduction, these authors both challenged and reinforced sentimental views of marriage. Their decidedly unglamorous depictions made implicit arguments for the necessity of birth control in improving marriage for women of all races and classes. While the fiction depicted the possible damage too-frequent childbearing inflicted on marriage, it did little to ameliorate the confusion over intercourse. Birth control contributed to the movement for freer discussion of sexuality and the growth of "sexual science," but depictions of fictional sex remained largely absent from mainstream fiction.