

## RURAL WOMEN AND THE DEPRESSION IN THE NOVELS OF DOROTHY THOMAS

by  
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The financial crash of 1929 and subsequent Great Depression forced America into radical change. The wealthy sacrificed summer homes, vacations, household help, and other luxuries that money had bought. But for the poor, the changes were less apparent. Their struggles, difficult even in prosperous times, intensified. While we may be familiar with such urban Depression images as men and women standing in bread lines, many of the poor lived more isolated lives in the small communities where they had been struggling for survival even before the national concept of depression. Louis Adamic, in his essay "Family Life and the Depression: 1930-32," notes that "Early in the Crisis...the father and husband bore the brunt of the family difficulties."<sup>1</sup> Such a statement ignores the role of women in households where women's work was integral to the function of the home, and farm life where women's work—whether it was inside the home or outside—determined the success of a farming operation. Dorothy Thomas, a Plains writer of the 1920s and 1930s, challenges Adamic's statement in her novels of Depression life in Nebraska.

Born in Barns, Kansas in 1898, Dorothy Thomas lived in her home state until 1906 when her father moved his wife and nine (soon-to-be ten) children to Alberta, Canada. Mr. Thomas died in 1909. The family returned to Kansas from 1912 to 1914. Then they moved to Lincoln, Nebraska. Following her education at Bethany High School, Cotner College and the University of Nebraska, all in Lincoln, Dorothy Thomas taught for a short time, mostly in rural Nebraska schools, specifically

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Emerson, Gering, and Red Willow Consolidated. By 1930 she was writing full time from her home in Lincoln where she lived until 1934. She sold twenty short stories to markets such as *The Nebraska Farmer*, *The Atlantic*, *Fiction Parade*, and *The American Mercury*, had a one-act play published by Samuel French in 1932, wrote a volume of verse for children, and wrote two novels published by Alfred A. Knopf. Much of Thomas's inspiration for her prose came from listening to older women talk about their lives. During the period when she boarded as a rural teacher, she gleaned much firsthand knowledge of women struggling to survive in hard times. Thomas's novels, *Ma Jeeter's Girls* (1933) and *The Home Place* (1936), examine women, poverty, and rural life.

While all of America suffered during the late 1920s and 1930s, critic Linda Wagner-Martin notes that during this period women "were obviously excruciatingly poor. They were faced with the dilemmas of feeding children, as well as the rest of their families; of deciding whether to have children and—as a primary concern—whether to have sex." She points out that women were charged with placing "priorities on literacy, cleanliness, loyalty, and other less financially mandated concerns."<sup>2</sup> These are the issues that Thomas addresses in her novels, issues of everyday decisions in women's lives, lives steeped in the powerlessness of poverty and work, lives where women have few choices and suffer the pain of making the wrong choice.

The primary setting for each of Thomas's novels is a rural home occupied by too many people to be comfortable. Each book focuses on how the women interact in these homes as they find ways to make life bearable.

*Ma Jeeter's Girls*, the first novel, takes place in the rural Jeeter home, run by Ma, a one-eyed woman with a bad leg. The narrator is the school teacher who boards in their home. Each chapter bears the name of one of the Jeeter daughters, and rather than being developed through a traditional plot device, the book centers around the narrator's experience of hearing Ma tell the story of each daughter's life. Ma recounts how five of her six daughters have become pregnant while single, and how she has had to force some of the young men to marry the girls, including threatening one young man with a shotgun and requiring the presence of the sheriff to

convince another future son-in-law that marriage was his best option. These five Jeeter daughters have been “ruined” by local men, most of whom were employers of the girls who were hired out as household help. The youngest daughter, Evie, has been “working out” for three years and is still a virgin and unmarried. She is the hope of the family that not all of Ma Jeeter’s girls are doomed to sexual ruin. Throughout the novel Ma recounts story after story of her daughters’ downfalls and subsequent marriages, noting the loss of their innocence at the hands of more experienced men. With each chapter the reader can see the striking difference between these girls’ stories and that of the teacher, a young professional woman who must remain morally upright and single in order to keep her job. Any trace of scandal in her life would drop her to the level of the Jeeter girls. As the book progresses, the tragic affairs of Ella, Laura, Lizzie, Lena, and Bell Jeeter are set against the anonymity of the listener, the woman known only as “Teacher,” and the sanctity of the youngest daughter, Evie, about whom little is revealed until the last chapter.

The simple box structure of the house parallels the structure of these women’s lives. They have worked hard in the Jeeter household, perfecting such skills as cooking, cleaning, washing, and ironing, and these skills are the ones that have enabled them to find jobs as domestics in the household of those more affluent than the Jeeters. These jobs provide their only escape from the poverty of their own home. The women move from unpaid domestic work to paid domestic work. However, once they marry, they return to unpaid domestic work. The cycle of these women’s lives is perpetuated by task, pregnancy, and marriage. They cannot escape task; a woman’s work is her destiny. Except for Evie, the “youngest, smartest, fairest, and best daughter,”<sup>3</sup> the Jeeter girls have not been able to escape pregnancy. And only one daughter, Lena—“the unlucky one”<sup>4</sup>—has not married by the end of the book. Lena has had two children out of wedlock by different fathers, and she chose to give the first child away because the father was married. Lena, then, has broken the cycle of marriage, but she is to be pitied for being duped twice by men who made promises that they did not keep rather than admired for asserting a choice to remain independent. The

choice has not been hers.

However, at the end of the novel, Evie is married in a traditional white gown at a large family wedding, a joyous celebration for the entire family for the one among them who has been able to save herself. While Evie prepares to leave on her honeymoon, her sisters tease her about the realistic possibility of being pregnant in a year's time. Over her sisters' protests, Evie responds that she will never have children. The novel ends with Evie asserting a choice about her future. Her ability to maintain her virginity, her choice of whom and when to marry, and her firm decision never to have children contrast strongly with her sisters whose lives have involved little choice on their parts. Evie is an anomaly, the new woman who may already exist in urban areas, but one who is definitely yet to come in a rural setting. Such choices were not afforded women at that time. In Jeane Westin's book *Making Do: How Women Survived the '30s*, one farm wife, when asked about conditions in the Depression, answered, "What did we do during the thirties? We had babies, that's all we had. We did without lots of things, but that wasn't one of them."<sup>5</sup> Another wife described her lack of control in this area in this manner:

I had all seven of my babies at home...Then I told my husband I didn't want any more. I was scared to death I would get pregnant again; but in those days the husband had the say. A woman didn't know any way to stop having babies; we had a whole flock of 'em before we knew how it happened. We didn't talk about such things among ourselves—not even women together—so if anybody had any information it was never passed along to me.

The man was the master; the only thing we knew that would stop children was abstinence, and no man is ever gonna go for that.

I had babies as long as I was able—past wantin' to. But the men had all the say—so. It sure looks to me like they coulda used a little better judgment, I think.<sup>6</sup>

This is the control that Evie intends to take for herself at the end of

the novel, asserting that she will not bear broods of children as her sisters have.

Thomas's second novel, *The Home Place*, again looks at women living in difficult conditions.<sup>7</sup> The main character, Phyllis Young, is a former school teacher who has married Ralph, the middle of three sons of a farm family. The setting is the home of Papa and Mamma Young who have taken in their oldest son Tom, his wife Edna, and their two sons in addition to Ralph and Phyllis, and their daughter, Betty. Both sons lost their farms. These nine characters also share the home with Papa Young's mother, Old Grandma, who is a bit senile. The book resounds with issues of lack of personal space, lack of privacy, and division of chores among the women. Phyllis and Edna, having little in common, maintain a strained relationship. Tom and Edna's two sons constantly tease their cousin Betty until she cries. Old Grandma, with her weak memory, often mixes up members of several generations of the family, and chronically complains about having to give up her bedroom to accommodate others. A quarter of the way through the book, the third son, Harvey and his bride, Cleo, unexpectedly move to the farm after Harvey loses his job in the city. Harvey joins his father in the farming operation, but Cleo, a spoiled, whining, lazy "city girl," refuses to become a contributing member of the household.

As with *Ma Jeeter's Girls*, the primary setting of the book is a house too small to hold its inhabitants. Soon after the beginning of the novel, the reader realizes that Phyllis is pregnant, that one more body must fit into this already overcrowded home. The goal of each family member is to have sufficient space and privacy, a goal virtually impossible given their financial hardships. (The Young family finances had dwindled to the point that Papa Young had written to Harvey to ask for money. However, he didn't have a chance to mail the letter before Harvey showed up with Cleo.)

Although the men's work on the farm provides the capital for the family to continue, the novel focuses on the women's work in the house rather than on the farm labor. While the reader is aware that the men are doing heavy tasks, the novel pinpoints the women's work: cleaning, cooking, canning, washing, ironing, sewing, mending. The novel

repeatedly emphasizes how heavy and continuous such work is. Mamma Young does not believe that the women should work outside with the men because “it takes the delicacy out of a girl,” and “the house and the babies are enough...with the children and canning and all, for any woman.”<sup>8</sup> Tom’s wife Edna does the majority of the housework. However, the reader learns that Edna would prefer to be outside working with the men, and her competent work in the house is just a substitute for the farm labor that she prefers. Mamma Young reveals to Phyllis that Edna was Tom’s second choice for a wife, that his first love was a beautiful young woman who was killed in the flu epidemic. Tom married Edna because she knew how to run a farm home and would be able to bear children. Edna’s marriage allows her to perpetuate the rural lifestyle in which she was raised. Cleo married Harvey for financial security after losing her secretarial job. Phyllis seems to be the only woman of her generation in the Young house who has married for love. In an essay about women during the Depression, one woman explained the concept of marriage from a woman’s viewpoint:

I believe marriage was much less difficult then for one reason. You really didn’t have choices. You accepted what you had and you made the most of it rather than to think, “...if I had something better, I’d such and so.” Because you knew you couldn’t have it anyway. You knew you had just the best you could get.<sup>9</sup>

The women in the novel can’t move forward with their lives until their husbands prosper. Edna cannot return to any level of autonomy until Tom can once again have his own farm. Phyllis, trying to make the best of the living situation in the crowded Young farm home, still wishes to have her own home for the privacy it would afford her with her husband and growing family. Cleo despairs of Harvey’s becoming solvent again, and she plots to leave him and return to the city where she intends to find someone else to provide for her.

Clearly Thomas’s farm novels are not concerned with the traditional theme of man’s conquest of the soil. The books have few landscape

scenes; the outdoors represents a level of freedom that the female characters do not have. Their hope of social placement is marriage, and marriage means the work of running a household, raising children, and keeping the family together. When the women of the Young family are outside, they are hanging clothes on the line, picking vegetables in the garden, pitting cherries, and tending the chickens. There are no romantic scenes of becoming one with nature or musing on the glory of the moon. These rural women are not energized by their lives; instead they are fatigued, injured, impregnated, ignored, and quick to age.

*Ma Jeeter's Girls* and *The Home Place* are not escape fiction. Thomas is not writing as much to entertain her reader as to serve as an historian for the large number of women whose physical and financial lives were narrowly restricted in the post-pioneer period. Annie Pike Greenwood, a farm wife whose family lost their farm to the Federal Land Bank and who experienced the harshness of rural women's lives, wrote:

The reason mentally deranged farm women are not in the insane asylum is because they are still on the farms. I do not write this to make you smile. The sanest women I know live on farms. But the life, in the end, gets a good many of them—that terrible forced labor, too much to do, and too little time to do it in, and no rest, and no money. So long as a woman can work, no matter how her mind may fail, she is still kept on the farm, a cog in the machine, growing crazier and crazier, until she dies of it, or until she suddenly kills her children and herself. More farm women than [sic] city women kill themselves and their children. You read of such cases so frequently that it seems strange to me if this explanation never occurred to you. No need for statistics to prove it.<sup>10</sup>

Documenting these Depression-era lives mars the more common romantic image of the women in rural communities, and for this reason Thomas's work is important. The story of post-pioneer rural women is largely untold in the written form. The responsibilities of their lives limited the time women needed to chronicle it in writing. Most women

would have felt that no one would have had an interest in reading about their chores, their isolation or their poverty. But when rural women gathered together, the commonalities of their lives gave them a sharing point, and in the oral tradition their stories were told. What Dorothy Thomas has done is to be the scribe of the rural sisterhood, the woman who has set in writing the stories she overheard in the rural communities where she taught.

Thomas's rural women are forerunners to Ma Joad, the prototype of a poor, rural woman during the Depression. Dorothy Thomas writes of the hard years, establishing a precedent for John Steinbeck's *Grapes of Wrath* (published in 1939) which will chronicle the desperate years. Toward the end of Steinbeck's novel, Ma Joad tells Pa:

Man, he lives in jerks—baby born an' a man dies, an' that's a jerk—gets a farm an' loses his farm, an' that's a jerk. Woman, it's all one flow, like a stream, little eddies, little waterfalls, but the river, it goes right on. Woman looks at it like that.<sup>11</sup>

This is what Dorothy Thomas gives us: how the woman looks at it.

## NOTES

1. Louis Adamic, "Family Life and the Depression: 1930-32" in *The American Writer and the Great Depression* edited by Harvey Swados (New York: The Bobbs-Merrill Company, Inc., 1966), 211.
2. Linda Wagner-Martin, *The Modern American Novel 1914-1945: A Critical History* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1990), 99.
3. Dorothy Thomas, *Ma Jeeter's Girls* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1986 edition), 165.
4. Thomas, *Ma Jeeter's Girls*, 15.
5. Jeane Westin, *Making Do: How Women Survived the '30s* (Chicago: Follett Publishing, 1976), 15.
6. Westin, 78.
7. A more complete explication of Thomas's *The Home Place* in the context of 20<sup>th</sup> century farm novels appears in "Women Writing about Farm Women" in *Great Plains Quarterly* 18 (Spring 1998): 113-126.
8. Dorothy Thomas, *The Home Place* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1967



edition), 29-30.

9. Westin, 52.

10. Annie Pike Greenwood, "'Growing Things from the Soil is Bliss'" in *Writings of Farm Women: An Anthology* edited by Carol Fairbanks and Bergine Haakenson (New York: Garland Publishing, 1990), 325.

11. John Steinbeck, *Grapes of Wrath* (New York: Viking Press, 1989 edition), 577.