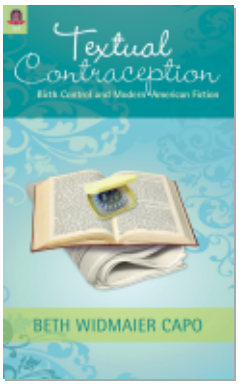
2. "As Red and Flaming As Possible:" Radical Rhetoric of the 1910s



2

"As Red and Flaming as Possible"

Radical Rhetoric of the 1910s

The Rebel Women claim:
The Right to be lazy.
The Right to be an unmarried mother.
The Right to destroy.
The Right to create.
The Right to love.
The Right to live.
—*The Woman Rebel*, March 1914: 3

The first three decades of the twentieth century witnessed great changes, both in American life and in American fiction. The push for women's suffrage and increased employment for women outside the home helped to change long-held ideas about female roles and the capabilities of their bodies. Sigmund Freud's *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality* appeared in English in 1905 and contributed to growing discussions about the need for sex education and the idea that women and children were sexual beings.[1] New roles for women opened in the years between the World Wars, and female sexuality gained wider social acceptance. Young women smoked cigarettes, danced, and cut their hair. They "made necking America's favorite pastime, and 36 percent of them engaged in premarital intercourse" (James Reed, "The Birth Control Movement before *Roe v. Wade*" 28). Reformers for birth control, including Emma Goldman, Margaret Sanger, and Mary Ware Dennett, read

1. According to Julian B. Carter, sex education began in the 1910s in America as a response to the growth of venereal disease.

progressive theorists and sexologists who warned that abstinence and withdrawal were dangerous to the development of both men and women. The subject of sex, and of female desire, entered public discourse. Press coverage of the early birth control movement's challenges to the law contributed to debates over the purpose and morality of sex. In turn, this dissemination aided the movement by accustoming people to "shocking" or radical ideas. Leslie Fishbein argues that this "repeal of reticence" in the pre–World War I years "led to increased recognition of sexuality, although many still worried that people would become sex-obsessed" (35). The time was right for birth control.

American fiction also underwent many changes during this period. During the late nineteenth century, literature generally conformed to the genteel code embodied in a statement by the 1897 U.S. Commission of Education: literature "educates man's insight into the distinction of good from evil, reveals to him his ideals of what ought to be, and elevates the banner of his march toward the beautiful good and the beautiful true" (Boyer 16). The 1873 Comstock Act also policed literature for its moral lessons. However, by the turn of the century many authors were challenging these precepts. Naturalism, with its emphasis on environmental forces shaping and limiting individual opportunity, was a natural fit with the birth control movement, as was a muckraking journalistic impulse. In its attempts to expose life's harsh nature, this literature explored taboos such as violence and the darker side of marriage. This critique offered implicit support for contraception.

Potentially radical ideas implicating birth control in a social rather than sexual revolution ran through articles and fiction published in radical periodicals and also, although perhaps more subtly, in mainstream novels. A common belief in freedom and social change linked journals such as the *Blast, The Masses, Mother Earth, The Woman Rebel, Birth Control Review,* and *New York Call.* They were also united, at least briefly, geographically and through a host of shared contributors. Emma Goldman, Max Eastman, Floyd Dell, Mary Heaton Vorse, Inez Haynes Gillmore, Susan Glaspell, Theodore Dreiser, Sinclair Lewis, Margaret Sanger, and other artistic and political leaders all lived for a time in the Greenwich Village area of New York City.[2] Greenwich Village was a hotbed of radical thought. Villagers read Havelock Ellis's *Psychology of Sex,* underwent

2. Floyd Dell, *The Masses*' editor, contributed a humorous six-part series on "The Outline of Marriage" to the *Birth Control Review* in 1926, and the *Review* positively reviewed his novels. Mary Heaton Vorse and the artist Cornelia Barns contributed to both periodicals, and Vorse, Elsie Clews Parson, and Rose Pastor Stokes supported Margaret Sanger in her legal battles. See Fishbein.

Freudian analysis for their sexual repression, and joined discussion groups such as the Heterodoxy Club. Their influence reached far beyond the confines of the Village, thanks in part to *The Masses* (1911–17) and other periodicals. Women often led the sexual rebellion in the Village. Mabel Dodge Luhan used her Fifth Avenue salon as a forum for taboo topics such as birth control and free love, and credits Margaret Sanger as the one "who introduced to us all the idea of Birth Control. . . . She was the first person I ever knew who was openly an ardent propagandist for the joys of the flesh" (Luhan 69). Indeed, Sanger met Emma Goldman, one of the first advocates for birth control as part of a socialist program, at Dodge's salon in 1911.

Discussions of sexuality reached outside of private forums such as the Heterodoxy Club and fed the impulse toward realism present in authors such as Theodore Dreiser and Ellen Glasgow. Sherwood Anderson recalled, "I do not think that any of us, at that time, wanted to over play sex. We wanted in our stories and novels to bring it back into its real relation to the life we lived and saw others living" (qtd. in White, *Sherwood* 343). As the media began to cover the public face of the birth control movement, such as the trials of Margaret Sanger, William Sanger, Emma Goldman, and Ben Reitman, the fiction and art in journals such as *The Masses* and *Birth Control Review,* Sanger's second attempt at magazine publishing begun in 1917, dramatized the debate, bringing the radicalizing social reality of poverty before the public in another form.[3]

Many historians credit Margaret Sanger as the founder and driving

3. Sold through subscription and street sales, the *Birth Control Review* gained a circulation that fluctuated between 15,000 and 30,000 (as compared to the *Woman Rebel*'s more modest 2,000). Judging from the readers' letters, this audience included doctors, clergymen, reform-minded society ladies, and poor women from rural and urban settings. To challenge the sanction against "lewd and lascivious" material, the *Birth Control Review* used rhetorical appeals to prove why birth control information was necessary, not titillating. It contained detailed and impassioned arguments on eugenic sterilization, birth control abroad, child labor, poverty, religion, medicine, and state and national laws. In addition, it reported on legal trials, birth control league meetings, the opening of birth control clinics, reports from nurses and social workers, press clippings, and letters from readers. Poetry extolling motherhood or praising Sanger and other leaders littered the pages, as did cartoons and drawings reminiscent of *The Masses*. Although well-known British and American authors such as Theodore Dreiser, Upton Sinclair, Agnes Smedley, H. G. Wells, Julian Huxley, Vera Brittain, and Charlotte Haldane contributed articles in support of the birth control movement, the fiction that appeared in its pages was by lesser-known authors. The *Review* often contained book reviews of novels that it deemed as adding to the conversation surrounding contraception, including novels by many of the above-named authors. Overall, the fiction in the pages of the *Birth Control Review* corresponded with and contributed to the message of the articles and art. The literature presented the issues in another form, a dramatic genre that offset the didactic tone of the articles, injecting life into the statistics on child mortality and providing "case studies" to the impassioned arguments.

force behind the American birth control movement.[4] According to her autobiography, after seeing the devastating physical, social, and economic effects of multiple pregnancies on the poor women of New York City's East Side from 1900 to 1902, Sanger decided to campaign for birth control. Sanger is a controversial figure, with critics and biographers alike disagreeing on her role. Her forceful personality and "flamboyant defiance of the law" unquestionably helped to push birth control as a term and concept into public circulation (Reed, "Birth Control Movement before *Roe v. Wade*" 31). However, Sanger was not the first to make birth control a public issue. Emma Goldman viewed birth control as a vital part of the larger issue of freedom. She, too, had witnessed the devastating effects of uncontrolled pregnancy on poor women while working as a nurse. Both women began their crusades as part of a larger call for social justice, both established and wrote for radical periodicals, and both challenged the Comstock Act by writing and lecturing about birth control. Goldman, an immigrant anarchist, socialist, and feminist, traveled the country speaking on free love, birth control, modern drama, conscription, and other topics, and published her ideas in *Mother Earth* from 1906 to 1917, selling it at her lectures and by subscription. She made "The Limitation of Offspring" a regular topic of her lectures beginning in 1910, and in 1915 she

4. This study discusses Sanger more than other leaders due to her role in publishing *Woman Rebel* and the *Birth Control Review*. Scholars such as D'Emilio and Freedman credit Sanger as the mover behind the movement, as do Himes, Reed, Gordon, and others. Mary Ware Dennett was perhaps more radical than Sanger; when Sanger fought for a "doctors only" bill Dennett persisted in arguing for the complete repeal of the Comstock Act. Dennett lobbied state and national politicians and unsuccessfully tried to find a sponsor for her bill. Birth control reformers found themselves split between supporting Sanger's "doctors only" bill and Dennett's "clean repeal" bill. Dennett argued that a medical monopoly on birth control information would not help the common people, and that it actually reinforced the idea that birth control was somehow shameful. The two reformers publicly disagreed, and in 1921 Sanger, openly hostile to Dennett and the Voluntary Parenthood League, organized the American Birth Control League. Constance Chen makes a powerful case for the importance of Dennett's presence in the movement and her strategies in *"The Sex Side of Life": Mary Ware Dennett's Pioneering Battle for Birth Control and Sex Education*. Chen portrays Sanger as a latecomer and publicity hound: "Like other unthinking people, whether liberal or conservative, Sanger was myopic and intolerant" (162). Chen also describes Sanger as jealous, subversive, hypocritical, egomaniacal, and "shrill and hysterical" (163), while depicting Dennett as a spotlight-avoiding saint who just wanted to improve "the lives of all women" (166). See also Dennett's 1926 tract, *Birth Control Laws: Shall We Keep Them, Change Them, or Abolish Them?*, and Rosen.

Archival information on Sanger is available through the Margaret Sanger Papers Project (http://www.nyu.edu/projects/sanger/). A series of books containing her papers, edited by Esther Katz, is in progress, with the first volume published by the University of Illinois Press in 2002. On Goldman, whom *The Masses* lauded "as the woman who had done the most in the country to champion the cause of birth control" (Falk 153), see Falk and Shulman.

explained "how to practice birth control," "the first time the subject had been publicly discussed anywhere in America" (Shulman 169). Sanger's first periodical, *The Woman Rebel,* openly proclaimed her radical purpose in its title, and she moved from writing and speaking to establishing birth control clinics and organizations.

This chapter examines the radical writings of Goldman, Sanger, and other authors and social activists from 1910 to 1920. Their early ties to the Socialist Party led to rhetoric and literature depicting birth control as a vital part of social and economic revolution.[5] The birth control movement had its roots in Progressive Era reform and "was part of a general upswing in activism. Joining that resistance, birth controllers appealed for support, particularly to women and to working-class and poor people in general, because they believed that lack of control over reproduction helped perpetuate an undemocratic distribution of power" (Gordon, *Moral Property of Women* 139). The socialist emphasis found its equivalent in fiction, some of it published in radical periodicals, which depicted an oppressive class divide, the inadequacy of the current philanthropic system, and a critique of marriage. Using a variety of tactics, from sentiment to humor, writers in the 1910s introduced birth control in the context of an emancipatory movement for social justice.

Goldman and Sanger were entering into a new public debate about contraception, which intersected with a complexity of other issues including economic inequity and its effects on women. The status quo can perhaps best be seen with a brief analysis of Kathleen Norris's 1911 novella, *Mother,* a work that some have called anti-birth-control propaganda.[6] The protagonist, Margaret, hears the gossip of her wealthy employer's friends, none of whom has more than three children. Ironically, these women discuss their reasons for not having more children in terms of money. Mrs. Carr-Boldt, married to a millionaire, states, "People—the very people who ought to have children—simply cannot afford it!" (112). She goes on to list the many things children simply must have, including a trained nurse for each child. Her friends agree, "You don't want to have them

5. The first two decades of the twentieth century were full of labor radicalism, including the International Workers of the World. The widespread support for this worker-centered message is evidenced by the 1912 presidential election, in which nearly one million Americans voted for Socialist candidate Eugene Debs. The Socialist Party of America split into three groups, including the American Communist Party, in 1919. This split is symbolic of the larger fragmentation of leftist political organizations. Although their propaganda attempted to forward a univocal message, the Left had no coherent party doctrine. Mari Jo Buhle reports that the "new intellectuals" of the Socialist Party supported birth control, while the old guard party loyalists were hostile or apathetic. For a more general history of the American Left, see Paul Buhle.

6. See Balay.

unless you're able to do everything in the world for them" (114). While wanting to provide for your offspring is a laudable sentiment, Norris uses these leisure-class mothers to argue against birth control at several levels. She undermines a class-based eugenic argument, that only certain people "ought to have children," by contrasting the idle rich women with Margaret's own mother, who provides a loving home for her seven children. Norris also deconstructs as selfish the idea that family size should be based on economic conditions via her characterization of Margaret's Mother. The family lives in a shabby poverty that young Margaret finds embarrassing, yet provides the material basics for each child, thus showing that children need love alone, not nurse and nanny.

While Norris argues against birth control by canonizing Mother, a refusal to depict real poverty and its consequences, such as overcrowding, disease, and despair, weakens her argument. That is, Norris assumes homogeneity of class such that all poverty is genteel, and ignores differences within economic classifications. Family size is part of a consumer economy, with the wealthy able to make lifestyle decisions. Economists view the number of children as "an individual consumption decision bounded by constraints, tastes, and preferences. The principal idea, which stems from the theory of consumer choice, is that the demand for children reflects the way a household balances its subjective tastes for a number of goods, including children, against externally determined constraints in order to maximize its satisfaction or 'utility'" (Katz and Stern 66). Margaret's ultimate decision that these wealthy women are selfish because they do not have more children erases the very real economic concerns that many women had.

Other writers, such as Theodore Dreiser, supported birth control but carefully veiled their support within their fiction. As a naturalist writer, Dreiser was concerned with examining how external conditions such as economics shaped people's lives. In 1911, also the year of *Mother*'s publication, Dreiser published *Jennie Gerhardt*. The protagonist, Jennie, is tempted to engage in premarital sex to help support her family. Jennie's body, her sexuality, is her most valuable asset, and she agrees to exchange it for her family's security. Here, Dreiser acknowledges the uncomfortable reality of the female body in the labor market and the sexual marketability that led to prostitution. Increased urbanization at the end of the nineteenth century contributed to a growth in prostitution. Viewed as both a moral threat and a menace to public health by spreading venereal disease, prostitution was outlawed by the Progressive Era's 1910 Mann Act and later state laws. Yet Dreiser's Jennie is a wholly sympathetic character who belies seamy popular depictions of diseased whores.

Prostitutes also were suspected of having illicit knowledge of birth control. In keeping with Dreiser's portrayal of Jennie as innocent, her second lover, Lester Kane, introduces knowledge of birth control. He tells her, "But don't worry about that. You don't need to. I understand a number of things that you don't yet. It can be arranged. You don't need to have a child unless you want to. And I don't want you to" (158). What is particularly interesting here is that Lester controls the knowledge, and in doing so controls Jennie's reproductive body. It is his desire, not Jennie's, that she remain unimpregnated, as her infertility increases her value is as a sexual object.

Dreiser consistently supported birth control in his writing: in "A Word Concerning Birth Control," in the April 1921 issue of *Birth Control Review,* he advocates birth control for the poor and is suspicious of efforts to keep this knowledge illegal. He writes, "I sometimes suspect the wealthy and powerful of various persuasions and interests, especially those who might hope to profit from the presence here of vast and docile hordes, of having more of an interest in blind unregulated reproduction on the part of the masses than they would care to admit" (12–13). Reading the novel *Jennie Gerhardt* alongside Dreiser's commentary clarifies his understanding of gender and class in the political economy.

Dreiser's subtext of birth control in *Jennie Gerhardt* coincides with Margaret Sanger's more explicit print campaign in the socialist newspaper the *New York Call.* Beginning in 1911, Sanger published two series of articles, "What Every Mother Should Know" and "What Every Girl Should Know." Both attempted to educate children about sex, touching on topics such as masturbation and desire. By 1913 the series had attracted the censorship of Comstock, and the postal authorities suppressed the last column, "Some Consequences of Ignorance and Silence—Part III." To publicize this censorship the *Call* left a column with only "What Every Girl Should Know. NOTHING! By order of the Post Office Department" as its text. The column never mentioned specific contraceptive method—simply the suggestion was enough for the postal service to deem it in violation of the Comstock Act against "lewd and lascivious" literature.

This publicity, as well as personal experience, helped inspire other activists such as Mary Ware Dennett. Dennett believed strongly in civil liberties and saw the repression of birth control knowledge as a death sentence to many women. Indeed, the mortality rate is truly astonishing: "In 1913 more women between the ages of fifteen and forty-four died in childbirth than from any other cause except tuberculosis, and the mortality was three times that of typhoid fever" (Chen 151). Doctors

told Dennett, after her own three difficult labors, not to risk another pregnancy. They would not, however, tell her how to accomplish this. The suppression of contraceptive knowledge had very real and potentially deadly effects for women, and much of the radical fiction that follows used the tragedy of women's broken bodies for dramatic effect.

Margaret Sanger continued her feminist and socialist crusade to push the boundaries over birth control in 1914 by confronting Comstock on two fronts: through the publication of *Family Limitation,* a pamphlet containing "socialist and feminist arguments for contraception with pictures and descriptions of birth control devices then available—the douche, vaginal suppository, condom, sponge and pessary," and with the launch of a new journal, *The Woman Rebel* (Masel-Walters 6).[7] Although *The Woman Rebel* contained no explicit information, the first issue implied that future editions would discuss contraceptive methods: Sanger wrote, "It will also be the aim of *The Woman Rebel* to advocate the prevention of conception and to impart such knowledge in the columns of this paper" ("The Aim" 1). Readers certainly expected and wanted this information. According to *My Fight for Birth Control,* Sanger had received over 10,000 requests for contraceptive information within six months (81). Goldman sold copies of *Woman Rebel* on her lecture tours—indeed, Goldman told Sanger that *The Woman Rebel* "sells better than anything else we have"—and handed out *Family Limitation* and *Why and How the Poor Should Not Have Many Children* by Dr. William Robinson when asked for specific information (Falk 132, 141).

The Woman Rebel was a simple eight-page, three-column monthly newspaper with a range of content—indeed, the one consistent factor is an underlying tone of anarchy. As Sanger wrote in her autobiography, "I worked day and night to make it as red and flaming as possible" (80). *The Woman Rebel* quickly met its objective: the postal service deemed it "unmailable," a fate that had earlier met the January 1910 edition of Goldman's *Mother Earth.* Authorities confiscated four of the seven issues of *The Woman Rebel* and arraigned Sanger for violating the law. Alex Baskin notes, "The *Woman Rebel* was largely a crimson burst of anger. It was an unburdening of emotion, of pent up feelings, of hatreds and of discontent. It was anarchist in expression, direct actionist in tone and woman liberationist in its aspirations. Years later, a less disputatious, more socially respectable Margaret Sanger would refer to the *Woman Rebel* as a little 'sass box'" (ix). Goldman supported Sanger throughout

7. "What Every Mother Should Know," "What Every Girl Should Know," and "Family Limitation" are available online through Michigan State University's Digital Collections (http://digital.lib.msu.edu/).

this brush with the law. In the February 1915 edition of *Mother Earth*, Leonard B. Abbott wrote of William Sanger's arrest for distributing *Family Limitation*. Abbott opined that the arrest was "an outrage and should be resented by every fair-minded man and woman" (379). Margaret Sanger fled to Europe after being arraigned for violation of the Comstock Act and returned in 1915, a month after Anthony Comstock's death; the case never came to trial.

While the birth control movement was a frequent topic in Goldman's journal, *Mother Earth*, *The Woman Rebel* was unique in publishing fiction alongside its articles. This fiction largely sought to counter the myths of romance and gentle motherhood by reminding readers of economic imperatives. Emile Chapelier's 1914 article entitled "To Working Girls," for example, destroys the romantic self-perceptions of the "working girl" by depicting the harsh realities of a working-class woman's life: "Every one of you makes yourself the heroine of a novel: you are going to love and be loved by a handsome, fine chap, your life is going to be spent in one beautiful love story! Oh! a fine dream . . . all filled up with tender caresses, passionate embraces, inexpressible pleasures, and undreamt of happiness! For most of you the reality is going to be a nightmare" (12). Chapelier indicts popular fiction, specifically novels, for creating false consciousness among young women. This direct address to working girls was part of the early alignment with socialism and recalls Sanger's dedication of "What Every Girl Should Know" to "the working girls of the world." *The Masses*, a Socialist Party–affiliated periodical known for its political cartoons, in April 1912 used its trademark satire to mock hysterical arguments that socialism and birth control were twin threats to traditional morality.[8] A drawing by Alexander Popini entitled "The Happy Home" depicts a wrinkled woman in a shabby cloak leaving four young children in a bare room. The caption asks facetiously, "Dear Reader, do you know what the above pretty picture is? . . . Is it not too bad of Socialism to try and break up such a Happy Home?" By contrasting the harsh reality of poverty with the satiric caption, the illustration sends the message that socialism is the friend, not foe, of family. Cartoons, articles, and stories presented birth control as a commodity that the wealthy do not want to share with the poor.

8. *The Masses* also differed from other Socialist-affiliated periodicals in its liberal editorial policy, its refusal to endorse coherent party lines, and unified support for birth control. See Fishbein and W. O'Neill; see Morrisson on race/ethnicity and *The Masses*, and R. Fitzgerald for biographies of artists Art Young, Robert Minor, John Sloan, and K. R. Chamberlain.

"Breed!"

THE FEMALE AS FACTORY

The first several decades of the twentieth century saw a transformation in American society that firmly fixed mass production, labor unionism, and a growing "culture industry" in the economic landscape. Social and political unrest circulated throughout public discourse, generating a mechanistic language that the birth control movement took up in its persuasive arguments. Contraceptive rhetoric employed the metaphors and images of the industrial economy, including the trope of the salt-of-the-earth laborer and the dehumanizing factory. The early, and more consciously radical, arguments of the 1910s recognized multiple sites of female production in the labor economy: the female body as a commodity of value either for sex (notably prostitution) or for reproduction (as a factory to reproduce the working class). According to Lindy Biggs, "The machine became a powerful symbol in the early United States. . . . A machine was predictable and perfectible; it was controllable, nonidiosyncratic, easy to routinize and systematize" (5). Similarly, writers figured the female body as machine under the control of the capitalist system. Emma Goldman uses this tactic in an excerpt of "Love and Marriage," reprinted in *The Woman Rebel*, when she asks, "Who would fight wars? Who would create wealth? . . . The race, the race! Shouts the king, the president, the capitalist, the priest. The race must be preserved, though woman be degraded to a mere machine" (3). Women's labor inside the factory and their reproductive bodies outside the factory were subject to the demands of capitalism. Female factory workers joined labor unions to protest unsafe conditions, but with mixed results: although almost 20,000 shirtwaist workers struck for better conditions in New York in 1909 and 1910, over 140 died in the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory fire in 1911.

Regaining control of the female body thus became part of a social revolution. Margaret Sanger, briefly a paid organizer and lecturer for the Socialist Party's Women's Committee in 1911, left in 1912 for the more radical direct action of the International Workers of the World. She aimed her early calls for birth control at working-class women and had distinct revolutionary tones. Sanger established a classic adversarial relationship between proletariat and aristocracy, and saw birth control as a weapon in the hands of the workers: In *Family Limitation* (1914), she wrote, "The working women can use direct action by refusing to supply the market with children to be exploited, by refusing to populate the earth with slaves" (3). This early appeal advanced birth control as a means for

women to gain control over their reproductive bodies and firmly situated those bodies within the labor economy.

One common trope in the radical press was equating the female reproductive body with a factory. Rather than producing machinery, the material good at issue is babies to be used by the wealthy. The November 1912 issue of *The Masses* featured a satiric advertisement calling for "Increased Opportunities for Babies" and offered them positions in factories, slums, railroad wrecks, insane asylums, or jobs as white slaves or war casualties. This piece implies that uncontrolled fertility among the poor benefits the wealthy (who need workers and soldiers) but only keeps the poor enchained by poverty. In the context of the birth control movement, contraception becomes a tool empowering the poor while depriving the wealthy of cheap labor.

Sanger's early language envisioned capitalism and sexism as a totalizing system of enslavement, a machine of the master class. In "Why the *Woman Rebel?*," an explanatory editorial in the first issue, she writes, "I believe that woman is enslaved by the world machine by sex conventions, by motherhood and its present necessary child-rearing, by wage-slavery, by middle-class morality, by customs, laws and superstitions" (8). Mechanistic metaphors dissociate motherhood from any human emotion or bond; it becomes simply another mode of production, figuring the female body as doubly laboring, doubly invested in the maintenance of the capitalist economy. As Katherine Stubbs notes, "the rhetorical construction of women as analogous to machines seemed to make possible the supervision, manipulation, and control of women throughout the economic sphere, for the flexibility of this discourse meant that it could be used both in the sphere of production (where working-class women could be represented as "mechanical" workers) and in that of consumption" (142). The discursive invocation of the female as machine justifies the treatment of women as an instrumental object, depersonalizing the woman as worker.[9]

The birth control movement's early rhetoric used this cold, anti-sentimental language as a shock mechanism to argue that capitalism destroys poor families and women. Writing directly to the working class in 1918, Sanger warned, "Do not be deceived. Your children are commodities—they are bought and sold in industry. And the price of infants like the price of everything else, goes up when the commodity grows scarce" ("When Should a Woman Avoid Having Children?" 7). This trope reap-

9. Later works, such as Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* (1932), foresaw a future in which technology would replace the inefficient human body, even in reproduction.

pears in later socialist-oriented feminist literature of the Depression, such as Meridel Le Sueur's "Anunciation." In this story, the pregnant protagonist states, "I remember I kept thinking to myself that a child should be made by machinery now, then there would be no fuss" (128). The body's unruly mess would be removed, making pregnancy and childbearing another antiseptic, mechanistic process of capitalism.

This pessimistic, antagonistic tone was also evident in the visual rhetoric. *The Masses* published a double-page cartoon entitled simply "Breed!" in the December 1915 issue. The political cartoon depicts a fat, rich white man pointing to an empty cradle to the young woman standing behind him. In the background, workers stand outside a factory while a cloud labeled "war" looms overhead. This cartoon appeared six months after the death of 124 American passengers aboard the *Lusitania,* sunk by a German submarine, when Americans were debating a possible entrance into World War I. But the image is prescient in its portrayal of the looming conflict, foregrounding economic and gender divisions and the link between capitalism and militarism. Capital needed poor bodies to fill the ranks of soldiers that die to protect the system and to work in the factories producing the mechanism of war. The wealthy owner is overweight, a visible sign of his wealth in contrast to the mass of workers behind him. His central position is another visual cue to his power over the other figures. The simple command to "Breed!" tells the story of a woman's role: her body is the factory producing labor and cannon fodder. Read in this frame, a subtext of birth control lies beneath the visual rhetoric: birth control for the poor could interfere with this capitalistic war machine by enabling poor women to control their fertility, cutting off the supply of cheap labor. *The Blast* connects these threads in its February 26, 1916, edition when, in "A Menace to Profit," the writer argues that Sanger and Goldman were arrested because they are "a menace" to the manufacturer who "needs 'hands' for his factories. The State needs cannon fodder to protect the manufacturer, its partner" (5).

Illustrators who contributed to both *The Masses* and *Birth Control Review* explored the relationship between reproduction, production, and war. These illustrations reinforced the written message of surrounding pages, together forming a coherent and powerful argument. A drawing in the April/May 1917 *Review* by K. R. Chamberlain shows a woman surveying a graveyard, a sign reading "Breed! We Need Men" slipping out of her hand (fig. 2). This image appears above a brief piece by Olive Schreiner, the South African feminist, entitled "Breeding Men for Battle." The need for men to replace those who died in war was symbolized by the vast

graveyard setting. Although the United States had just entered the war in April of 1917, reports of earlier casualties indicated that one of women's wartime roles would be the traditional one, maternal rather than martial.[10] To refuse to breed is a denial of patriotic as well as gendered duty. In her radical early writings, Sanger encouraged women not to become "a mere breeding machine grinding out a humanity, which fills insane asylums, almshouses, and sweatshops, and provides cannon fodder that tyrants may rise to power on the sacrifice of her offspring" (qtd. in Miriam Reed 101).

The figure of woman as an assembly-line breeder was prominent during wartime, but the birth control movement changed the focus slightly after peace was declared. In the December 1918 *Review,* after the close of World War I, a drawing by Lou Rogers gives a more hopeful outlook of "The New Vision" (fig. 3). A young woman, surveying a graveyard, sees shining from the heavens "quality not quantity," and ignores the glowering man behind her holding open a book reading "Traditional After-The-War Duties for Women: 1st Commandment—Breed." The second and third commandments are also to breed, the repetition emphasizing the inescapable duty of women, who, it seems, are good for little else. But the illustration denies this call to duty with a different message coming from the heavens. It extols not unthinking mass production but a call to quality control in reproductive labor. The woman standing in front of the man, her gaze fixed on a heavenly message, clearly overthrows male authority and encourages women to break with tradition. The visual rhetoric of these images articulates the intersection between war and women's role(s) in the economic machine. By opposing this message of female reproductive duty, the images represent the early location of birth control as implicitly feminist and socialist. Birth control is thus a way to stop the mindless breeding of materials for the war machine. It offers poor women a means to power over their bodies and lives.

By foregrounding the female body as a machine implicated in the economy, these narrative images critiqued the gendered and classed social system. Appealing to values that would trigger emotion, they sought a reader response similar to the rhetorical questions asked by Margaret Sanger in *Woman and the New Race* (1920): "What shall this woman say to a society that would make of her body a reproductive machine only to waste prodigally the fruit of her being? Does society value her offspring? Does it not let them die by the hundreds of thousands of want, hunger

10. In "Arms and the Woman: The Con[tra]ception of the War Text," Helen M. Cooper, Susan Merrill Squier, and Adrienne Auslander Munich offer a sweeping look at the intersection of war and contraception in texts from the *Aeneid* to Chinua Achebe.

FIGURE 2. K. R. Chamberlain, "Breed! We Need Men," *Birth Control Review,* April/May 1917: 5.

and preventable disease? Does it not drive them to the factories, the mills, the mines and the stores to be stunted physically and mentally? Does it not throw them into the labor market to be competitors with her and their father?" (90–91).

This trope of the breeding woman's body being used by evil capitalists also runs through later birth control literature. The poem "Breed, Women, Breed" by Lucia Trent, reprinted in the *Birth Control Review* in April 1930, reveals this strand of thinking's reappearance when economic issues again came to the fore during the Depression Era.[11] The poem describes poor women as breeding machines for a capitalist system, producing workers and soldiers:

Breed, little mothers,
With tired backs and tired hands,
Breed for the owners of mills and the owners of mines,
Breed a race of danger-haunted men,
A race of toiling, sweating, miserable men,
Breed, little mothers,

11. Chapter 6 will discuss how the birth control movement continued to focus on the economic disparities but, during the Depression years, shifted its rhetoric to appeal to the wealthy.

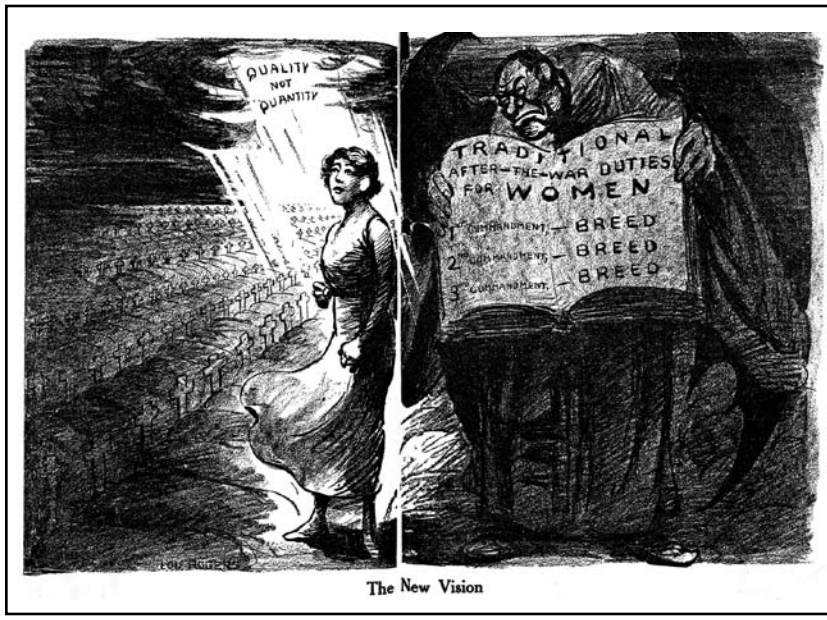


FIGURE 3. Lou Rogers, "The New Vision," *Birth Control Review,* December 1918: 8–9.

> Breed for the owners of mills and the owners of mines,
> Breed, breed, breed! (113)

This image envisions woman as an automaton, her body a reproductive factory without subjectivity, producing interchangeable commodities on the assembly line of her womb. Breeding is a word most often applied to animals, signaling an unthinking fecundity. The repetition of the word *breed* foregrounds the dual action of the woman, the internal reproduction mirroring the external action of the "tired backs and tired hands" that keep the factory running. Both labors are repetitive, numbing the mind and deadening the soul. The tropes of machine as feminine and woman as machine contrast with a cultural ideal of the sentimental "little mother," pitting greedy and faceless capitalists against frail female bodies. Women thus remained within a matrix of power such as described by Michel Foucault: "political investment of the body is bound up, in accordance with complex reciprocal relations, with its economic use; it is largely as a force of production that the body is invested with relations of power and domination; but, on the other hand, its constitution as labour power is possible only if it is caught up in a system of subjection" (25). Birth control offers the possibility of disrupting this system of subjection of the

female body, although its actual effects have often served to reinscribe women in an oppressive system.

Birth Control as Social Revolution

"IF YOU'RE RICH, THE LAW DON'T COUNT"

While the First World War combined with the language of industrialization helped establish the rhetorical trope of breeding woman as a factory, a second and supporting strain ran through the radical rhetoric: the message of social injustice couched in the images of the pathetic poor. Radical activism for birth control grew stronger as the decade progressed: Dennett founded the first birth control organization in the United States, the National Birth Control League, in March 1915. (In 1919 it was renamed the Voluntary Parenthood League.) A year later, Sanger opened the first birth control clinic in the Brownsville section of New York City, and in 1917, the same year that Alice Paul's National Woman's Party began to picket the White House to pressure President Woodrow Wilson into supporting women's suffrage, Sanger began the *Birth Control Review* to spread her message. Although the rhetoric of the *Birth Control Review* was less radical than its predecessor, *The Woman Rebel*, the implicit message of birth control retained its revolutionary appeal, and the class divide became a rally call that brought together the increasingly mainstream Sanger and radical thinkers. To many radical thinkers, birth control was a logical part of the revolution and "destructive to the capitalist system," as a 1917 article in the *Birth Control Review* argued (W. Roberts 7). *The Blast*, anarchist Alexander Berkman's short-lived periodical (January 1916–June 1917), advocated for birth control and rallied its socialist readers to support the work of Goldman and Sanger, posting notices of their lectures and trials.[12] Although Sanger's rhetoric began to distance the movement from socialism, her arguments remained tied to class oppression. Indeed, her decision to open her clinic in Brownsville was an attempt to reach those most in need of contraception: poor immigrant women.

Although the American Medical Association did not formally accept birth control until 1937, ample statistical evidence shows that some American women were controlling their reproduction long before that

12. Sanger's article "Not Guilty" in the first edition of *The Blast* explained her indictment for *The Woman Rebel* (7); later issues updated readers and explained "The Meaning of Margaret Sanger's Stand."

FIGURE 4. Lydia Gibson, "The Boss's wife can buy information to limit her family," cover of *The Blast,* February 12, 1916.

year. But how was this information made available, and to whom? The decline in family size among the wealthy clearly indicates that the rich had access to information on birth control from sympathetic doctors.[13] The poor, however, often did not, creating a divide in resources and knowledge. The contradiction, of course, is that those who would most benefit from birth control were the poor. The ability to control family size would allow them to budget their meager resources rather than to fall further into debt. This contradiction is prevalent in the literature and in political cartoons. The cover of *The Blast* for February 12, 1916, features a drawing by Lydia Gibson in which an "M.D." hands "birth control information" to a well-dressed woman with a single child, while holding a warning hand up to a poor woman surrounded by children (fig. 4). A Lou Rogers drawing

13. See Dawson, Meny, and Ridley, "Fertility Control in the United States before the Contraceptive Revolution," and Riley and White, "The Use of Various Methods of Contraception."

FIGURE 5. Lou Rogers, "Mrs. Poor Patient," *Birth Control Review,* June 1918: 5.

in the June 1918 issue of the *Birth Control Review* sends a similar message (fig. 5). A man labeled "Medical Profession" whispers (contraceptive information?) to a well-dressed woman, while in the background a haggard woman holding a baby, with a small child tugging at her skirts, looks on. It is captioned, "Mrs. Poor Patient: — 'If you're rich, the law don't count.'" Class is a clear determinant to access, and the visual placement of the figures emphasizes the poor patient's marginality. The caption also stresses that the law is applied unevenly based on class. Wealthy women could often receive birth control from sympathetic private physicians who would prescribe a pessary, a device worn in the vagina to support a prolapsed uterus, which also acted as a contraceptive.

The economic implications of the law's enforcement were clear, especially when one considered the wealth of the judges and lawyers enforcing the law against poor women. The *Birth Control Review* made much of this disparity and the attendant hypocrisy. When activist Kitty Marion was arrested for selling the *Review* on the streets in 1918, an anonymous article addressed her judges with, "One wonders, Your Honors, why Kitty Marion is in jail and your families, to all appearance, have been the subject

of a wise and judicious limitation?" ("Judges with small families jail Kitty Marion" 5). The legal system may have intended "blind justice," but the application of the law served only to oppress the poor. *The Blast,* in a "Reflection" entitled "Birth Control Fight," reiterates this rhetoric that "Law has ever been enemy of human welfare" (5).

This divide in knowledge and resources appears to have been common knowledge, judging from letters, fiction, and articles of the period.[14] Margaret Sanger received thousands of letters written to the *Review* each year begging for information. These letters reveal poor women asking for the information they are sure wealthier women had. For example, a series of letters in 1917 entitled "Raising Garbage Collectors for the Doctors" foregrounds the re-entrenchment of class difference in its title, while the contents implicate uncontrolled fertility as the mechanism of continued oppression. One letter reads, "Have you any literature on Birth Control? I have six children, and we are so poor and no work I feel as though there was any more children I should go crazy." A series of letters in the May 1928 *Review,* "The Mother's Question—Is Poverty Inevitable?" demonstrates that poor women were in the same straits eleven years later. These letters demonstrate how knowledge was a commodity that reinforced class divisions. As Dr. Alice Hamilton argued in the *Review,* "It is a question of offering to the poor who need it most, the knowledge and the power which has long been the possession of those who need it least" (228).

Pro-contraceptive fiction also discussed this knowledge divide. Humor and farce are the tone of Lawrence Langner's 1914 play, *Wedded: A Social Comedy,* published in the *Little Review.* Margaret Anderson's *Little Review,* a literary magazine devoted to publishing the works of avant-garde writers, attracted "a more upscale segment of the modern audience" than *The Masses* (Stansell 175). As Mark S. Morrisson argues, the *Little Review* marketed itself to an emerging youth culture by adopting images of youth from advertising and the advice column genre of

14. In the April 1927 *Birth Control Review*, John P. Troxell and James H. Maurer, in separate articles on facing pages, argue that the wealthy and middle class have access to birth control, but the poor needed it more. In "Women and U.S. Literary Radicalism," Paula Rabinowitz notes that the Communist Party USA Women's Commission journal, *Working Woman*, reprinted a letter to a birth control clinic and provided an editorial response acknowledging the class-based knowledge divide of contraception, calling for women to fight for more birth control clinics (6). In her 1934 study of women's labor, *Women Who Work*, Grace Hutchins quotes from several letters to the American Birth Control League to argue for more clinics and the dissemination of information to the working class (because, as she states, anyone who can afford a private physician already received this information "as a matter of course" [qtd in Rabinowitz, "Women" 336]).

commercial magazines. Thus, it gained a surprisingly diverse readership and a respectable circulation of 2,000 to 4,000 subscribers, selling to both political radicals and literary bohemians in thirty-six cities across the country by 1914. Like *The Masses* and *Birth Control Review,* the *Little Review* was based on the "bedrock assumption that art must have a public function" (Morrisson 6). And, like the other radical periodicals under discussion, the *Little Review* ran afoul of the Comstock Act for printing "lewd and lascivious" material, in this case installments of James Joyce's *Ulysses*.[15]

Wedded opens with an absurd tragicomic scene: The groom has died shortly before the wedding, leaving the bride pregnant and unmarried. Janet, the bride, and her mother attempt to persuade the priest to pretend that Bob died after, not before, the ceremony, thus allowing Janet the security of "marriage." Janet reveals that she and Bob had heard of birth control but had no access to it. The Minister argues that birth control is unnatural and therefore evil, saying, "let me tell you that there is nothing worse than trying to interfere with the workings of nature, or—if I may say so—of God." Janet replies, "Well, Bob said the rich people do it. He said they must know how to do it, because they never have more'n two or three children in a family; but you've only got to walk on the next block—where it's all tenements—to see ten and twelve in every family, because the workin' people don't know any better" (16). Family size, a physical sign of hidden knowledge, was apparent to the poor, leading to the supposition that the wealthy must know something that they didn't. The commodity of knowledge manifests, and is embodied by, family size. The play uses morbid humor to critique how the Comstock Act (and public morality) kept birth control a black-market commodity that only the rich could afford. Janet and Bob delayed their marriage for years because of their poverty, and Janet believes economics are again holding her back.

One of the few fictional pieces in Margaret Sanger's first publication, *The Woman Rebel,* appears in the April 1914 issue and demonstrates the effects of uncontrolled fertility on female health and marriage. "Man's Law" by Sonia Ureles reveals the short-lived *Woman Rebel*'s emotional tone and revolutionary combination of feminism and socialism. The tragic story demonstrates the "typical" course of married life for the poor, and the effects of poverty and ignorance on women and children: "The first

15. The 1918 *Little Review* containing a portion of *Ulysses* in which Gertie McDowell exposes herself to Leopold Bloom was seized; in 1920 Margaret Anderson and Jane Heap were found guilty of publishing obscene material. *Ulysses* contains references to several types of birth control, including condoms and the diaphragm.

three years of married life crowned them with two babies. The first, a son, was proudly cared for. The second brought no enthusiasm. The third made it harder for them" (Ureles 9). At last, broken in health and in despair, the mother "stumbled into the nurses room" at the local hospital and "gasped, in a broken whisper, 'that I'm pregnant again.'"

> "Tell me what to do," she pleaded, frantic with fear. "I can't," said the nurse, averting her eyes in misery, "the law won't allow it." [. . .] "I'm sick—my babies are dying," whispered the mother. "And now—another! Never!" She screamed, terror holding her rigid. "Never! I'll kill myself first." (9)

Later hearing that the woman has indeed drowned herself, the nurse weeps, "Man's law is bitter cruel!" (9). This melodramatic vignette asserts that the law against birth control is solely man's law, an artificial construction whose effect is to unjustly penalize the poor. The story employs tragic extremes—of broken health, poverty, and suicide—to evoke an emotional reaction against the Comstock Act. The heroine's broken body becomes the terrain on which the reader engages in political action.

Images of poverty and its destructive effects on love and family infiltrated political cartoons as well as stories and plays. *The Masses* contained many political cartoons directly supporting birth control by linking the issue of uncontrolled fertility to class struggle. In July 1915 Editor Max Eastman explained the connection between birth control and the larger struggle for the working class in "Revolutionary Birth Control." This article appears under a cartoon by K. R. Chamberlain entitled "The Jones Family Group (Mr. Jones believes that Family-Limitation is criminal)," which depicted a haggard-looking couple with eight children. Birth control, Eastman argued, was a needed part of the revolution for class equity, and he championed it along with a wide range of issues such as suffrage and sexual liberation. The image thus reinforces the written argument in support of birth control, making visual the economic imperative of contraception for the working class.

If the poor lacked the tool of birth control to gain power over their economic plights, what did they have? Official "solutions" to the problem of poverty, which took the form of "good works" rather than knowledge and empowerment, exacerbated class differences. Whereas birth control contained the possibility of transcending inherited class distinctions, the "philanthropy" given in its place reinscribed class boundaries. Charity differed by race, as white welfare activists advocated for government programs that were means and morals tested, while black activists focused

on building private institutions by raising private funds.[16] However, many left-leaning thinkers were harshly critical of "charity" and "philanthropy," depicting it as simply another form of social control. This attitude can be seen in *The Masses,* a magazine that endorsed no single ideology but was, according to its masthead, "directed against Rigidity and Dogma wherever it is found."

Seymour Barnard's humorous "Philanthropy," published in the March 1915 *Masses,* is a satire of well-meaning uplift agencies and wealthy philanthropists. The characters debate in sing-song rhyme the "cure" for poverty, coming up with solutions like cash, prayer, and study, but in the end leaving Poverty "just where he stood" (16). Although this brief "Comic Opera" does not explicitly name birth control, the absence is certainly to the point. While theorists, social workers, and clergy study and argue over the problem, they do nothing at all to solve it. The true solutions are exactly what they do not consider; indeed, they cannot consider these solutions, because that plan would destroy their world and livelihood. As the Social Workers admit in an aside:

> When we discover the
> Reason of Poverty,
> Minus our jobs are we,
> Standing and stations. (15)

The act of philanthropy literally employs them, and thus their motives are selfish as much as charitable. Indeed, the deployment of charity reinforces the economic structure. Socialism would wipe out the distinctions that allow the wealthy to "give" alms to the poor. Reading this piece in conjunction with the editorial and cartoon described earlier reveals how birth control fits into any plan that addresses structural inequity. Knowledge is a resource of the wealthy, and contraceptives are more valuable than philanthropy.

While the sharpest tool of critique for *The Masses* was satire, they

16. See Linda Gordon, "Black and White Visions of Welfare." Gordon provides revealing statistics on the black and white women welfare activists from 1900 to 1920 and their use of contraception. Of black welfare activists, 85 percent were married, but 34 percent of those had no children (as compared to a rate of 28 percent in the general black population). Only 34 percent of white women activists were married, and of those only 28 percent had children (compared to 69 percent in the general white population). Gordon concludes from these statistics, "It thus seems likely that these women welfare activists used birth control, although long physical separations from their husbands may have contributed to their low fertility. In their contraceptive practices these women may have been as modern as contemporary white women in comparable class positions" (568).

also published pieces that deployed sentimental appeals more reminiscent of the *Birth Control Review*. The economic discourse of the birth control movement argued that poverty harmed children and families, thus appealing to emotional and moral sentiment. As Martha Banta notes, "the sentimental tradition was mainly the most effective weapon the woman journalist possessed to rake up the muck caused by an industrial process that left women's bodies at the mercies of men and machines. What mattered was that the seemingly sentimental (a soft, fantasy form) be revealed as the ultimate realism (strong, brutal, true)" (148). The struggle of poor women to provide for their children is the theme of "The Wash," a narrative poem by Wilton Agnew Barrett in the April 1916 issue of *The Masses*. Barrett describes a visit of the Church Relief Committee to the home of a washerwoman, Mrs. Driggs, who had requested "a little ready money" so that she can have more time to look after her four children (19). The churchwomen argue that if they give money rather than their (and the congregation's) laundry, Mrs. Driggs will give it to her alcoholic husband, or cease to work at all (one wonders then who would wash the committee's fine clothing?). This dehumanization of Mrs. Driggs as a woman incapable of good judgment is belied by the subtext of the story, which depicts her as reasonable, valiant, and motivated by maternal love. The committee women are compared to a "tribunal" of "the Fates," implacable in their judgment, holding supreme power over the life of the poor, but whose judgment is clearly clouded by class prejudice. The piece concludes without the resolution of the committee's decision, but with a plaintive vision of Mrs. Driggs staring out at the thin, dirty faces of the two youngest children hiding under the "dank lines of the wash" (20). This emotional vision emphasizes the effects of poverty on children and criticizes the "means and morals" testing approach of this charity.

As in the earlier "Philanthropy," the "good works" of the wealthy are more a salve to their conscience than an actual help to the poor. Mrs. Driggs's impassioned arguments present a view of fierce and sacrificial mother-love while supporting the birth control movement by dramatizing the problems of poor women and children. How can a woman who must work constantly to feed her children find the time to raise them properly, especially as the overwork, poverty, and repeated childbearing break her health? Birth control advocates used these arguments to demonstrate the need for contraception among the working class. Knowledge and means, not laundry, are what the poor needed. These stories, and the rhetorical discourse they accompanied, did not send an anti-motherhood message, but rather argued that the poor could not afford so many children, and that it was better to provide a good life to a few children than to recreate

the cycle of poverty for many. A survey of the immediate context in which "The Wash" appears supports this reading: The page following contains a column entitled "Birth Control," which reports on the trials of Sanger and Goldman as well as two legislative bills put forth by the National Birth Control League. Thus, readers were to interpret the story in the framework of real political events and birth control's importance to socialist economic policy.

The fiction acting as contraceptive propaganda focused on the abject poverty of the noble-but-poor. These short stories, often thinly plotted, rely on descriptions of squalid settings, a despairing tone, and stereotypic characters for their persuasive value. The May 1916 issue of *The Masses* contains two stories demonstrating the economic need for birth control. In "The Hunky Woman" Helen Forbes depicts a poor Hungarian immigrant who works all day in a laundry to feed her two small children. When she is jailed overnight for her absent husband's crime, the children are left alone in the tenement. She returns home to find her baby dead and her daughter taken to Associated Charities. Hampered by her broken English, her boss does not believe her story because "things like that don't happen in this country" (13). The Hungarian woman is dehumanized by her poverty and her immigrant status. Indeed, one speaker in the story comments, "those Hunkies are just animals," a sentiment that corresponds with a growing public negativity toward immigrants during the middle of the decade (13). This story contrasts immigrant tragedy against naïve native wealth to argue that "things like that" do happen to the poor.

John Reed's "Broadway Night" comments on birth control more explicitly from an unusual first-person male perspective. Reed, a journalist and revolutionary who was involved in the splintering of the American Communist Party from the Socialists in 1919, is perhaps best known for his coverage of the Mexican Revolution, World War I, and the Bolshevik Revolution. In "Broadway Night," a man relates how his loving marriage was destroyed by the death of his wife and children. The first child died "largely because our means did not permit us to dwell in a neighborhood where there was sufficient light and air for a sickly baby," another died of a typhoid epidemic, a third died of scarlet fever, and his wife died giving birth to a fourth stillborn child. Soon after the death of one of her children "she was going to have another baby. We knew that her condition wouldn't permit it, and tried our best to find some means of prevention. I've heard there were things—but we did not know them, and the doctor would do nothing. The child was born dead. My wife did not survive it" (20). The male speaker makes the emotional case for contraception with his tale of how repeated pregnancy not only destroys a woman's health but

drags a family into poverty and thus endangers the health of the children, all while doctors know of safe preventatives that they will not speak of. The use of a male narrator reminds readers that the issue affected men as well as women. It also depicts a descent into poverty, thus acknowledging the permeability of class boundaries.

The physically worn-out wife appears so frequently as to become a stock figure in the radical fiction of the 1910s and 1920s. While used in a critique of class inequity, this trope also appealed to a general public steeped in sentimental mother-love, as evidenced by the response to a 1916 *Pictorial Review* article on birth control that drew thousands of letters in support: "the reader letters quoted all argued for birth control, primarily on the grounds of preserving mother's strength and producing healthier children" (Zuckerman 88). The trope of the physically exhausted woman appeared in *The Masses* and other radical periodicals. In "Till Death—," a 1917 *Masses* story, Helen Hull tells another tragic tale of broken marriage and the trap of unwanted pregnancy. The characters, an alcoholic husband and a struggling mother, call up a mythic narrative of suffering. When her husband threatens to go find "some un as'll be glad to sleep with me," the woman replies, "The doctor said I needed to be let alone—" (Hull 5). This was the usual "birth control" recommended by physicians—abstinence.[17]

The wife is torn between saving her health and saving her marriage. Hull uses stark characterizations to ensure the reader's sympathy with the wife. She is working to save money for her children's education but needs "[a]nother year—I thought—if he'd let me alone! I get so scared, worrying—if he got me with child—what could I do! There's ways—but I don't know 'em" (6). With her unnamed heroine, Hull emphasizes the inevitability of the familiar female life-plot. The woman's ignorance of birth control methods leads to another pregnancy, and the doctor, while sympathetic, remarks, "There's nothing I can do now. It's too late" (6). The story's title makes the vow "till death do us part" tragic, as it implies both that the husband will soon break his vow with infidelity, and that repeated childbearing will hasten the wife's death. The story's simplistic didacticism relies upon a familiar narrative told about and through the female body—the traditional female plot of marriage and motherhood cast in the context of poverty. The story thus contributes to a wider cultural narrative that erased female difference through a focus on a generic female body, deploying sentimentality to "argue through embodiment

17. See James Reed, "Doctors, Birth Control, and Social Values: 1830–1970," for a comprehensive examination of medical attitudes toward birth control.

FIGURE 6. Cornelia Barns, "Remember, Mrs. Judd," *Birth Control Review*, August 1919: 9.

and an appeal to experience: the sentimental locates moral values in the (feminized) heart and denies the importance of external differences" (Clark 22). Hull's story gains rhetorical force through its use of extreme emotional appeals.

A drawing by Cornelia Barns, published in *The Masses*, graphically depicts the repeated narrative image of the dying mother unable to find help from a doctor and could have served as an illustration to these stories (fig. 6). The drawing shows a gaunt woman half-rising from bed in a one-room shack, newborn at her side and several smaller children gathered around. The doctor tells her, "another child will kill you," but then refuses to tell her how to prevent pregnancy with the brief denial, "I cannot." Through both satire and sentiment, image and word, *The Masses*

used its editorial freedom to provide early support for birth control as part of an economic revolution. This pro-contraceptive method appeared consistently in articles, fiction, and artwork from 1915 until *The Masses* ended publication in 1917 (after several editors were charged under the Espionage Act).

This message of class-based oppression is also evident in some of the early fiction of the *Birth Control Review.* The polluted industrial setting of Rita Wellman's 1918 "On the Dump" mirrors the ugliness of life for Mrs. Robinson, who for ten years "had not had one year free from child-bearing" (7). The waste of the trash dump is both Mrs. Robinson's landscape—her only place to escape from the overcrowded tenement in which her family struggles for existence—and a symbol for her own life—she feels as discarded as the stained corset at her feet. Pregnant again, she remembers the shame of charity the last time her factory-worker husband was on strike. The insistent futility of repeated child-bearing and inescapable poverty lead her to consider suicide, and when her unwieldy pregnant body slips on the trash and slides down the dump heap into the "yellow and sluggish" river below, she ceases her struggle (7). Mrs. Robinson and her unborn child are simply more unwanted trash, expendable material goods. The characterization of Mrs. Robinson as a woman who loves beauty and feels shame counteracts stereotypes of the poor as coarse and unfeeling, a device that more accomplished writers such as Nella Larsen employ to complicate reader reactions to their characters.[18]

What was to blame for this tragic waste, this social injustice? The title of a 1918 *Birth Control Review* story by Jessie Ashley clearly attributes blame. In "The Law at Work" Ashley shows that ignorance of birth control harms all women, even those of the middle class. The husband, George, finds his pregnant wife, Helen, drowned in the bathtub with the note, "I cannot endure it so soon again. I will not go through it. Five babies in six years and another coming. No one would help me, so I must help myself" (3). The husband, confused, tries to resolve the suicide with his belief that "[i]f people loved and were married, wasn't it the woman's happiness to have children?" (3). He goes to his family physician, who reveals that every "sensible man" knows how to "prevent disease," there are simple ways for a woman to protect herself that "are not against the law, everyone who knows them uses them," and "it is only against the law to tell anyone what the methods are" (3). The husband's traditional view of women, not class barriers, stops him from practicing birth control.

18. See my discussion of Larsen's *Quicksand* in chapters 3 and 4.

The story highlights the tragic consequences of a law that censors needed information.

Ashley does not end her story by indicting the medical profession, but by showing the many institutions that contributed to Helen's death. George next visits his lawyer, only to find that Helen had been asking about her rights to get "some information she wanted" (4). But the lawyer had told her that only if she had grounds to separate from her husband did she have a right not to fulfill her "marital duties." When George returns home, he learns that the nurse he had engaged to care for the baby had been arrested for distributing birth control information. The nurse tells him that she would have given contraceptive information to his wife, as she does to all women in need. While the male professionals would deny a woman the knowledge to control her fertility, a birth controller is the potential heroine. Ashley reminds the reader that even wealthy women can be trapped by their conditions, thus transcending class by referring to a kinship of women created by shared experience. As the title indicates, "The Law at Work" is an instrument of death and despair to all women.

Birth control clinics and the medical profession itself acted as sites of institutionalized power, enforcing traditional morality and the class divide. Clinic policy was to serve only married women, and while clinics helped many indigent clients, private physicians were available only to the wealthy. Behind these political machinations, propagandistic stories indicted the medical profession for its class bias. Many stories in the *Birth Control Review* focused on families in abject poverty denied contraceptive information by the medical profession. Mary Burrill's "They That Sit in Darkness" typifies the terms of this discourse. The play portrays a large family in extreme poverty in the South. The subtitle, "A One-Act Play of Negro Life," indicates that the family is black, as does the dialect and the mention of Tuskegee, but the tragedy that occurs could be applied to any poor family. The play places particular emphasis on the material affects of poverty. The visiting nurse tells Mrs. Jasper, a week past the birth of her tenth child (eight live, although one is simpleminded and one has stunted legs), that the last pregnancy has left her with a bad heart and she must give up her laundry work. Mrs. Jasper, who cannot afford to stop taking in laundry, begs the nurse to tell her how to prevent conception, but the nurse can only reply, "I wish to God it were lawful for me to do so! My heart goes out to you poor people that sit in darkness, having, year after year, children that you are physically too weak to bring into the world—children that you are unable not only to educate but even to clothe and feed. Malinda, when I took my oath as nurse, I swore to abide by the laws of the State, and the law forbids my telling you what you have a right to

know!" (7). The nurse embodies the moral conflict between current law and a woman's right not to be killed by repeated childbearing. The nurse obviously knows successful birth control methods but is bound by "man's cruel law." Soon after this exchange Mrs. Jasper dies, and her oldest daughter must give up a scholarship to attend Tuskegee, a chance to lead her family out of the "darkness" of ignorance and poverty. Uncontrolled fertility creates tragedy for this loving and honest family, sucking them deeper into poverty and ensuring that the next generation will continue the cycle.

Other fictional works effectively revealed with dramatic descriptions of poverty the complicity of enforced ignorance with class oppression. A forgotten "playlet" by Coralie Haman in the *Birth Control Review,* "Children" centers on a conversation by several tenement women. As a work of propaganda fiction it lacks narrative complexity, but this short piece provides an effective example of the use of sentiment to make a contraceptive argument. "Children" uses vivid description to evoke an emotional reaction. It is set outside a tenement house and specifies the setting as "a pile of rusty iron debris, paper litter, etc., can be seen in the yard" (230). "A mob of children of all ages, tattered, ragged, dirty" fight in the opening scene (230). Indeed, in its crowded, filthy setting, the play echoes Margaret Sanger's description of the Lower East Side tenements in which she worked as a visiting nurse.[19] The characters, Irish and Italian immigrant and black women, speak in heavy dialect about their large broods. Poverty and excessive childbearing defines these women: racial and ethnic differences are subsumed into a generic class and gender identification.[20] When Mrs. O'Flaherty complains that ten children are too many, Mrs. O'Roarke replies, "Why thin, don't yez do something about it? Somethin' to kape yerself from havin' so many? I've heard tell there's a way, but I don't rightly know just what it is at all" (230). Both women express a desire for information on contraception and link large families with poverty.

19. Sanger, "Impressions of the East Side," a multiple-part publication in the *New York Call* in 1911.

20. In much of the fiction under discussion, race is subsumed within the generic designation of class and gender, erasing differential experience based on race. Race and ethnicity were often ignored in Socialist Party propaganda as well, according to Sally M. Miller, who writes that "the Socialist Party in the Progressive Era failed, as did the country at large, to view the Negro as an individual, as a distinct human being in a unique dilemma. . . . The party did not reject Negro membership—it stood for Negro suffrage when the issue arose—yet with the exception of a vocal minority, it doubted Negro equality and undertook no meaningful struggles against second-class citizenship" (34).

Mrs. O'Rourke: 'Tis not the Lard's will, I do be thinkin'. 'Tis the ignorance av us poor human mortals. If we didn' have so manny children 'tis out av this muck we could be gittin'.

Mrs. O'Flaherty: God knows 'tis fair strangled we aire wid 'em.

Mrs. O'Rourke: An' takin'care o' the family, trying to find food for 'em at all. An' just as ye think ye can git away somewheres, along cooms anither wan, an' ties ye doon to this hell, an' while ye're havin' a new wan, wan av the ithers dies on ye. Oh, 'tis a dog's life, so it is. (231)

Their friend Mrs. Johnson, a black woman who takes in laundry for the wealthy, brings the knowledge divide into the conversation by talking about her employer, who "ain't got so many chillen" (232). Haman's use of dialect and descriptions of poverty make a narrative link between class and knowledge. These women recognize the enslaving links of poverty, ignorance, and reproduction.

The conversation of Jim and Annie, a young couple in the play, reinforces this message. When Jim proposes to Annie, she turns him down because she knows marriage means children: "'tis bitter hard, so it is, and that's God's room there is for so manny on 'em. For me, I'm think' I'd rather work in the factory" (236). The factory promises money and autonomy for Annie, but marriage would only bring children and hardship. Annie recognizes her limited choices, and she consciously chooses commercial production over reproduction. However, the text's larger message questions whether such a choice should be necessary. Annie recognizes that class and knowledge are intertwined, as the doctors tell the "up-town women" but not the poor "how we can kape our families small" (236). Jim presents a reason that is similar to Dreiser's hint of class conspiracy: "I suppose them rich fellahs wants us poor people to have a lot o' childher so as they kin have more av 'em in their factories. Childer come cheaper than grown folks" (236). The profit motive makes poor bodies—children and adults—expendable. While the play is comic in its exaggerated, broadly stereotypical characters and dialect, its message is serious. It concludes with a drunken Italian immigrant killing his young pregnant wife because if she is dead, "Den she can't have any more children" (237). The play thus falls into an undeveloped sentimental tragedy to underscore the serious need for birth control. Without contraception, the only way to end the reproductive capacities of the female body, to shut down the assembly line, is death or abstinence.

This fiction reveals how knowledge of birth control was a commodity in the social economy. Ironically, what the poor needed was exactly what they did not get in the fiction or articles of the *Birth Control Review* and

FIGURE 7. Lou Rogers, "Must She Always Plead in Vain?," cover of *Birth Control Review,* July 1919.

other radical journals: specific information on contraceptive methods. The fictional characters dramatized the plight of the poor to elicit sympathy, anger, and support for the movement. The stories of nurses and doctors unable to give needed information supported Sanger's advocacy of a "doctors only" bill that would allow medical professionals to give contraceptive information at their discretion. The cover of the July 1919 *Review* also makes this case, depicting a nurse and a poor woman, with the caption, "Must she always plead in Vain? You are a nurse—can't you tell me? For the children's sake—help me!" (fig. 7). The U.S. legal and medical systems operated under class constraints, and it was poor women and children who suffered the consequences.

While these stories and images use melodrama to give impact to their short sketches of working-class life, they serve to humanize the statistics underlying the argument for birth control. The frequent death of young children in these stories was no exaggeration: "300,000 babies, according

to the baby welfare association, are sacrificed in the United States each year," Emma Goldman stated in her trial defense, reprinted in the June 1916 *Masses*. Birth controllers advocated limiting the number of children in proportion to the available income. The texts make a composite argument for contraception as a solution to poverty and as a tool in the emancipation of women. By focusing on depictions of abject hardship and the sense of despair it engenders, these works use emotional arguments for birth control while never explicitly discussing it.

Sanger and Goldman both believed that the fight for women's suffrage was too narrow, but they shared the radical notion that women such as Alice Paul embodied—that women must break the law to change it. Both women were breaking the law by speaking out on and providing information about birth control, and both were eventually arrested—Sanger in 1916 for distributing information at her clinic and Goldman in February and again in October 1916 for speaking publicly about specific birth control methods. These arrests made contraception "a topic of discussion and interest among strap hangers in subways and housewives at home. The significance of family planning was discussed openly and widely by many who some months earlier would have only broached the subject in hushed and secretive tones" (Baskin xvi). This discourse of rights extended from women to children, as a January 17, 1916, headline in the *New York Times* indicates: "Teddy Roosevelt Wrong, Says Anarchist—Emma Goldman Asserts Child Has A Right Not To Be Born."

But a strategic choice to court upper- and middle-class professionals and politicians quickly subsumed the radical possibilities of birth control, and conservative arguments in alignment with traditional morality tempered the movement's rhetoric by the 1920s. Historian Linda Gordon notes, "two separate factors pushed the birth control movement away from the organized Left: attacks on birth control by leftists and even some feminists and the independent decline of socialism and feminism" (*Moral Property of Women* 167). "Red" Emma Goldman, the earliest radical advocate for birth control in America, shifted to the topic of conscription and was deported in 1919 for opposing the draft. Margaret Sanger, who made the birth control movement her life, toned down the "red and flaming" rhetoric for a more conservative message meant to appeal to the mainstream. The radical rhetoric faded away, and, by 1917, the *Birth Control Review*, the movement's main outlet, adopted other tactics. The new publication changed audience as well, aiming its message at the middle and upper classes rather than at working women and anarchists/socialists. While much of the later fiction continued its sen-

timental depictions and served a vital role by adding dramatic narrative elements to the arguments, it ceased to imply that social and sexual revolution were imminent. The following chapters will discuss this approach and its appeals to the values of motherhood, marriage, eugenics, and economics.