Textual Contraception
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Today, magazines and television openly advertise and discuss birth control. Birth control pills are the most commonly prescribed drug for women ages 15–44, with an estimated 16 million American women on “the Pill,” and recent legislation requires health insurance companies to cover it as a prescription drug.\(^1\) Indeed, the Pill is so ubiquitous to today’s media-savvy culture that the Ortho Tri-Cyclen brand distinguishes itself in the crowded market by asking, “If you decide to take the Pill, why not take the only one that helps your skin look better too?”\(^2\) (This hormonal contraceptive, developed by Gregory Pinckus at the urging of Margaret Sanger in 1951, was the first truly new contraceptive device.) Makers of various oral contraceptive brands prominently advertise in magazines focusing on beauty, fashion, health, and “female interests” aimed at women ages 18–35. These ads feature attractive young models and use slogans to highlight the ease and efficiency of their products to appeal to today’s busy woman (“Take birth control off your mind and just keep it on you” reads an ad for Ortho Evra, the contracep-

1. The seemingly automatic coverage of the male impotence drug Viagra in the late 1990s spurred “Contraceptive Equity” (see Goldberg A1). Individual states have passed bills mandating that employee-sponsored insurance plans cover FDA-approved prescription contraception, while the Equity in Prescription Insurance and Contraceptive Coverage Act (EPICC) slowly works its way through the federal government. According to Shape magazine, one year’s supply of the birth control pill can cost more than $300, yet it is not covered by the majority of insurance plans and HMOs (Moriarty 24). Indeed, one way or another, women are still “paying” for their reproductive choices.

2. According to Lara V. Marks, the pharmaceutical company Johnson & Johnson tripled their sales of Ortho Tri-Cyclen when it was approved as an acne treatment (6). See also Oudshoorn and Asbell on the history of the birth control pill; see Gossel on the marketing of the pill.
tive patch, while an Estrostep pill ad reads, “One part complexion, one part protection. Your pill. For more reasons than one.”) The open marketing of female contraceptives demonstrates birth control’s transition from an illegal and “obscene” idea to a popular product marketed through glossy advertisements.

In 1938 Margaret Sanger predicted that in the future “birth control will have the position that the tooth brush has today, and people will think no more of it than they do of the tooth brush as an essential to good health” (“Quotable Quote”). Have we reached that point? Birth control is big business in the United States, both for pharmaceutical companies and for advertisers. Analysts have estimated the U.S. market for Depo-Provera alone in 1996 exceeded $850 million a year. Birth control has entered the realm of commercial advertising for mainstream products.
such as Candie’s fragrances, which shows bra-clad actress Alyssa Milano opening a medicine cabinet overflowing with brightly wrapped Trojan condoms and two bottles of Candie’s fragrance—one for men, one for women (fig. 1). The colorful fragrance bottles evoke youthful sexuality from their surroundings and an aura of risqué excess, although seeing sex linked here to responsible practices is refreshing. Indeed, is the woman’s “Mona Lisa smile” for the fragrance or the condoms—which is she reaching for? And is this her medicine cabinet, displaying signs of a sexually active woman, or is she in the bathroom of her partner?

The Candie’s fragrance ad also points to the continued assumption that birth control is a female responsibility. Although condoms have been used for hundreds of years, as both a prophylactic and contraceptive device, birth control has long been the domain of women. Currently, men can choose from withdrawal, condoms, and vasectomy as methods with varying degrees of effectiveness. Although a male hormonal contraceptive is in clinical trials, funding and public interest, at least in the United States, have been erratic. Women face a much longer list of available methods, such as the diaphragm, sponge, intrauterine device (IUD), pill, Norplant, Depo-Provera, female condom, and Ortho-Evra patch. And pharmaceutical company researchers are testing new forms of contraception for women, including a seven-year IUD, a film that dissolves inside the vagina, a disposable diaphragm, and a vaccine. These developments have not been without controversy, however. Plan B, the emergency contraceptive “morning-after” pill, has not received Food and Drug Administration (FDA) approval in the United States (although over thirty other countries, including Canada, have approved it), and two officials at the FDA resigned in protest over what they saw as the intrusion of politics into science (Kaufman). Some pharmacists have invoked a moral right to refuse to sell Plan B, which former Wisconsin Senator Tom Reynolds has equated with abortion, and Illinois Governor Rod Blagojevitch issued an emergency order that pharmacists must stock and fill any contraception prescription (Brackett). The sense of social immediacy is as alive among reproductive rights activists now as it was during the early years of the twentieth century when the birth control movement began.

How did birth control infiltrate the American consciousness on social, economic, and personal levels? Contraception was not always such a widespread and visual part of popular culture. Indeed, for a long time contraception was illegal and widely considered immoral, linked

3. See also Shorto.
to prostitutes and “fallen women.” The birth control movement in the United States, roughly from 1914 to 1940, was a time of social upheaval as the public acceptance of contraception tangled with World War I, the passage of the Nineteenth Amendment and changing roles for women, the growing power of the medical profession, the economic crisis of the Depression, and controversy over immigration.

The birth control movement, often remembered for the political agitation of Margaret Sanger, was a vital part of this social ferment in modern American history. Dorothy Day, a young activist and journalist, covered the birth control movement for the socialist New York Call and later served as assistant editor of The Masses, another radical periodical supporting birth control. In her 1924 novel, The Eleventh Virgin, Dorothy Day describes the fevered atmosphere of political and social change experienced by young radical journalists:

There was much to do—meetings to attend of protest against labor, capital, the high cost of living, war-profiteering. . . . There were meetings to start strikes, to end strikes, to form unions, to fight against other unions. Food riots came. The city hall was stormed—if you can call it storming (as the papers did) when a crowd of fat Jewish women from the East Side with babies in their arms stood in front of the city hall and scolded that institution. . . . There were birth control meetings—trials of birth control leaders, meetings of the Anti-Conscription League, the Emergency Peace Federation—and interviews galore. (113–14)

This autobiographical novel, written while Day was recovering from a traumatic abortion, captures the excitement of activism and the paradoxical position of radical women, fighting for social justice while still trapped by conventional gender roles and their own fertile bodies. Day’s story further captures the complex and evolving emotions individual women have toward reproduction and contraception: she later founded the Catholic Worker Movement and attempted to find and destroy all copies of The

4. I use the terms birth control and contraception interchangeably as any deliberate effort to prevent conception. The term birth control, as defined by Margaret Sanger in 1914, referred to “the conscious control of the birth rate by means that prevent the conception of human life” (My Fight for Birth Control 84). Thus, from the start Sanger and others were careful to distinguish the contraceptive methods they advocated from abortion. This distinction was made repeatedly to gloss the birth control movement with the patina of respectability and enable it to argue from a position of morality. As Frederick A. Blossom writes, “by ‘birth control’ is meant the regulation of conception by harmless means, with a view to preventing the birth of undesired children. By no stretch of the wildest imagination can it be made to spell abortion or any form of infanticide” (12).
Like Dorothy Day, other American authors, male and female, canonical and forgotten, captured the issues and tone of the birth control movement in their fiction, contributing their narratives to social discourse on the morality and economics of legal contraception. In the novels of authors from Theodore Dreiser to William Faulkner, plays from Susan Glaspell to Lorraine Hansberry, and stories from Ernest Hemingway to Angelina Grimke, birth control and its attendant controversies implicitly or explicitly influenced the narrative. Whether authors consciously saw their writing as enacting a social as well as aesthetic role, these works together compose a rich and valid site to examine the birth control movement and its historical implications for female sexuality and reproductive control. Placing these works in the context of the birth control movement, and the social discourse of economics, marriage, motherhood, and eugenics, this study traces the ways American authors took up and influenced dominant cultural discourses. As V. F. Calverton argued in 1926, “One of the best methods of discovering the theories of sex behavior which have prevailed in any generation is by examining the literature of the period” (Sex Expression in Literature xxv). This study, then, establishes the important role of fiction in shaping the birth control movement and the effects of contraception on modern narrative.

Birth control occupies an interesting social position. It is ostensibly within the realm of the private, of the female body and the tension between motherhood and independence, choice and biology. But little in the female “private sphere” remains a matter of individual choice untouched by social norms. Contraceptive practice was illegal during the early years of the twentieth century, but social forces as diverse as radical socialism, an incipient women’s movement, and corporate profit

6. While authors such as Theodore Dreiser took an active role in the birth control movement, others touched more subtly on the debate. Many modernist writers, especially those who published in “little magazines” such as the Little Review and The Masses, “tended to see the social role of art as an issue related to the nature of public discourse” (Morrison 6). Frederic Jameson argues persuasively that making strong distinctions between “high” aesthetic literary value and “low” political literature limits our ability to fully understand a text. Jameson writes, “From this perspective the convenient working distinction between cultural texts that are social and political and those that are not becomes something worse than an error: namely, a symptom and reinforcement of the reification and privatization of contemporary life. Such a distinction reconfirms that structural, experiential, and conceptual gap between the public and the private, between the social and the psychological, or the political and the poetic, between history or society and the ‘individual,’ which—the tendential law of social life under capitalism—maims our existence as individual subjects and paralyzes our thinking about time and change just as surely as it alienates us from our speech itself” (20).
seeking were introducing contraception to the public vocabulary under more acceptable guises, such as “voluntary motherhood” and “feminine hygiene.” Advertisements for drugs to “regulate the female menses” circulated in newspapers and magazines. These same periodicals acted as a forum for public debate over the moral and legal implications of birth control. The public battle over companionate marriage, women’s role in the public sphere, the declining birth rate and growing poverty, were fought not only in newspapers and magazines but also in fiction.

My purpose in this study is a dual one: to place previously unexamined literary material alongside canonical modernist fiction in the context of American and feminist history, and to explore the process of the circulation and exchange of contraceptive issues within contemporary literary production. The resulting narrative is not intended to be exclusionary but rather to introduce new material into an interdisciplinary understanding of modern literary and American cultural history. This methodology owes a debt to several recent works, including Michael Trask’s Cruising Modernism: Class and Sexuality in American Literature and Social Thought and Daylanne English’s Unnatural Selections: Eugenics in American Modernism and the Harlem Renaissance. Such a methodology can illuminate the relationship between modern American social thought and literature. This study takes as a given that literature is not separate from the public sphere, and that, while shifting aesthetic criteria may separate “high” and “low” art, the written word can have a powerful rhetorical effect and play an integral role in popular culture.

As a vehicle for information exchange and normalization, fiction both is influenced by and has a powerful influence on social acceptance of cultural norms. As Rachel Blau DuPlessis argues, “any literary convention—plots, narrative sequences, characters in bit parts—as an instrument that claims to depict experience, also interprets it. No convention is neutral, purely mimetic, or purely aesthetic” (Writing beyond the Ending 2). Consider, for example, the development of the “bodice-ripping” romance and its current popularity. These works openly portray female (hetero)sexuality and the sex act itself through lines such as “[h]is whole weight rested on me now as he upped and raised me for still greater penetration” (Gabaldon 437). The explicit sexual description allows readers to contextualize and normalize their own feelings of desire, in turn influencing their acceptance of sexual expression in the broader popular culture. At the same time, however, these depictions often leave out the

7 While most contemporary romance novels still portray heteronormative sexuality, a growing number of works depict lesbian sexuality. While recognizing the existence of multiple sexualities during all periods of history, this study focuses on reproductive hetero-
unromantic features of sex, the awkward, unseemly, and messy bits.

While sex appears more openly in current mainstream fiction than it did previously, fiction still rarely describes the ritual act of birth control. No scene in Gabaldon’s novel shows the narrator slipping in her diaphragm prior to “savage[ing] each other in desperate need” (437). When birth control does appear, it is often the site of comedy or potential disaster. Ann Beattie mentions a son pricking a pinhole in his mother’s diaphragm in her 1980 novel, Falling in Place, and Don DeLillo sets a scene of his 1997 opus, Underworld, in Condomology, an urban condom boutique. If the media now openly advertises birth control, and it is an important part of many women’s lives, why is it still largely absent from fictional plots? Could this gap be due to reticence in discussing a “private issue,” or some sense that the topic is obscene, or the objection that contraception is not a legitimate authorial concern?

According to Suzette Henke, female authors of the twentieth century have failed to discuss “the profound connection, for fertile women of every age, between sexuality and reproductive potential” because they still are trapped by cultural myths of femininity (46). These myths include those perpetuated by romance novels of an effortless and romantic sexual encounter. Henke asks, “What works of modern literature portray a woman inserting a diaphragm? Vertiginous from morning sickness? . . . All these physiological events are, perhaps, too messy, violent, or indelicate to be part of women’s literary consciousness” (52). However, this surface absence is not a void of female experience. As Henke further notes, “The perpetual connection of female desire to anxieties attendant on reproductive potential” has not been so much “erased, as it were, from the semiotic code” as written into the very structure of that code (52). It is a silence that speaks the reasons for its condition, the issues that shape this persistent anxiety. In critically analyzing fiction we can trace out the social forces impinging on public and literary consciousness, adding depth to our narrative of history. As Nancy Armstrong states, “a text may serve, in other words, as a drop of amber which preserves a complex social dynamic that cannot be contained within the text in question” (355).

No single work provides a definitive understanding of the movement for birth control, but as an intersecting network these texts reveal the social forces at play. They “construct the frameworks, fashion the sexuality. The birth control movement upheld heteronormative sexuality in its discourse.

8. See also Susan Koppelman Cornillon, who argues that "certain types of feelings and experiences common to women in our culture are not represented in our fiction by male or by female novelists, or, if these phenomena are mentioned, it is in a context that reinforces our alienation from ourselves and the mystification of our humanness" (114).
metaphors, create the very language by which people comprehend their experience and think about their world” (Lauter 11). Consider two cases. The popular sitcom Seinfeld aired an episode entitled “The Sponge” in 1995. Upon learning that her preferred contraceptive method, the Today Sponge, has been removed from the market, Elaine performs a “hard-target search. Of every drug store, general store, health store and grocery store in a 25-block radius” because, as she says, “women are really loyal to their birth control methods.” To conserve these valuable commodities, Elaine screens every date to see if he is “sponge-worthy” (Mehlman). This episode had real-world effects, prompting Allendale Pharmaceuticals to reissue the Today Sponge in 1999. A second incident provides an additional example of the interaction of fiction and fact in popular media culture. Candace Bushnell, “chick lit” author and creator of Sex and the City, helped launch a new oral contraceptive, Seasonale, which lowers the number of menstrual cycles from thirteen a year to four. Bushnell’s turn as spokeswoman reveals the permeable barrier in today’s popular culture between author and celebrity, between novel and television, and between a fiction of the sexually emancipated woman and technological innovations that make that emancipation possible.

Accounts of the need for and use of birth control, especially from the perspective of the contracepting woman herself, do not dominate contemporary fiction, nor do they dominate the fiction of the 1910s through 1930s when the political movement to legalize birth control occurred. Rather, these accounts infiltrate texts through the many issues that tied the birth control movement to other social concerns: economics, eugenics, women’s roles, the falling birth rate, and America’s place in the international sphere. Since birth control was marginalized in the private sphere until Margaret Sanger and others made it a matter of public debate, we should not be surprised that it has also been marginalized as a fictional subject. Instead, fiction explores the conditions that necessitate birth control, including the physical facts of repeated pregnancy on a woman’s body. Birth control appears within these narratives as a subtext. Because birth control was a private issue in women’s lives, it is a hidden issue in the lives of female characters: Charlotte Rittenmeyer’s douche bag may get brief textual space in Faulkner’s If I Forget Thee, Jerusalem (1939), yet its failure shapes the narrative. Nella Larsen’s Helga Crane may have

9. Because she was a single-issue reformer after 1916, Margaret Sanger is often considered the public face of the movement. Many other reformers were involved, however, including Emma Goldman, Mary Ware Dennett, Agnes Inglis, Jessie Ashley, Ida Rauh Eastman, Rose Pastor Stokes, Carl Rave, and Carlo Tresca (see Gordon, Moral Property of Women).
no explicit knowledge of birth control, yet it is her very ignorance that leads to the final scene in *Quicksand* (1928).

While many scholars have explored abortion and motherhood in literature or in history, *Textual Contraception: Birth Control and Modern American Fiction* begins to close the gap between disciplinary accounts. While valuable, previous studies of motherhood or abortion in literature reaffirm, through repeated accretion of scholarly attention, the "naturalness" of the pregnant female body. But what of contraception, of the premeditated, conscious decision to control one's reproductive life? What is missing from current scholarship is an investigation of deliberate attempts to avoid such a state, of woman-with-womb but not woman-as-womb. This study also provides an analysis of works from popular and radical periodicals and reads them in the context of historical developments and other literature. Historical studies of the birth control movement ignore the cultural work done by fiction and other popular forms, focusing instead on leaders and organizations, dates and legal struggles. For example, historian Norman Himes writes of the "increasing diffusion, democratization or socialization" of birth control knowledge, but he ignores two critical venues for this democratization: popular media and fiction (*Medical History of Contraception* xvii). Too often historians ignore fiction, assuming that its created reality is far removed from the "factual" history they are attempting to ascertain. Yet literature provides a rich social artifact that can track cultural change on multiple levels, most obviously in the events selected to move the plot along and the character types as reflections of social norms. Written as well as oral methods have

10. The birth control movement began to receive significant scholarly attention in the 1970s. Linda Gordon (*Moral Property of Women*), Carol McCann, James Reed (*Birth Control Movement and American Society*), and Andrea Tone (*Devices and Desires*) have written comprehensive social and political histories of contraceptive technology in the United States. Bernard Asbell, Elizabeth Siegel Watkins, and Lara V. Marks have written specifically on the development of the birth control pill. Adele E. Clarke, Nellie Oudshoorn, and Merrily Borell discuss the scientific approach of biologists and researchers in the development of hormonal contraceptive methods. Lynne Masel-Walters and Ellen Chesler are representative of writers placing Sanger squarely at the center of the movement, while Constance M. Chen, John M. Craig, and Robyn Rosen focus on Mary Ware Dennett's contributions to the American Birth Control League.

Many feminist scholars consider abortion as a legal, psychological, and technological issue, including Mary Boyle, Janet Farrell Brodie, Kristin Luker, and Rosalind Pollock Petchesky. Literary scholars such as Judith Wilt, Irene Dash, Joy Castro, and Donna Hollenberg have examined fictional representations of abortion.

While the birth control movement has been extensively discussed by historians, less examined is the literary and artistic response to the inherent drama of birth control. Anne G. Balay has written briefly on birth control in Katherine Norris's *Mother*, and Sheryl Stevenson identifies opposition to motherhood in Djuna Barnes's *Ryder*. On British authors, see Mary Lowe-Evans, Jerome Meckier, and Christina Hauck.
been important to the retention and circulation of contraceptive knowledge among women even up to the present, and women were as likely to find accurate information in fiction as in nonfiction, from a friend as from their doctors. Indeed, as one anonymous reader told me, “Most of us learned about all this [contraception] from the novelists, not from any health care clinic. And our mothers were hopelessly uninformed and afraid.” Wendy Wasserstein’s 1978 play *Uncommon Women and Others* echoes how a novel by Mary McCarthy provided a contraceptive education. The character Leilah muses, “Do you know the first time I ever really understood about diaphragms or sex was from reading *The Group*” (28).

Today, women have a variety of options offering up to 99 percent effectiveness. But what did women who wanted to control their fertility use earlier, and what social as well as scientific developments led to the variety of methods we enjoy today? A brief look at the historical and literary developments leading up to the early twentieth century is necessary before more closely examining the relationship between literature and the political movement for birth control.

Birth control is not a new idea. Historian Norman Himes claims “the desire to control conception is a universal social phenomenon” (*Medical History of Contraception* 209). The title of chapter 3 of Dr. Charles Knowlton’s 1832 *Fruits of Philosophy*, “Of Promoting and Checking Conception,” concisely describes a concern of humanity since earliest recorded history.11 The Egyptians, early Hebrews, Greeks, and Romans had knowledge of early contraceptive techniques, and in these societies women used herbal concoctions, prolonged lactation, interruption, pessaries (vaginal suppositories used to support the uterus or rectum), the rhythm method, condoms, and other barriers.12 Textual evidence of effective chemical and herbal birth control exists since the second century B.C., and contraception and abortion are mentioned by Aristotle, Plato, and Socrates. The Berlin Papyrus, circa 1300 B.C., commands, “you should [make] for her a prescription to loosen semen,” and in the fifth century B.C. Aristotle wrote of “smearing the cervix with cedar oil, or lead with olive oil” to prevent conception (Riddle, *Contraception and Abortion from the Ancient World to the Renaissance* 66). The Ebers Papyrus, written between 1550 and 1500 B.C., contains medical prescriptions for

11. See Chandrasekhr on Charles Knowlton. Other marriage manuals of the period include Dr. Frederick Hollick’s *Marriage Guide*, which had gone through dozens of editions by the 1870s.

12. Race, class, geography, and other factors complicate women’s access to and relationship with contraception. Dorothy E. Roberts argues, “Race completely changes the significance of birth control to the story of women’s reproductive freedom” (*Killing the Black Body* 56). See also Solinger (*Pregnancy and Power*).
birth control. Plants such as pomegranate seed, silphium, acacia, Queen Anne’s lace, juniper, willow bark, pennyroyal, and rue could be taken by mouth or used as a pessary.

Methods of contraception and abortion hold a prominent place in the classical and medieval medical records. But who had access to this knowledge, and how widely was it practiced? Many scholars, such as Norman Himes, have argued that this knowledge was limited to physicians and was not spread among the populace. This supports the general belief that birth control was not a regular or conscious practice in the ancient and classical world. More recently, however, John M. Riddle has refuted this claim, arguing that although early herbal methods were largely ineffective by today’s standards and linked to “superstitious” charms, the low birth rate can be explained by the conscious practice of birth control. Based on little evidence of male-dependent methods, such as coitus interruptus, condoms (sheaths of animal skin or linen), or the rhythm method, Riddle concludes that as early as antiquity birth control has depended on the actions of women, who had both effective contraceptives and a female network to transmit the needed information, passing knowledge orally from one generation of women to the next (Contraception 5).

Women lost access to much of this knowledge when male physicians replaced midwives and social attitudes towards women’s bodies and reproductive duties spawned laws against contraception. Christianity’s growth in the Middle Ages led to increased opposition to fertility control, which became associated with witchcraft and magic; indeed, Riddle argues that the rash of midwives killed as witches was due to the threat they represented as practitioners of and as circuits of knowledge of birth control and abortion (Eve’s Herbs 113). Both church and law argued that sex was only for procreation, and recipes for herbal contraceptives were confiscated. The position of midwives degenerated into mere birthing assistants, and medical curriculums excluded birth control during the Renaissance. Published herbal recipe books contained minimal information on contraceptive and abortifacient recipes, and apothecaries sold mixtures under “the cloak of false labels,” a practice that continued through the early twentieth century (Riddle, Eve’s Herbs 165).

Historians of sexuality note that ideas of marriage and family changed in the late eighteenth century from a family-centered view of marriage that focused on reproduction as the purpose for sex to an idea of companionate marriage. Attitudes toward contraception continued to develop due to “altered attitudes and habits in sexuality and the role of the church;
the development of embryology and the dissemination of debates about fetal development; the awareness of and, in some cases, alarm over the relationship between population size and political and economic power” (Riddle, Contraception 213). The 1820s–1850s saw a movement for “free love”—not advocating promiscuity, but the belief that love, not marriage, should be the basis for sexual relations. The social purity movement advocated “voluntary motherhood” through continence and abstinence, rejecting the necessity for birth control by other means but emphasizing human control of family size. Although these reformers recognized female sexuality and eroticism within marriage, they argued that women gained social and moral power through self-denial. The middle class read marriage manuals and listened to speakers on physiology and health, while the lower classes looked to almanacs and newspaper advertisements for insight into sexual health.

But social attitudes regarding birth control were slow to change, and the 1800s witnessed the legalized suppression of contraceptive information. In England, Lord Ellenborough’s 1803 crime bill declared it murder to “administer to, or cause to be administered to or taken by any of his Majesty’s subjects any deadly poison, or other noxious and destructive substance or thing, with intent [for] . . . his Majesty’s subject or subjects thereby to murder, or thereby to cause and procure the miscarriage of any woman, then being quick with child” (qtd. in Riddle, Contraception 207). In colonial America laws began to mirror this phrasing, and a wave of statutory laws based on the wording of the Ellenborough bill attacked abortion, which had been treated on the basis of common law. In 1829 the New York state legislature passed a law stating, “Every person who shall wilfully administer to any pregnant woman, any medicine, drug or substance whatever, or shall use or employ any instrument of other means, with intent thereby to destroy such child, unless the same shall have been necessary to preserve the life of such woman . . . shall, upon conviction, be punished by imprisonment in a country jail not more than one year, or by a fine not exceeding five hundred dollars, or by both such fine and imprisonment” (qtd. in Harper 247).

Information that had once been available vanished from the published record as pharmaceutical guides deleted information on the contraceptive usages of many drugs, and marriage manuals omitted their discussions of sexuality. Marital guides such as Charles Knowlton’s Fruits of Knowledge; or, the Private Companion of Young Married People (1832) and Robert Dale Owen’s Moral Physiology; or, A Brief and Plain Treatise on the

14. See Mohr.
Population Question (1831) had contained basic and often conflicting information on contraception. For instance, Owens’s tract, in print for forty years, included a brief and rather vague discussion of birth control methods. It recommended coitus interruptus as the best method, citing the vaginal sponge as ineffective and the skin condom as too expensive. Knowlton, who later was prosecuted for obscenity for Fruits of Knowledge, wrote a much more specifically useful tract, which included a chapter with detailed descriptions of human genitalia as well as a chapter on birth control methods. The purpose of Fruits of Knowledge, which had gone through ten printings by 1877, was “to obtain and disseminate a knowledge of means whereby men and women may refrain at will from becoming parents, without even a partial sacrifice of the pleasure which attends the gratifications of their productive instinct” (8). Knowlton not only advocated post-coital douching as the most effective method but also recommended douching solutions containing alum or salt, gave approximate dosages, and informed women on how and where to obtain a syringe.

The Comstock Act of 1873 made it illegal to distribute through the U.S. mail “any article or thing designed or intended for the prevention of conception or procuring of abortion” as well as “advertisements” or “information” regarding birth control.\(^\text{15}\) The act, named for New York reformer Anthony Comstock, was part of the Progressive Era’s attempt to wipe out vice.\(^\text{16}\) This national obscenity law ignored distinctions between pornography and medical information and treated any printed material discussing contraception, including fiction and advertisements, as illicit. When a publisher reprinted Knowlton’s Fruits of Philosophy in 1876, he was fined under the Comstock Act for publishing such a “dirty, filthy book,” and had to withdraw the book from the U.S. market. (In England, Bradlaugh and Besant republished it and used their indictment in that country for publicity for birth control.) The Comstock Act limited what could pass through the mail and, in consequence, influenced what would be published and read. Sellers advertised contraceptive materials such as syringes and douches under the guise of “feminine hygiene products”; however, many of these ads were for ineffective sugar pills and powders.

15. While feminist critics such as Janet Farrell Brodie and Carol Smith-Rosenberg have argued that the purpose of the Comstock Act was in part to control female sexuality, Nicola Beisel argues that Comstock himself was motivated by a desire to protect children: “children, not women, were Comstock’s concern, although he assumed that the rearing of morally pure children required women devoted to home and family” (9).

16. Marge Piercy’s 2005 historical novel Sex Wars: A Novel of the Turbulent Post–Civil War Period, is an interesting fictional account of Comstock, Victoria Woodhull, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Susan B. Anthony, and a fictional immigrant woman who goes into the condom-making trade.
While the message of the advertisement may have been innocent enough to get by Comstock, the inherent message was clear enough to women in need. What these “Preventative Powders” were meant to prevent, clearly, was pregnancy.

By the late nineteenth century, contraception and abortion were illegal and unavailable to any but a few wealthy women, and the concept of “birth control” went against social and religious ideas of woman’s proper role. The American Medical Association, founded in 1847, opposed contraception and abortion to differentiate professional doctors from midwives. The new field of gynecology equated women’s health with their reproductive function.\(^\text{17}\) Indeed, not until 1936 did the majority of the nation’s medical schools train students in contraceptive methods.

Even as moral and legal sanctions stripped information on birth control from the public record, scientific and technological advancements improved methods, enabling birth control to be “inexpensive, reliable, and available” (Bullough 104). Condoms made of fish bladder and other materials had been available, but at $5.00 a dozen in New York City in 1860, only the wealthiest could afford them. Then, the vulcanization of rubber in 1843 and 1844 led to the growth and development of the condom industry, enabling the mass production of cheap condoms marketed for prophylactic rather than contraceptive purposes. The vulcanization of rubber also enabled the development of the rubber diaphragm and pessary, which became the recommended device in Dutch contraceptive clinics. In 1846 a diaphragm patented as “The Wife’s Protector” emphasized both the place of sex within marriage and the mysterious question of what the device would protect her from. In the United States, rubber pessaries were developed, patented, and advertised strictly as medical devices to support a prolapsed uterus. Madame Restell (also known as Anna Lohman) sold her “Portuguese Female Pills” for “suppression of the menses” for five dollars per box, advertising in New York newspapers from 1840 to 1845. Sold under the guise of a “certain cure for married ladies,” Restell hid her product under mystery (what disease is being cured?) and respectability (for married women only, of course). Although the product’s actual purpose was not stated as contraceptive, the rhetoric accompanying it surely leads to that idea, asking, “Is it desirable, then—is it moral—for parents to increase their families, regardless of consequences to themselves, or the well being of their offspring, when a simple, easy, healthy and certain remedy is within our control?” (qtd. in Olasky 51).\(^\text{18}\)

\(17\) See Kapsalis for a fascinating look at the history of gynecology.

\(18\) On Madame Restell, see also Browder. See Tone, Controlling Reproduction, for an edited collection of original newspaper advertisements and articles. See Tone, Devices
Although she may have been the most (in)famous advertiser, she was by no means alone: ads also appeared for “Dr. Vandenburgh’s Female Regeneracy Pills,” “Portuguese Female Pills,” “French Lunar Pills,” and “Madame Costello’s Female Monthly Pills.”

The Comstock Act was challenged by doctors, publishers, and social activists. Dr. Edward Bliss Foote challenged the act in “A Step Backward” and advertised contraception in his medical encyclopedia, Plain Home Talk, in 1875. But authorities seized and destroyed Foote’s pamphlets recommending his “Womb Veil,” thus ensuring that such effective devices would only be available to women wealthy enough to have private doctors who would diagnose them with a prolapsed uterus. Despite the promise of the Mensinga pessary, “Womb Veil,” and diaphragm, most Americans in the nineteenth century continued to practice abstinence, withdrawal, and the misunderstood rhythm method (E. Katz, “History of Birth Control in the United States” 87).

Critics disagree on how effective the Comstock Act was in suppressing birth control information. Population studies demonstrate that the decision to limit family size preceded the official birth control movement in both the United States and England. The average family size dropped throughout the 1800s and 1900s. According to Esther Katz, “white marital fertility rates dropped from an average of 7.04 births per woman in 1800 to 3.56 births in 1900” (“History” 82). Among the African American population, fertility dropped sharply during the latter years of the nineteenth century until about 1940 (McFalls and Masnick 89). Scholars have found an increasing body of evidence suggesting that “it was the result not of natural physiological changes, but of deliberate efforts to limit the number of children born” (E. Katz, “History” 82). Contemporary surveys support this conclusion. Katherine B. Davis conducted a survey of 1,000 women who were of marriageable age before the onset of World War I. Seventy-four percent of respondents practiced some form of contraception, while an even larger number surveyed believed that it was morally right. Dr. Clelia Mosher found that 84 percent of the Victorian women she surveyed practiced some form of fertility control. In Middletown, a sociological study of the changing trends from 1890 to 1925 in the “life of a small American city,” the Lynds noted that, despite an earlier marriage age, family size was shrinking (from 4.6 in 1890 to 3.8 in 1920) due in

19. Himes argues that the Comstock Act was effective, but later historians such as Esther Katz have noted veiled news of contraception in newspaper medical columns and penny circulars.
part to “the diffusion of knowledge of means of contraception” (111). The Lynds described the distribution of contraceptive knowledge across class as a pyramid: “At the top, among most of the business group, the use of relatively efficacious contraceptive methods appears practically universal, while sloping down from this peak is a mixed array of knowledge and ignorance, until the base of ignorance is reached” (125). The working class in urban northern areas and in the South did not have easy access to birth control, and evidence of effective contraceptive use outside of the middle class only surfaces in the 1930s.

This study concentrates on the turbulent political and social context of the United States in the years between the World Wars. During these years a cogent movement to legalize birth control began, and fiction contributed to this fight even as it underwent fundamental stylistic changes. Bolstered by increased urbanization and technological advancement, American society sought rationality and order, and the birth control movement marketed its wares as a means to bring science and logic to reproduction. In literature, naturalism’s interest in social shaping of the human character gave way to modernism’s experimentation and alienation during the 1910s and 1920s, which in turn gave way to the social realism of the 1930s.

Why posit a link between literature and birth control, between the aesthetic and the sociological? What is needed to gain insight into these factors is a cultural analysis of the literary discourse that surrounded and sustained the topic of birth control. As Esther Katz notes, “Clearly, analyses using census data and statistical records can track important links between economic variables and fertility rates, but they cannot adequately incorporate the complex weave of factors that may have gone into so fundamental a decision as whether or not to have a child” (“History” 87). Literary representations published during the period not only reflected social values but served to influence the terms and outcome of the birth control debate itself. How was female sexuality represented with regard to pregnancy and childbearing, duty and freedom? How were women’s bodies depicted? How were birth controllers portrayed, and how were these texts used rhetorically to forward or oppose the cause? In what ways did contraceptive ideology affect narrative structure itself, enacting a form of

20. Birth control movements were happening in other countries as well. See Rose on Marie Stopes’s battle for birth control in Britain, Grossmann on the movement in Germany, and Ramirez and Seipp on Puerto Rico.

21. Bauman argues that modernity’s “task of order” was accomplished via the strategies of exoticizing, segregating, scientific management, and assimilation (4); see Banta on managerial science and narrative.
literary or “textual contraception”?

To answer these questions, chapters 2 through 7 explore fictional representations of women’s lives, the economic and ethical implications of birth control, and eugenic and feminist arguments. Because “causal claims are notoriously difficult to verify, as they often rely on associative rather than empirical proofs,” I consider the fiction within the rhetorical arguments of the birth control movement and in the matrix of reader letters, demographic studies, historical events, and literary theory (Rado 4). Rather than assuming that the birth control movement and its outcome are universally positive, I hope to expose the complicated nature of the movement, the negative as well as the positive effects it had on women’s (and men’s) lives.

Authors suffered under the same censoring restrictions that the Comstock Act of 1873 imposed on birth control information, and endured the monitoring of their work for any sign of “lewd and lascivious” implications. This prohibition limited the openness with which authors could write about sexuality and contraception. Despite this censorship, American writers contributed to the changing public sentiment that overturned the Comstock Act. For example, in his 1922 novel The Beautiful and the Damned, F. Scott Fitzgerald lampoons the old-fashioned reformist impulse of Anthony Comstock in his description of the protagonist’s grandfather: “He became a reformer among reformers. Emulating the magnificent efforts of Anthony Comstock, after whom his grandson was named, he leveled a varied assortment of uppercuts and body-blows at liquor, literature, vice, art, patent medicines, and Sunday theatres” (4). Fitzgerald attributes this lengthy string of “immoral” practices, conflating literature with vice, to an older, dying generation. The novel’s protagonist views his grandfather as “a rabid monomaniac, “a prig, a bore, and something of a hypocrite” (4, 71). By poking fun at the old-fashioned morality of Anthony Comstock, artists and writers led readers to question the relevance and efficacy of a law so obviously a ban to progress. This sentiment echoes the basis of the birth control movement as articulated in Margaret Sanger’s 1917 trial testimony: “I cannot respect the law as it exists today” (“Sanger on Trial”).

The following chapters create a rough chronology to highlight how the

22. British writer George Orwell also invokes Anthony Comstock, ironically naming a character who sells erotica in a seedy bookstore “Gordon Comstock” in his 1936 novel Keep the Aspidistra Flying.

23. Arrested October 1916 for operating a contraceptive clinic in the Brownsville section of Brooklyn, Sanger was brought to trial for violating Section 1142 of the New York State Penal Code. The trial took place in January 1917 and Sanger was found guilty, serving a thirty-day prison sentence. See New York v. Sanger.
birth control movement evolved alongside literary developments. Over the course of this discussion, key themes emerge as prevalent at certain periods. Chapter 2 examines the early years of the movement and the more radical feminist and socialist rhetoric that underlay the call for birth control during the 1910s. Chapter 3 examines how women and writers negotiated the ideas of the New Woman alongside traditional views of marriage and motherhood during the 1920s, as the movement sought increased public legitimacy. Chapter 4 discusses this growing conservatism and its calls for a modern scientific motherhood, while chapter 5 considers how increasing social anxiety over immigration and racial tension during the 1920s led to an alignment with the growing field of eugenics. During the Depression Era economic arguments came to the fore of the movement’s rhetoric, and these developments are considered in chapter 6. In 1936 the birth control movement won the U.S. v. One Package decision, which legalized the prescription of contraceptives by a licensed physician for the purpose of preventing pregnancy. The study concludes with a consideration of the continued legacy of the birth control movement in American fiction.

Each chapter discusses fiction alongside historical documents and letters from readers of the Birth Control Review, published from 1917 to 1940. In tone, character type, and narrative the letters and the literature often sound interchangeable, demonstrating the dialogue between women’s lived reality and fiction. In her 1928 introduction to Motherhood in Bondage, a collection of letters she had received, Sanger asks, “What writer of fiction has more briefly or more heart-breakingly revealed the tragedy of a whole life?” (xiv). While the letters tell a heartrending tale, the fiction adds a depth of detail and dialogue, effectively recreating a realistic, rounded drama that may invite and affect a different audience. The following chapters analyze a wide range of works by early-twentieth-century American authors, including Theodore Dreiser, Meridel LeSueur, Djuna Barnes, Ernest Hemingway, William Faulkner, Kay Boyle, Ellen Glasgow, F. Scott Fitzgerald, and Nella Larsen.

Not simply by censorship were authors restricted; they were constrained by a limited range of narrative possibilities for female characters that reenacted the narrow range of roles available to women. Some texts engaged with the struggle to rewrite the traditional biological narrative of women’s lives. These chapters investigate the relationship between developments in the social rhetoric of birth control and developments in fictional technique and content. The historical period of the birth control movement covers several currents in literature: naturalism’s focus on the real and lower class brought franker discussion of the social con-
sequences of too many pregnancies; radical writers demonstrated the female body as capitalist commodity; popular magazine writers forwarded a sentimental vision of femininity and motherhood; and modernist authors experimented with narrative as they discussed sexuality. How could the traditional biological plot of women’s lives—virginity to marriage to pregnancy to motherhood and domesticity—be narratively interrupted? This textual contraception, an interruption of the reproduction of the traditional plot(s), allowed for new conceptions of women and sexuality.

Taken together, these works help to break the silence that surrounded social perceptions of birth control. Did these authors intend to engage in an ongoing social and political debate? Did they create works of literature or of propaganda? Such a distinction is at best arbitrary. While many of the stories published in the Birth Control Review overtly influenced readers by illustrating points made in the rest of the journal, and thus may be characterized by some critics as “propaganda,” all texts may serve a didactic function in the use that the reader makes of them. As Susan Rubin Suleiman and others have noted, texts are read in a cultural context, and often take on rhetorical as well as aesthetic functions. These texts range from sentimental drama to political agitprop to experimental fiction, but all respond to the issues of the birth control movement.

24. On the rhetorical uses of fiction, see also Booth and Lauter.


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