The Folks of the Postapocalypse: The Road, Religion, and Folklore Studies

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Since its publication in 1974, Yonnondio by Tillie Olsen has incited literary analysis. As part of the recovery movement, it is not surprising that Yonnondio is often viewed through a feminist lens. The circumstances under which Olsen wrote Yonnondio became part of this literary criticism, considering the restraints placed on her during its creation including her motherly and womanly roles and the “silence” inflicted on women during the era. Corinna K. Lee in her article “Documents of Proletarian Fiction: Tillie Olsen’s Yonnondio: From the Thirties” the book is treated as a feminist text with political ends. Adding to the arguments presented about feminism in Yonnondio is the treatment and exclusion of female characters. Class and economic criticism is yet another understandable subset of analysis of Yonnondio. After all, it is a novel based on an economically struggling working-class family during the pre-depression era of the 1920s and 1930s. The family around which the entire story revolves moves from area to area in the hopes of a better life and out of sheer financial necessity. Other criticism based on the escapist psychology or the struggles for self in the novel are also prevalent (Macpherson, Staub). However, even with a vast history of literary criticism, there is still new territory to explore in terms of the novels relation to urbanism.

Not typically seen as urban centered, classifying Yonnondio in this fashion shifts what classifies something as urban. Urbanism is typically associated with cities, but where does this
defining characteristic of association end? The elusive limits of urbanization are hard to put boundaries on especially given the ever-evolving urban environment. The ideas of urbanism need to be reanalyzed to allow for this evolution. I will argue that Yonnondio is indeed an urban novel and that as an urban novel it provides a commentary on the far-reaching influence of urbanization and its effects. Not only will the redefining of urbanism influence what is seen as an urban text, bringing new texts into the urban genre, it will also apply the characteristics found in urbanism (such as alienation) to texts “outside” of the field. Starting by defining what constitutes something as “urban,” a brief analysis of the connection of urbanization to spaces and conditions outside of the city will be discussed. This inevitably leads to an analysis of the widespread nature of urban influence. To exemplify this, I will focus on the influence of urban alienation in Yonnondio. Ultimately, I will argue that as a consequence of the urban nature of Yonnondio its characters become urbanites due to their connections to the urbanism. Urbanism no longer resides just within city limits. It has permeated into other aspects of life and other locations far away from the actual cities to the point where finding a place that is not urban is becoming nearly impossible.

“Urban”: What’s in a Name?

Terms dealing with urbanization are highly elusive. Asking someone to define an urban environment will rouse a long list of opinions and examples: New York City is urban as is Chicago. When a “concrete” definition appears, it often proves problematic, as limitations are not properly defined. When does something stop being urban and become something else? Essentially this makes the definition into a subjective spectrum leaving the questions of what constitutes the urban environment only vaguely answered. Would a smaller city count as urban? How much smaller can it go until it no longer counts? What about surrounding areas right
outside the city limits? It can and should be argued that this ambiguity is somewhat inevitable. Urbanism itself is elusive and constantly changing. Cities are rebuilt, renewed, repurposed, and expanded. Explaining urbanization through examples and vague definitions that allow for evolution and variation is necessary otherwise any definition of urbanism would immediately become obsolete due to the constant transformation of urban areas. This fluidity and broad nature of urbanization is what enables *Yonondio* to be enfolded into the arms of the urban world.

According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, basic definitions (a definition that as explained previously will unsurprisingly allow for play and interpretation) of “urban” are: 1. “Relating to, situated or occurring in, or characteristic of, a town or city, esp. as opposed to the countryside” 2. “That constitutes of includes (part of) a city” (‘urban, adj.’). These definitions may seem finite at a first glance: “urban” is the city and it is definitely not the country. Using this binary, Los Angeles, California would most likely be considered urban. Buford, Wyoming (population: 1), however, would probably not be seen as the prime example of the urban city. This brings up an important distinction. While the debate of what technically counts as a city (size, population, density, etc.) can vary, urbanism is a related yet separate idea. The influence of urbanism is reaching everywhere.

**Symbiosis**

The countryside no longer exists in isolation. The great frontier of the United States is all but gone. By 1790, farmers made up 90% of the U.S. labor force. Fast forward to 1920 where farmers made up 27% of the labor force. The number of farms dramatically declined and the size of the individual farms increased (“Historical Timeline—Farmers & the Land”). Going back to the dictionary definitions, these places outside of the city are in relation to and are a part of the urban city.
The rural countryside, not just farms, shrunk. Technology allowed for larger amounts of land to be cultivated. Industrialization necessitated workers to move towards the centers of production. Cities popped up, enabled by ever advancing technology in transportation, industry, communication, and so on. If this were where it ended, the city would confine urbanism within its borders. However, cities, towns, and industrial areas, need a way to sustain themselves. Over time, farming became less about providing for an individual or a community. Instead, it became a way of enabling urbanization. A farmer no longer farms just for an area; he farms for the country as a whole on a larger scale to support urbanization. It would be unfair to claim that this only goes one direction in this structure. Products, technology, income, and demand are sent back out beyond the city creating a symbiotic relationship of sorts.

Due to the influence of urbanization, the country became an appendage of the city, a thread in the entangled web of society. *Yonnondio* takes place in a multiplicity of settings as the family migrates in the hopes of a better life: industrial mining areas, country roads, farms, slaughterhouse districts, garbage dumps, and sewers. One thing that these locations have in common besides the Holbrook family is that they are significantly connected to and influenced by urbanization. Each is a cog in the urban machine.

**Connecting the Dots**

For *Yonnondio* to qualify as an urban novel, it must first be established that the urban connections are present and significant. The coalmining town in Wyoming, the farm in South Dakota, and the slaughterhouse slum in Omaha Nebraska provide the dominant locations in which the Holbrook family interacts. Using these three locations, a connection to urbanism will be established.

Coalmining began its trend towards becoming mainstream in relation to the
industrialization of England, a trend that quickly bled into other parts of the world including the United States. The Industrial Revolution demanded coal for factories, furnaces, steam engines, and other new advances. Demand for coal increased the need for more mines that dug deeper into the earth: coalmining was reborn (Trueman). This is the type of mine that Jim Holbrook, the father, works in. He is there to mine the coal that will support industrialization and urbanization. Mazie’s mental description of the mine paints a poignant picture. “A phrase trembled into her mind, ‘Bowels of earth.’ She shuddered. It was mysterious and terrible to her. ‘Bowels of earth.’ It means the mine. Bowels is the stummy. Earth is the stummy and mebbe she eats the men that come down. Men and daddy goin’ in like the day, and comin out black. Earth black, and pop’s face and hands black, and he spits from his mouth black. Night comes and it is black. Coal is black—it makes fire” (4). Deep into the darkness of the earth he travels, risking his life and braving darkness and the all too prevalent accidents out of the necessity that urbanism created. This mine and the vast amount of jobs it provides would not have been there or at least would have been highly altered in scale and danger, if it weren’t for urbanization. The very space in which the Holbrook’s live and work is a product of urbanization.

Turning attention to the farm, this location would seem more disconnected from urbanism than the other settings of the story. However, as discussed previously, farming transformed through a connection to urbanization. The sizes of the farms are different. The farm that the Holbrook family cultivates is part of a larger structure that requires a certain amount of product (29). The family may seem to be living a life separated from the city, but even in the countryside they cannot escape the link to urbanism. Ultimately they are unable to meet the demand, making it necessary for them to move yet again (45). The scale of the farms and the demand placed on those farms drastically impacts the brief time the Holbrook’s spent there.
The slaughterhouse district has the most stereotypical connection to the city. The work in the slum provides for the city. The mass slaughtering of the animals satiate yet another need the urban environment created. “That stench is a reminder—a proclamation—I rule here. It speaks for the packing houses, heart of all that moves in these streets: gigantic heart—pumping over the artery of viaducts the men and women who are the street’s lifeblood… (They say this heart pumps lifeblood far and far—thin and blue the veins—to purest air where scents flower under glass and in hundred-dollar perfume bottles, and a rare and cherished few are nourished)” (48).

The same demands placed on the coalmine and the farm exists here as well. The slum is there because of urbanization. Jim has a job there because the job is provided by urbanization. The family moves there because of the opportunities provided by urbanism’s demands and needs.

**Drinking the Urban Kool-Aid**

The connections to urbanism create a web of relationships and influence. Urbanism does not stand in isolation; neither will the effects of the urban environment. Since *Yonondio’s* connection to urbanism is so prevalent, it stands to reason that the influences and effects of the city would also be present, reinforcing the notion that *Yonondio* is an urban text. There are a multiplicity of urban city effects such as the function of space, psychological and emotional consequences, and lifestyles. Here, the idea of alienation as a result of the urban city will be traced; however, other influences and traits would also be applicable.

Seeing the urban city as alienating is a frequently used way of looking at the city, although it should be noted that there are those that argue against this alienation. To alienate is to estrange (“alienation, n.”). It is an act of separation and withdrawal. In Patricia Yaeger’s article, “Introduction: Dreaming of Infrastructure,” she acknowledges the trend of alienation—as well as crowding, flânerie, and absolute space—as established by Georg Simmel, Walter Benjamin, and
Henri Lefebvre during the course of her argument (4). Alienation also reveals itself as a trend associated with urbanism in film. “Individualism, Alienation and the Search for Community: Urban Imagery in Recent American Films,” observes the lack of community, the separation, and the indifference exhibited both by the city and the people who come to inhabit it. There are those films that stand as “a commentary on the alienation of human from human that exists in the city” and the “[indifference] to other human beings and their joys and sufferings—the city itself creates this climate of indifference” (Holton). Analysis of the cityscape also reveals a sense of powerlessness associated with alienation (Geis, Schwartz). This trend of alienation from the connections to urban cities comes into play in *Yonnondio*.

Focusing on the oldest daughter of the Holbrook family, Mazie experiences this disconnection. In the coalmining town (a town whose existence depends on urbanization), Mazie is left on the outside. The only space she has shuns her by its very characteristics. “Mazie lay under the hot Wyoming sun, between the outhouse and the garbage dump. There was no other place for Mazie to lie, for the one patch of green in the yard was between these two spots. From the ground arose a nauseating smell. Food had been rotting in the garbage pile for years” (3). It is just a patch of ground near the outhouse by her house. She does not fit into the surroundings. Even the very location and nearby objects, sights, and smells prevent her from latching on. The town itself also isolates her. Sheen McCoy, a disfigured and psychologically unstable mind, a man whose injuries and instability can be traced back to an accident in the mine making him a manifestation or product of the mine, rejects her. He seeks to sacrifice her to the mine (11). She is not connected to the mine. In his human sacrifice he believes she will become the child of the mine: a forced connection to compensate for her previous isolation from the urban influenced environment, but in sacrificing her would permanently disconnect Mazie from the area.
Later, at the farm, Mazie still continues in her isolation regardless of her attempts to create ties. She learns, makes friends, and is given books; however, because of the influence of urbanism, the family must leave. The farm that is so influenced by the need for production and capital that comes with the urban environment ends up not being able to sustain the family because they in turn cannot sustain the needs of urban life (45). The Holbrook’s must leave yet again. The “ties” are gone—even her friend dies and her books are sold—as she is forced to move with her family due to economic restraints and connections to city demands.

In the slaughterhouse slum, Mazie continues in her isolation. Mentally she is disconnected not being able to deal with the horror of the area. A refuge must be found inside her own mind to deal with the estrangement (51, 56). Physically, she continues to be alienated. Parts of the landscape are cut off to her. She cannot go where others go, like in the ravine behind the house. She is separated. The only has is the dump: the place of discarded objects. She also is discarded and separated by the city. Is it any wonder this the place she gravitates towards?

On the dump, territory is established, shifted, abandoned, fought over, combined… Children—already stratified as dummies in school, condemned as unfit for the worlds of learning, art, imagination, invention—plan, measure, figure, design, invent, construct, costume themselves, stage dramas; endlessly—between tasks, errands, smaller children to be looked after, jobs, dailinesses—live in passionate absorbed activity, in rapt make believe. (101)

The dump is the symbolic culmination of the urban alienation in this slum.

Mazie was forced to deal with the urban environment much like any urbanite would. She was alienated, had to navigate through the space constructed and influenced by urbanism, and was left trying to find a niche for herself. She could not base her identity as an “urbanite” on or
in response to the surrounding location and culture like other city-dwellers because while in an urban atmosphere, she is always shifting from place to place within, without, and away from the city, but never away from its influence. She couldn’t do what was done in Sister Carrie. Carrie moved to the urban city and was able to define herself in the experience. She was an actress with talent and potential who was more capable of independence than she initially thought. Mazie did not even have the illusion of moving to the urban environment, because she was already so palpably connected to it. Carrie also would have been influenced by the city (especially noting her beliefs and ideas about the city even before entering Chicago), but the illusion of separation and a transition was there for her. Sara, from Bread Givers, led a hard life influenced by the urban environment but was able to get out of her oppression, not be “entering” the city, but by changing her direct connection to it. She no longer experienced it through the beliefs of her father. She gets away, defines herself, and then is able to go back without being entrapped again. Mazie on the other hand is already in perpetual motion jumping from one thread of the urban tapestry to another. She is already moving, breaking away from one connection to another (like her experience with the farm). She is not a part of the city, even though she is a part of the urban environment and is touched by its influence so she cannot define herself by the city itself.

The key comes when she chases the star. The sun is setting and she is chasing the great star of the sky as it sinks. Running through fields trying to reach it for herself (36). This is something both Sara and Carrie do. They chase their stars, their possibilities, in relation to and within the city. Mazie must do it elsewhere. Where she will go to define herself as a “new urbanite” is unclear. She cuts up her feet while chasing it, but does not quite reach it within the scope of the story. So is she lost then, forced to wander without definition? The answer, or the lack of an answer, is found with the ending of the Yonnondio. The family is listening to the radio
with an approaching dust storm when the pages suddenly end. This is not the intended ending; the book was left incomplete, but therein is the answer. Mazie has to keep chasing her star and what she will find is yet to be written. The new urbanite is yet to be defined, leaving a call for other novels, other authors, other individuals, to answer the call.

**The Urban Takeover**

So, is *Yonnondio* an urban novel? Unequivocally yes. The influence of the urban environment is palpable throughout the novel from coalmine to farm to slaughterhouse. The influence of the city is something they never shake no matter where they go or what they do. They never escape the grasp of urbanization.

Reading *Yonnondio* as an urban novel colors the text. Instead of a family wandering from place to place, causing strain on familial relationships, it becomes a struggle with the urban environment and the situations and repercussions therein (like their struggles with alienation and urban demands). Other issues such as the family struggles and economic issues as well as critiques on feminism and psychology are then components within the larger structure of urbanism.

Beyond the text of *Yonnondio* is this book’s connection to the urban literary tradition. “Julian Wolfreys has recently noted in *Writing London* that the materiality of the city coexists alongside the materiality of language. The metropolis keeps us alive by providing the environment in which we communicate with one another; it allows us to speak, and thereby provides for our psychological well-being” (Trepe 1). The urban tradition includes an inextricable connection between the urban environment (stereotypically in the form of the city itself) and the language that it provokes. Urban texts are an expression of this connection.
The modeling of modernity as a visual concept grapples with literary urbanism in a number of ways, first being how the city, as an architectural and geographical being, manifests spatially in the body and in the mind of the city dweller. Subsequently, visual modernity considers how the city dweller, through body and mind, perceives the city; and from here, how the city and the city dweller together allow for representations of urban life to arise in literature and the fine arts.

(Trepe 2)

This connection can be seen in the studies of space, repression, infrastructure, mobility, reconstruction, displacement, function, dysfunction, purpose, obligation, politics, economics, sociality, public and private, real and imagined, separation and community that have been the subjects of analysis for urban literature (Yaeger). This urban tradition has primarily focused on the city and/or things relating to it including city dwellers, city culture, city-based perceptions, and physical characteristics of the city. *Yonnondio* as an urban text expands this tradition. Texts usually not considered as urban must now be brought into the genre. Novels connecting to cities, especially during times of industrialization, deindustrialization, and post industrialization, or that are even in eras where the power of cities started to creep past its borders resulting in blurred lines must be read as urban texts. On a similar note, novels already accepted into the genre now must consider more than just the city (including the city as real or created, public or private, physically or imaginary, cultural or individual). Influences of urbanism as well as its broad connections need consideration. Seeing urban issues in isolation, even those issues about isolation, no longer is enough.

Away from the literary sphere, it is necessary to acknowledge the disappearance of non-urban areas. Few places are left untouched by urbanism. As urbanism continues to grow, these
few places will continue to shrink until urbanism is all but totalizing. The marching journey of redefining urbanism has brought down the walls of Jericho, breaking down the city limits. Urbanism is everywhere. All are made urbanites. Now the challenge comes not only with re-seeing texts in an urban light, but society as a whole needing to grapple with the idea of how this widespread urbanism defines them. What does it mean to be this new type of urbanite?
Works Cited


