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Beyond "Main Street": Small Towns in Post-"Revolt" American Literature

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Beyond *Main Street*: Small Towns in Post-“Revolt” American Literature

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy in English

by

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Abstract

“Beyond *Main Street*” examines the impact and legacy of the literary movement that Carl Van Doren, in an infamous 1920 article from *The Nation*, referred to as the “revolt from the village.” This movement, which is widely acknowledged to encompass such writers as Edgar Lee Masters, Sherwood Anderson, and Sinclair Lewis, pushed back against the primacy of the heretofore-dominant pastoral tradition when it came to depictions of rural America. These authors sought to create a more accurate portrayal of the small town, one that, while not completely eschewing the pastoral, also exposed the more seedy side of village life. Critics typically view this movement (if they view it at all) as one grounded in a very specific time period, usually from around 1915 until about 1930 or so. There is little extant research about the influence of this movement after 1930, and it remains a kind of cultural footnote in the legacy of literary modernism. To say that, after this period, depictions of the small town simply reverted to notions of the pastoral, though, would be oversimplification at best.

This project argues that, as with so much of modernism, what began as a flouting of convention developed into an established paradigm. The “revolt” is no longer a “revolt” as such, because its conceptions of small-town America have become a lasting motif in American literature of the twentieth century and beyond. The pastoral image of the village functions now as a kind of simulacrum, an ideal that still permeates the American cultural imagination, but it is rarely given legitimate consideration in literary depictions of individual towns. Rather, I argue, the individual village has become a construction ripe for critique in an increasingly modern and urbanized society. In this project I examine three popular novels from the mid-twentieth century, Henry Bellamann’s *Kings Row* (1940), Grace Metalious’s *Peyton Place* (1956), and Larry

McMurtry's *The Last Picture Show* (1965), in order to illustrate this paradigm shift which can be traced directly back to the "revolt from the village."

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List of Published Papers

A portion of the introduction was modified from the introduction to Theodore Dreiser's *A Hoosier Holiday* (Hastings, Nebraska: Hastings College Press, 2016).

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Introduction: Reassessing the Rose-Colored Window: The “Revolt From the Village”

In his collection *Contemporary American Novelists: 1900-1920*, Carl Van Doren introduces his review of Edgar Lee Masters’s 1915 *The Spoon River Anthology* by asserting what had heretofore been the primacy of the pastoral tradition when it came to depicting small towns in American literature, noting that “For nearly half a century native literature had been faithful to the cult of the village, celebrating its delicate merits with sentimental affection, and with unwearied interest digging into odd corners for persons and incidents illustrative of the essential goodness and heroism which, as the doctrine ran, lie beneath unexciting surfaces” (146). Indeed, this “cult” had been exemplified in numerous literary and historical interpretations of small-town America; unlike England, America was a still vast landscape of wide-open spaces and a largely rural populace. Of popular trends in literature about small-town America during the early twentieth century, Dorothy Anne Dondore, in *The Prairie and the Making of Middle America: Four Centuries of Description* (1926), writes that “Survey of the portrayals of the rural community reveals a discouraging number of peaceful villages, beautiful girls, unfortunate youths, charming old ladies, and sweetly sentimental love stories...” (395). Minnesota novelist Sinclair Lewis, in his introduction to a 1937 reprinting of his novel *Main Street*, echoes these sentiments when he tells the reader that “Back in 1905, in America, it was almost universally known that, though cities were evil and even in the farmland there were occasional men of wrath, our villages were approximately paradise” (214). Just before this period, in 1896, none other than future President Woodrow Wilson boldly asserted in his essay “The Course of American History” that “The history of a nation is only the history of its villages written large. I only marvel that these local historians have not seen more in the stories they have sought to tell.

Surely here, in these old hamlets that antedate the cities, in these little communities that stand apart and yet give their young life to the nation, is to be found the authentic stuff of romance for the mere looking” (214). In 1966, historian Page Smith reiterated this importance, explaining that, “the basic form of social organization experienced by the vast majority of Americans up to the early decades of the twentieth century was the small town” (vii). The title of Smith’s book, *As a City Upon a Hill: The Town in American History*, is itself a reference to the Puritan preacher John Winthrop’s “Modell of Christian Charity”; while the term “as a city upon a hill” has been commonly used to invoke sentiments of nationalism and American exceptionalism, Smith uses the term to reinforce Winthrop’s actual audience, who were not analogous with contemporary notions of America at large, but were rather, as he writes, members of a “covenanted community,” a precursor to the small community that, he argues, is the core building block of America.

Van Doren argues, though, that Master’s work marks the beginning of a new direction in such literature, one that was specifically grounded in the tenets of American modernism. Van Doren refers to this emerging movement as the “revolt from the village,” referring to the revolt from conventional notions of the small American town as an idyllic space. In *The Machine in the Garden* (1964), Leo Marx writes that “the psychic root of all pastoralism” is “the yearning for a simpler, more harmonious style of life, an existence ‘closer to nature’” (6). The revolt from the village questioned this yearning, or, at the very least, if not the yearning itself, the conflation of the more “natural” landscape with a “harmonious” lifestyle. Jerome Loving notes in his introduction to the 2008 Penguin Classics edition of *The Spoon River Anthology* that “As the village began to reappear in American literature, whether as Spoon River or Winesburg, it was no longer viewed as a refuge from the brute external forces found in the city” (xvi). Rather, these

authors sought to create a more accurate portrayal of the small town, one that, while not completely eschewing the pastoral, also embraced the more seedy side of small-town life. These works of literature sought to show that small-town life was often marked by secrecy, hypocrisy, and corruption. As Van Doren says regarding Masters's book, "The roofs and walls of Spoon River were gone and the passers-by saw into every bedroom; the closets were open and all the skeletons rattled undenied; brains and breasts had unlocked themselves and set their most private treasures out for the most public gaze" (149).

Anthony Channell Hilfer studies this movement in depth in his 1969 work *Revolt from the Village: 1915-1930*, a volume which remains a prime resource for this oft-forgotten development in American modernism. In it, Hilfer explains that "These American writers were presenting a quite different and more realistic interpretation of the town, emphasizing its moral repressiveness and stultifying conformity, and protesting its standardized dullness" (3). Hilfer then uses the majority of the volume to catalog a variety of "revolt from the village" works and explain how they fit into the aforementioned definition.

Hilfer begins with a chapter entitled "The Revolt: What it was About," in which he lays the groundwork for the movement by explaining the tradition against which these rogue writers were reacting and exploring popular conceptions of the small town. Though he titularly defines the movement as having taken place from 1915 to 1930, his second chapter, "Eggleston to Frederic," explores books from the last thirty years of the nineteenth century, which, he argues, serve as precursors to the movement. He then devotes an entire chapter to Mark Twain, whose work, according to Hilfer, serves as another important forerunner of the revolt. By Chapter 4, "Willa Cather: The Home Place, Stultification and Inspiration," he has still not reached the movement proper, as much of Cather's output came about before 1915. Hilfer finally delves into

the formal “revolt” in his fifth chapter, “Brooks, Mencken, and the New Zona Gale,” and spends the next five chapters exploring the important figures who revolted from the village. His tenth chapter, “The Thirties and After,” briefly chronicles the village motif in the literature of the 1930s and beyond, and he reflects on his research at the end with a brief concluding chapter.

This project seeks to use Hilfer’s work as a model, and to simultaneously build on his substantiation of this important movement's development and refute his characterization of the movement as a static and chronologically isolated outgrowth of high modernism. While Hilfer devotes much of his work to the movement’s predecessors, he does not spend a lot of energy on the period after 1930 (especially when considering the fact that the book was published in 1969). During this later period, he argues, the “revolt” aspect of provincial literature softened considerably: “After 1930... the pendulum swang back, and the village was idealized by some of the same spirits who had led the twenties’ attack...” To say that the literary conception of the small town simply reverted to notions of the pastoral, though, would be oversimplification at best. In his 2012 publication *Main Street and Empire: The Fictional Small Town in the Age of Globalization*, Ryan Poll reiterates the modernist nature of this movement by asserting that “The revolt from the village is a modernist movement that recognizes the dominant village as an ideological form to be critiqued and transgressed” (39).

As was the case with so much of modernism, though, this “revolt” against a dominant motif eventually gave way to common cultural notions in the era of modernization and eventual globalization. The very modernist forces that led authors such as Masters, Anderson, and Lewis to question the American ideal of the village in the first place became forces of the establishment in the postwar era. As more and more people moved to the cities and, for the first time, there were more Americans living in urban areas than in rural ones, the reality of modernization and

urbanization led to an ultimately unavoidable marginalization of the rural. Times were changing, and American literature was reflecting that change. Through analyzing several popular novels from the period after 1930, this project will demonstrate how what started by being branded as a “revolt” led to an established paradigm shift in terms of American conceptions of rurality. The original village rebels sought not to destroy the small town but to question binary visions of geography. Advancing modernity, I argue, makes it more and more difficult to apply opposing labels such as urban and rural, central and marginal, or even good and bad. To hold up the small town as an unquestioned pastoral idyll allows for no expression of marginalized voices, for no discussion of what the town needs to do to move forward in the ever-changing world of modernity.

The village locale also provides a kind of society in microcosm. In an introduction written for *Taking Stock: A Larry McMurtry Casebook*, James Ward Lee explains that part of the reason for Texas-based Larry McMurtry's complicated and distinctly un-pastoral renderings of small towns is that “It is easier to hide in the city than in the small town or the country. McMurtry's novels in and around Archer City [McMurtry's real-life hometown in north Texas, and the basis for the fictionalized ‘Thalia’ setting of several of his novels] prove and show how complicated life can be” (39). Thus, part of the advantage of exploring American culture through the lens of the village is that provide a clearer overview of society than larger city might. As Lee notes, in a city, it is easier to hide. It is people for people who might stand out more in a rural locale to find, in a city, enclaves of similar individuals. In the small town, differences amongst are more overt and can lead to more direct tension. While small towns may be less diverse, in every sense of the word, than large metropolises, the structure of the small town forces citizens to confront diversity in a way that does not necessarily occur in more urban environments.

Despite the fact that Dondore refers to *The Spoon River Anthology* as book that fired “the first gun in the so-called Revolt From the Village,” Edgar Lee Masters, a native of small-town Illinois, was certainly not the first author to express anything but blatant praise for the rural Middle West (417). Writers such as Hamlin Garland, E.W. Howe, and to some extent, even Willa Cather had given us long tomes describing the hardships of life on the prairie. In fact, Richard Gid Powers, in “Tradition in E.W. Howe’s *Story of a Country Town*,” refers to Howe’s 1883 debut novel as “an opening blast of the trumpet which was later given the name of the revolt of the village” (51). While it is necessary to acknowledge these authors as predecessors of the literary continuum that came to question the inherent superiority of the village as years went by, such works came from more of a realist tradition driven more by character than by plot, one that often focuses more of the physical and emotional hardship of frontier life than of the shortcoming of the village as a construct.

Authors such as Masters, and later Sherwood Anderson and Sinclair Lewis, embodied more of a modernist tradition. In his tome on modernism, Peter Gay writes that writes that one of the essential elements that united modernists across the disciplines was the “lure of heresy,” and these latter authors certainly embodied this lure in many ways. While those before them may have suggested that life on the prairie is often difficult, and sometimes people perpetrate evil, these latter works suggest that sometimes the greatest evils are to be found in the hypocrisy of the village itself, and not necessarily in those involved in supposed scandals, or in naturalistic forces beyond one’s control.

These works also employ modernist techniques via their appropriation of multiple storylines and also multiple perspectives. In his seminal text *The Modern American Novel*, Malcolm Bradbury writes that “One essential way to perceive modernism is to see it as an art

that insists on its internal frame, on the active presence of the medium used, on the foregrounding' of the artistic activity, so that the achievement of the story's form becomes part of the story" (62). Masters's *The Spoon River Anthology* (1915) is an excellent example of this, presented not as a long, unitary narrative, but as a poetry cycle that tells the individual, first-person stories of over 200 townspeople in a cemetery in the Midwestern community of Spoon River. Through this technique we are able to see beyond a singular image of a town, and instead to glean a sense of community via the perspectives of all sorts of townspeople, from the most prominent to the shunned, and representing a wide spectrum of ages, gender identities, classes, and races. It gives us many perspectives from the disenfranchised in the town; this is reinforced by the fact that it literally gives voice to the dead. The dynamic is iterated in the very first poem, entitled "The Hill." This particular piece does not, as do the other poems, focus on a particular character, but rather set the physical stage for the voices we are to hear from beyond. The first two stanzas read:

Where are Elmer, Herman, Bert, Tom and Charley,
The weak of will, the strong of arm, the clown, the boozier, the fighter?
All, all are sleeping on the hill.

One passed in a fever,
One was burned in a mine,
One was killed in a brawl,
One died in jail,
One fell from a bridge toiling for children and wife—
All, all are sleeping, sleeping, sleeping on the hill.

This opening tableau, while perhaps rather morbid on the surface, aptly demonstrates the brand of egalitarianism that is so crucial to this particular literary movement, and to the ensuing paradigm shift that sprung from it. Here Edgar Lee Masters presents us with several characters with markedly different defining traits, from the "weak of will" to the "clown" to the "boozier,"

and then goes on to describe several distinctly dissimilar modes of death, from one worker's tragic death in a mine to someone who met a violent end in a brawl to someone who died in to someone who died "toiling" heroically for his family. Yet the repetitive syntax of "all" and "sleeping" in both stanzas mean that these differences may not mean as much as we think they do; here, in the cemetery, they are all the same. They are all equal in death. And they all have an equal chance to tell their story, no matter what their standing in Spoon River while they were alive.

This particular motif signals an important transition to a modernist telling of the hardships of prairie life and gives voice to the dispossessed. It also, via the facts that these voices come from beyond the grave, presents a more subdued kind of "revolt." It casts the problems of the village in a more tentative light than do later works, as the characters in the anthology do not condemn the village outright, but rather voice their concerns after death. Indeed, the poems that comprise the anthology serve as vignettes narrated by various citizens of the titular Spoon River who are now interred in the town cemetery. Loving suggests that the reason for such a set-up is that these characters are "admitting things that could not be broached in life" (xxii). The confessions of the deceased characters belie the pseudo-pastoral surface of the town that lies above the graves.

Indeed, *The Spoon River Anthology* frequently presents the lives of its characters in almost binary terms, often self-consciously emphasizing the fact that the narrative is giving us two representations of a given character: the person whom the village knew when the character was alive, and also the reality of who the person was, the secret persona that was hidden from the repressive atmosphere of the village. We see this early on in the story of Spoon River townspeople Serepta Mason, who laments from the grave that "My life's blossom might have

bloomed on all sides / Save for a bitter wind which stunted my petals / On the side of me which you in the village could see. / From the dust I lift a voice of protest / My flowering side you never saw!" (20). Here the aforementioned "bitter wind" refers to the tide of malicious gossip that characterizes the behavior of the town, while Mason's "flowering side" is something that the townspeople cannot see due to their own shortsightedness. This brief passage encapsulates the dynamic of the binary that marks the revolt from the village; the village rhetoric is often in stark opposition to the reality of individual characters.

Here it should be noted that, as alluded to earlier, for the purposes of this project, the village itself will not automatically be synonymous with the inhabitants of the village. In fact, this will frequently not be the case. Rather, this dissertation will argue that, both in the "revolt from the village" movement proper and the subsequent literature to be analyzed, the village is often presented as a personified character separate from its inhabitants. As mentioned above, Masters often accomplished this with the inhabitants of Spoon River via almost bifurcated portrayals of subjects. I argue that this is a necessary component in rejecting the village as a pastoral ideal. In order for the reader to see the folly of the village, we need a literary subject who can see the same folly. For this reason the narrators and/or most important characters in these narratives are often outsiders in their communities, for one reason or another. The subjects in the literature that I propose to analyze also always present their more private selves. Because of this, such literature usually takes on the form of a *bildungsroman*, with a protagonist who comes to see the folly around him/her as he matures, thus correlating the modernist maturation process with, if not a physical departure from the rural area, at least an acute understanding of its problems and limitations.

Edgar Lee Masters is also associated with another subgrouping of literary modernists that was becoming popular at this time, a grouping that created what is often termed the Chicago Literary Renaissance. Often included in this group, along with Masters and other poets such as Vachel Lindsay and Carl Sandburg, is the novelist Theodore Dreiser. Dreiser was himself a good friend of Edgar Lee Masters, and an over inspiration for Sherwood Anderson, the author of *Winesburg, Ohio* (1919). Anderson dedicated his 1923 collection of short stories, *Of Horses and Men*, to Dreiser, in the process telling his readers that “The fellows of the ink-pots, the prose writers in America who follow Dreiser, will have much to do that he has never done. Their road is long but, because of him, those who follow will never have to face the road through the wilderness of Puritan denial, the road that Dreiser faced alone” (xii). While Dreiser is not often directly associated with the actual village rebels, one of his lesser-known texts, *A Hoosier Holiday* (1916), deals with the changing nature of rural America in a manner similar to that of contemporaries such as Masters, Anderson, and Lewis. While this particular novel is certainly not his most famous, nor his most controversial (by Dreiser standards, the content is actually pretty tame), it is certainly worth revisiting in the twenty-first century. In his introduction to Indiana University Press’s 1997 edition of *A Hoosier Holiday*, Douglas Brinkley cites the book as the first entry in “a literary subgenre—the American automobile book,” a subgenre that now encompasses everything from Jack Kerouac’s *On the Road* (1957) to William Least Heat-Moon’s *Blue Highways* (1982) to Chuck Klosterman’s *Killing Yourself to Live* (2005) (4). Even today, there is something about hitting the open road by car that strikes one as both distinctly modern and, moreover, distinctly American.

The concept of what it means to be modern, as well as what it means to be American, was at a bit of a crossroads in 1915, when Theodore Dreiser decided to travel from New York to his

native Indiana via motor car, and *A Hoosier Holiday* perfectly captures the tempo of this society in flux. Dreiser, as the autobiographical narrator, is both excited by notions of modernity and progress and repulsed by them; he is enthralled by the beauty of rural America and simultaneously bored of it. As a man in middle age (Dreiser when 43 years old when he began the trip), meandering through the Middle West, Dreiser encapsulates a sense of liminality in his wanderings. Through his musings on his travels, he break down the binaries historically surrounding so much of America as it came of age: modernity versus antiquity, youth versus age, urban versus rural, etc.

While *A Hoosier Holiday* is not typically listed as being an important tome in the “revolt” tradition, Dreiser's narrative certainly complements these other works thematically. After all, this tradition was not about complete abjection of the village. While many of these texts do constitute a definitive break with simplified pastoralism, this, as noted, does not amount to a binary vision. As idealized as it is when compared with the village, the city does not offer a kind of alternative pastoral in these works (and certainly not in the more famous works of Dreiser himself). Neither is the country uniformly a negative force; rather, in typical modernist (if one can dare to invoke the term “typical modernist”) fashion, the revolt from the village offers an alternative to the pastoral village role, all the while questioning this alternative. While the village itself is a site of repression and backwardness, the modern subject in the “revolt from the village” novel is often presented sympathetically as an individual. In his book *Main Street Blues: The Decline of Small-Town America* (1998), Richard O. Davies emphasizes that Sherwood Anderson, for one, presented the inhabitants of Winesburg with “sympathy and compassion,” an aspect of Anderson’s book that is often glossed over in scholarship of the “revolt.”

We can discern a similar unraveling of the urban/rural dichotomy in *A Hoosier Holiday*. Dreiser embarked on a trip through a country that was not as rural as it had been even in his own childhood. Only 22 years prior to his trip, in a paper delivered to a meeting of the American Historical Association in 1893, the Superintendent of the 1890 Census noted that “Up to and including 1880 the country had a frontier of settlement, but at present the unsettled area had been so broken into by isolated bodies of settlement that there can hardly be said to be a frontier line” (Turner 1). This death of the frontier marks a moment of ceasing to look outward to “Westward expansion,” and instead inward to other methods of expansion. Since the American population continued to increase even after the recession of the fabled frontier, this would inevitably lead to a greater concentration of people settling in more populous areas. This pattern was further cemented in 1920, when the U.S. Census, for the first time ever, showed more people living in urban areas than in rural ones. As America transitioned from an agrarian economy to an industrial one, it was inevitable that attitudes about the rural would change as well.

This does not mean that things changed right away. While Dreiser's own writing style is often associated with the realist school that came to prominence at the end of the nineteenth century, his questioning of the morals and values of American exceptionalism reflects goals similar to those of high modernism. Marilyn Atlas notes that, “Dreiser refuses easy labels, preferring ambivalence and hybridity to orthodoxy” (32). At the time when Dreiser was writing, though demographic trends betrayed the increasingly urban nature of the American landscape, the “cult of the village,” as Van Doren described it, was still considered sacrosanct. In particular, the Midwest, now popularly defined as a wide swath of twelve states, and the region most commonly associated with rurality and agriculture in the popular imagination, was enjoying

national prominence as an emblem of the American spirit as a whole. Geographer James R.

Shortridge explains the status of the region during this period thusly:

People in the newly expanded version of the Middle West reached a pinnacle of self-confidence in the 1910s. Americans at that time placed a high value on the pastoral traits of morality, independence, and egalitarianism; and they saw the Middle West as a symbol for these ideals. Moreover, people all across the nation thought of the Middle West as the favored region in an analogy that linked sections of the country with stages in the human life cycle. Whereas the West was seen as brash and youthful, and the East was viewed as stodgy and old, the Middle West escaped the problems of both extremes. It was still young enough to have ideals and energy; yet it was not so old as to be ossified by decay, class stratification, and overcrowding. Agriculture there was stable, which guaranteed prosperity, while the development of industry and culture seemed to ensure a glorious future. Writers both in and outside the region agreed that the Middle West had replaced the East as the standard by which to gauge other sections of the nation. It was the heartland, the vital core, and as such, it was almost beyond criticism (8).

If, as Gay writes, one of the essential elements that united modernism across the disciplines was the "lure of heresy," and the undermining of this Midwestern ideal by first Edgar Lee Masters and then his friend Dreiser could certainly be seen as heretical. Dreiser himself was not known for his conservatism. Biographer W. A. Swanberg, reflecting on Dreiser's youth with his superstitious mother and his zealously Catholic father, notes that "The sensitive Theodore grew up among tensions. For a time he developed a nervous stutter. He cried easily. Among his earliest reflection was the realization of the sharp schism between his mother's way of life and his father's, the schism between the pagan and the puritan. There was never any question as to whose side he was on" (8). As we follow Dreiser along his journey, we see how his disdain for moral puritanism shapes his vision of small-town America. He, according to Clare V. Eby, "placed a premium on iconoclasm and romanticized the virtues of being on the margins" (46). This romanticization of marginality serves to undermine monolithic constructions of rurality.

His companion on the journey is artist Franklin Booth, who complements Dreiser's text with his own pen-and-ink illustrations of various scenes from their travels. Booth is a fellow displaced Hoosier in New York, and he is also the owner of the brand-new Pathfinder automobile that purveys the duo to Indiana. Dreiser characterizes Booth as being like himself in that he also eschews puritanism, telling us that “Socalled sin, as something wherewith to reproach one, does not exist for him [...] Franklin is also a very liberal liver, one who does not believe in stinting himself of the good things of the world as he goes—a very excellent conclusion, I take it” (14). For the first portion of the trip, these two liberal, modern men are aided by a chauffeur whom Dreiser refers to only by the nickname of “Speed,” a character whom Atlas labels “a symbol of modernity, from his name to his role” (40). Brinkley, in a 1999 interview with NPR's *All Things Considered*, adds to this modern mystique by characterizing Speed as “a gifted grease monkey who lives for cars.” Yet he, like his passengers, also has roots in the rural Midwest; Dreiser characterizes him as “a blond, lithe, gangling youth with an eerie farmer-like look,” and says that he “reeked of Indiana—the real Hoosier” (22). Together, these three modern Midwesterners embark on a journey to experience the American countryside on the cusp of increasing urbanization.

The impressions of Indiana that Dreiser gives us in the beginning of the story, before Booth proposes the titular Hoosier holiday, refer overtly to a sense of nostalgia. In *The Country and the City* (1973), theorist Raymond Williams explains that so much of our pleasant conceptions of rural life in an increasingly urban landscape are inextricably linked with nostalgia, noting that “Nostalgia, it can be said, is universal and persistent; only other men's nostalgias offend” (12). Dreiser makes it known that he is aware of the way in which nostalgia can warp the reality of past experiences. At the time of the proposed road trip, he is 43 years old

and has not been back to Indiana since the age of 18, when he attended Indiana University in Bloomington for a year. Despite the spatial and temporal distance of his Midwestern youth, exclaims, “And in that time what illusions had I not built up in connection with my native state! Who does not allow fancy to color his primary experiences in the world?” (14). Despite his acknowledgment that such thoughts are “illusions,” he textually indulges his nostalgia and even goes so far as to develop an extended metaphor to encapsulate these feelings:

Sometimes the experiences of delicious years make a stained glass window—the rose window of the west—in the cathedral of our life. These three years in “dirty old Sullivan [one of the towns Dreiser lived in as a boy],” as one of my sisters once called it (with a lip-curl of contempt thrown in for good measure), form such a flower of stained glass in mine. They are my rose window. In symphonies of leaded glass, blue, violet, gold and rose are the sweet harmonies of memory with all the ills of youth discarded. A bare-foot boy is sitting astride a high-board fence at dawn. Above him are the tinted fleeces of heaven, those golden argosies of youthful seas of dream. Over the blooming clover are scudding the swallows, “my heart remembers how.” I look, and in a fence corner is a spider web impearled with dew, a great yellow spider somewhere on its surface repairing a strand. At a window commanding the field, a window in the kitchen, is my mother. My brother Ed has not risen yet, nor my sister Tillie. The boy looks at the sky. He loves the feel of the dawn. He knows nothing of whence he is coming or where he is going, only all is sensuously, deliriously gay and beautiful. Youth is his: the tingle and response of a new body; the bloom and fragrance of the clover in the air; the sense of mystery is flying. He sits and sings some tuneless tune. Of such is the kingdom of heaven. (18)

Dreiser, though, in the spirit of his contemporaries in the village “revolt,” is not content to let such unitary sentimentalism stand. He then explains another event that characterized his “rose window of the west,” a scene he presents as sentimental but with a much sadder tone. He paints scenes of this same young boy, presumably Dreiser himself, frolicking with his beloved pet dog, scenes that he cuts short suddenly with “Now the dog is gone forever, shot somewhere for chasing sheep, and the boy, disconsolate, is standing under a tree, calling, calling, calling, until the sadness of his own voice and the futility of his cries moves him nearly to tears” (19).

Dreiser's feelings toward his youth, and his homeland, are certainly complicated, and this kind of push-and-pull aptly characterizes his assessment of the American countryside as he journeys from New York to Indiana.

This metaphor of a “rose window to the west” also suggests the idealization of the American frontier that was still very much alive during Dreiser's childhood (He was born in 1871). Of course, much of the appeal of going west at that time involved the prospect of new experiences, of land untilled and seeds unsowed. Heading west for Dreiser, though, involves traveling backwards through the landscape of nostalgia, which suggests an inversion of the frontier trope. Dreiser's own background serves to undermine this trope as well. Shortridge identifies one of the foremost characteristics that strengthened the stature of the Midwest at this time as the supremacy of the “yeoman-farmer ideal” (27). The image of prosperous, established families farming the same land for generations was not reality for young Dreiser, though. In his quest to revisit his roots, he travels to not one Indiana town but to several, because his large, impoverished family, often behind on rent, moved around frequently, often due to eviction. Swanberg writes that, when the family moved to Chicago for a few months when Dreiser was twelve years old, their new living situation was “at least the tenth dwelling the rootless Theodore had lived in during his twelve years, and the fifth town. He was denied familiar friends and exposed to constant change, aggravating his uncertainty, shyness and withdrawal. Like all the Dreiser moves, this one in the early summer of 1884 was impelled by need rather than by desire or careful plan...” (15). This constant relocation, living with a family of renters in a region shaped by the accessibility of owning land, not only shaped Dreiser’s personal sense of alienation but also serves, in the tradition of his fellow modernists, to show us alternative realities of Midwestern life that did live up to this “yeoman-farmer ideal.”

Despite this complicated relationship with rural life, Dreiser, powered by nostalgia, is still heartily enthusiastic about experiencing the countryside. He is also disillusioned with the city, lamenting early in the course of the narrative that “After a long year spent in New York, I was sick of the city—any city” (71). For this reason he balks at the original proposed route for the trip, which involves driving up to Albany, across New York State to Buffalo, and then along to Cleveland and across Ohio to Toledo before dipping into Indiana. This path is very similar to the Interstate 90 of today, and much of the route also follows the Erie Canal, itself an important connector between the urban East Coast and the more rural interior of the country. Of this proposal, though, Dreiser writes: “But this Hudson-Albany-State-road route irritated me from the very first. Everyone traveling in an automobile seemed inclined to travel that way. I had a vision of thousands of cars, which we would have to trail, consuming their dust... Give me the poor, undernourished routes which the dull, imitative rabble shun...” (21). Not only is he weary of the modern American city, but he is weary of the hordes of fellow motorists traveling the same way, experienced the same simulation of real American life from the safety of well-travelled roads. Long before William Least Heat-Moon vowed to only take the “blue highways,” Dreiser was in search of an authentic rural America.

His main physical means of achieving this goal, Booth's new five-passenger Pathfinder Touring Car, was itself exceedingly emblematic of the modern era. As they leave the city and head into New Jersey Dreiser remarks that "I can think of nothing more suited to my temperament than automobiling. It supplies just that mixture of change in fixity which satisfies me—leaves me mentally poised in inquiry, which is always delightful" (25). While Dreiser's descriptions of traveling at such daring speeds as 45 miles per hour seem tame by today's standards, the automobile is irrevocably linked with modernism. Not only does it provide the

comfort and convenience of the burgeoning industrial society, but automobile travel connects the East and the West in unprecedented ways. It also links the urban and the rural as has never been done before. The ease with which Dreiser is able to physically travel from the city to the countryside to the village and back again underscores the erosion of the urban/rural binary that was such a hallmark of the “revolt from the village.” This “mixture of change in fixity,” as implied in the above passage, is both physical and mental.

Another important element in Dreiser's rejection of binarism is in his own experience of American geography. Just as he questions both the village and the city, he also doesn't limit his questioning to a particular region. Though his end goal is to reach Indiana, and certainly much of his ruminations deal with the Midwestern United States, he also does not present regional boundaries as being clearly defined. Rather, he experiences his trip as a kind of continuum between the East and the Midwest, with no clear demarcation as to where one America begins and another ends. Atlas writes that, “Dreiser means this to be a study of his Midwest, a rural Midwest that begins in New Jersey and Pennsylvania” (41). This sentiment is echoed by his companion Franklin, who, after a night in a bare-bones country inn in western New York State, asserts that, “This is a typical middle west country hotel, even if it is in New York” (123).

Though the “revolt from the village” movement was commonly associated with lambasting the provincialism and small-mindedness of the rural Midwest, Dreiser's critiques of simplistic puritanism extend far beyond these geographic confines. One of the most prominent scenes in which he levies such critiques occurs early in the novel, in Paterson, New Jersey, an industrial mill town that, even in Dreiser's day, was considered part of the New York metropolitan area. (The text explains that “one does not really get free of New York—its bustle and thickness of traffic—until one gets west of Paterson, which is twentyfive miles west, and not

even then” [35]). Here Dreiser, Booth, and Speed discuss the recent success of a large revival in Paterson, conducted by none other than the famed evangelist Billy Sunday. Dreiser's reaction is critical, to say the least: “This wretched mountebank 'who came here and converted thousands'—think of him with his yapping about hell, his bar-room and race-track slang, his base-ball vocabulary [Before his success as a preacher, Sunday had enjoyed a career as a professional baseball player]. And thousands of poor worms who could not possibly offer one reasonable or intelligent thought concerning their faith or history of life, or indeed anything, fall on their knees and 'accept Christ'” (31). While his tone may seem cynical or even patronizing, such a reaction, as well as the success of the revival itself, shows that religious conservatism extends far beyond the confines of rural middle America, and thereby undermines a popular stereotype.

As they journey on, Dreiser thrills at his new mode of travel, and links the best of modern conveniences with the best of America, asking:

Where but in America can you at random step into a comfortable telephone booth and telephone to any city, even one so far as three thousand miles away; or board a train in almost any direction at any time, which will take you a thousand miles or more without change; or travel, as we did, two hundred miles through a fruitful, prosperous land with wonderful farms and farming machinery and a general air of sound prosperity—even lush richness? (61)

Here he waxes eloquent about matters of American exceptionalism, and does so in a manner that combines both pastoralism and modernism into a promising national tableau. Progress and agrarianism are not necessarily mutually exclusive in this worldview. But, somewhat paradoxically, he views these same modern forces as having a deleterious effect on American cities. Even at this early point in the twentieth century, the automobile, in its breaking down the borders between city and country, is making possible a process that will really take off as the

century progresses. As Dreiser surveys downtown Scranton, Pennsylvania, he laments that cities have begun the process of building and beautifying their outskirts instead of their inner core, noting that “Instead the city will bend all its energies to growing away from it and leave it to shabby factories and warehouses and tumble-down houses...” (76) While modernization is making isolated country living more and more a thing of the past, it is also undermining the importance of the self-sufficient city.

Dreiser sees this erosion of clear-cut boundaries within the villages themselves as well. Though he often laments what he calls “the small mind of the townsmen,” he also marvels at how modernization has expanded these same minds. At a stop for gas in another small town in western New York State, Dreiser finds himself in a conversation with the store clerk about the radical artist Elbert Hubbard, and marvels that

America is so brisk and well informed. Here was a small, out of the way place, with no railroad and only two or three stores, but this youth was plainly well informed on all the current topics. The few other youths and maids whom we saw here seemed equally brisk. I was surprised to note the Broadway styles in suits and dresses—those little nuances of the ready made clothes manufacturers which make one feel as if there were no longer any country nor any city, but just smart, almost impudent, life, everywhere. (113, 163)

Later on, in Painesville, Ohio, he ruminates on modernity and its surrounding commodification of culture has affected even the physical images of individual towns, explaining that, during his childhood in the rural Midwest, “No small American town of that date would have presumed to suppose that it had anything of interest to photograph, yet on this trip there was scarcely a village that did not contain a rack somewhere of local views, if no more than of clouds and rills and cattle standing in water near an old bridge” (217). While such developments often excite Dreiser,

they also sadden him, and his trip bears witness to just how fast the American landscape is changing during this era.

This feeling of unease becomes more apparent after the trio finally reaches Indiana, where Dreiser's nostalgia meets the actuality of modern life. So much has changed, family members have died, and nothing looks quite as magnificent to the middle-aged Dreiser as it did to his boyhood counterpart. He expresses his frustration by returning to the metaphor of the stained-glass window: "Thirty years, nearly, had passed and with them all the people and all the atmosphere that surrounded them, or nearly so, and all my old intimacies and loves and romantic feelings. A dead world like is such a compound—a stained-glass window at its best; a bone yard at its worst" (284). Dreiser's willingness to confront the sometimes harsh realities of American life at this time puts *A Hoosier Holiday* in a category with those other personalities of the "revolt from the village." His pictures of both urban and rural life are not always positive, but his honesty and willingness to reject binarism makes those beautiful scenes that he paints even more beautiful. Dreiser gives us a realistic portrait of a country at a crucial time in history, with one foot in an agrarian past and one in an industrial, commercial future. *A Hoosier Holiday* shows us that, even if you can't exactly go home again, it's still worth appreciating the past and anticipating the future.

Sherwood Anderson's 1919 short story cycle *Winesburg, Ohio* also deals with the changes in middle America during this critical juncture in time. The thematic and structural relationship of *Winesburg* to *Spoon River Anthology* is clear from even just a cursory glance; Richard Lingeman tells us that, while *Spoon River* "did not shape Anderson's vision of small-town life, but it may well have suggested its form—interrelated short sketches about an Ohio town" (376). Although written in prose form, Anderson's book also gives us a multilayered text

with stories that each center around a particular resident of Winesburg. While Anderson does not frame the prose stories of the citizens of Winesburg as messages from beyond the grave (thus suggesting an ever-so-slightly greater tolerance for nonhegemonic narratives within the actual life of the village), the given tales do certainly cast the citizens of Winesburg in a constricting light. In fact, he introduces the collection with a brief section entitled “The Book of the Grotesque,” in which an unnamed writer creates a book full of characters whom he labels “grotesques,” thereby suggesting a link between the writer’s book and the book of the actual, living writer, Sherwood Anderson, that is about to follow. Anderson describes the origins of these grotesques by associating their development with their attachment to what he terms “truths”: “... And then the people came along. Each as he appeared snatched up one of the truths and some who were quite strong snatched up a dozen of them... It was the truths that made the people grotesques.” (xxii). This notion of objective truths suggests the conventional narrow-mindedness of the American village, and thereby suggests that these “grotesques” have been rendered so by their own repressive, small-town environment. Mikhail Bakhtin, in *Rabelais and His World*, defines the grotesque body as “not a closed, completed unit; it is unfinished, outgrows itself, transgresses its own limits” (26). For many of the citizens of Winesburg, this sense of an incomplete body is true in many ways, both physically and metaphorically. These characters, I argue, are very much people in the process of becoming, of coming to terms with their “flowering sides” in the face of a repressive environment.

While, to this day, Sherwood Anderson is most remembered for *Winesburg, Ohio*, it is not the only one of his works that deals with the pressures of small-town society. One of his lesser-known stories is 1923’s “Unused,” which bears the subtitle “A Tale of Life in Ohio.” The tale, told from the perspective a young bystander, begins with a discovery of a female body on

the Ohio lakeshore, a body that turns out to be that of May Edgley of Bidwell, Ohio. Though there is a real Bidwell in the southern portion of the state, this particular community appears to be a fictionalized town in the midst of the northern Ohio lake country where Anderson himself grew up. We soon learn that “The entire Edgley family bore a shaky reputation in Bidwell but with the exception of May, the youngest of the girls, they knew how to take care of themselves” (38). At least part of this reputation seems to come from the fact that their two older daughters, Lillian and Kate, enjoy considerable sexual freedom for young, unmarried women. In particular,

The fame of Lillian, the eldest, went far. One the streets of the neighboring towns of Clyde [Anderson's own hometown and the inspiration for much of the fictionalized Winesburg], Norwalk, Fremont, Tiffin, and even in Toledo and Cleveland, she was well known. On summer evenings she went up and down our main street wearing a huge hat with a white ostrich feather that fell down almost to her shoulder. She, like her sister Kate, who never succeeded in attaining to a position of prominence in the town's life, was a blonde with cold staring blue eyes. On almost any Friday evening she might have been setting forth on some adventure, from which she did not return until the following Monday or Tuesday. It was evident the adventures were profitable, as the Edgley family were working folk and it is certain her brothers did not purchase for her the endless number of new dresses in which she arrayed herself. (36)

This picture of Lillian is one that, at first glance, spells excitement in many ways, and one that appears to be a confluence of so many aspects of a modernizing society. For one thing, she travels frequently, as her name is known throughout a string of towns in northern Ohio. And the fact that Anderson includes the word “even” before the cities of Toledo and Cleveland emphasizes the cosmopolitan nature of such travels, of the excitement of big(ger)-city life. We soon learn that her main mode of travel is by train up and down this Ohio corridor, itself, as noted by Dreiser above, an important symbol of American modernity. She walks proudly and is unashamed of her fancy attire, which was most likely purchased in one of these larger cities. Her behavior also certainly betokens a degree of sexual freedom, freedom that is not unilaterally

discouraged, as evidenced by the young narrator's use of the term "adventure" to describe her travels. In a world where the boundary between urban and rural is becoming ever more complicated, Lillian Edgley, walking proudly up and down the streets of Bidwell, represents these changing times.

We soon come to find out that not everyone is in automatic awe of this beacon of modernity, though. While Lillian carries herself proudly, her behavior nevertheless leads to whispers and hushed tones throughout the town. The text itself embodies a more modern attitude by suggesting that it is not Lillian's sexuality that is the problem, but rather that the provincial townspeople envy her freedom; this is said outright in the case of one male citizen, whom the text describes as "a buyer of pigs and cattle." As he stands on the station platform with her in Bidwell, "The thought of Lillian, the light o'love traveling free over the railroads filled his heart with envy and anger" (37). Certainly this mental image speaks to freedoms beyond a conventional life in small-town Ohio.

The story goes on to focus on the character of May Edgley, the youngest daughter of the family. If the rest of the family carries with them a "shaky reputation," May's is quite the opposite. In fact, the collective town embraces May because she seems to be the exact opposite of her free-wheeling sisters: "She was, unlike the other Edgleys, small and dark, and unlike her sisters dressed herself in plain neat-fitting clothes. As a young girl in the public school she began to attract attention because of her proficiency in the classes. Both Lillian and Kate Edgley had been slovenly students, who spent their time ogling boys and the men teachers but May looked at no one..." (40-41). Her academic success appears, to the eyes of Bidwell, Ohio, to come not because of, but in spite of the fact of her family background.

Despite years of accolades, May's reputation in the community suffers an abrupt about-face shortly after her high-school graduation, and just months after the death of her mother: "It was in the summer of her seventeenth year that May fell down from her high place in the life of the town of Bidwell" (43-44). That summer, while working on the local berry harvest, she meets a young man by the name of Jerome Hadley, and her normally diligent and rigid demeanor softens noticeably: "The girl, who had never talked to others, began talking to Jerome and the other pickers turned to look and wonder. She no longer picked at lightning speed but loitered along, stopping to rest and put choice berries into her mouth" (45). This flirtation is what starts the gossip, which only intensifies after May and Jerome Hadley are seen leaving their harvest work and going off into the woods together: "Everyone was quite sure it had all been arranged. As the girls and women got to their feet and stood watching, May and Jerome went out of the lane and into the wood. The older women shook their heads. 'Well, well,' they exclaimed while the boys and young men began slapping each other on the back and prancing grotesquely about" (47). This reaction clearly displays a sexual double standard, as the female members of the crowd gaze at one of their own with judgment and scrutiny while the males celebrate apparent sexual conquest. The narrator even emphasizes that "no one blamed Jerome, at least none of the young fellows did" and that "Jerome Hadley had something of which to boast" (46). Yet Anderson's choice of syntax here clearly paints the young men's celebratory antics as questionable at best, referring to their manner of movement as "grotesque." In invoking this term from his earlier "Book of the Grotesques" in *Winesburg, Ohio*, Anderson suggests that their behavior is limited and deficient.

If the experience in the woods is invigorating for Jerome Hadley, it has the opposite effect on young May Edgley: "Jerome and May stayed for two hours in the wood and then came

back together to the field where the others were at work. May's cheeks were pale and she looked as though she had been crying." Shortly afterward we learn that "No one saw May in the berry fields after that" (47). May's behavior is strikingly different from that of her older sister Lillian, whose proud demeanor on the streets of the town betokens comfort and agency with her own sexuality. May, on the other hand, internalizes the town's view of her and considers herself a sinner for what has happened, confining herself to her house because, in her view, "I have made myself an outlaw among people but I am not an outlaw here" (50). Her actions suggest that she feels a need to punish herself.

One night, after keeping to herself for so long, May begins to strike up a friendship with the teenaged Maud Welliver, a new girl in town who lives on her street. Like May, Maud is also something of a shut-in, although her isolation appears to be related to her physical health, or lack thereof: "The newcomer in Bidwell was tale and slender and looked like an invalid. Her cheeks were pale and she looked tired. During the year before she had been operated upon and some part of her internal machinery had been taken away and her paleness and the look of weariness on her face, touched May's heart" (57). As their friendship develops, May addresses the rumors about herself and Jerome Hadley by spinning a fantastical tale about his having taken her into the woods to confide in her his plans for a murder, only to violently attack her when she protested his idea: "They saw us struggling and they went and said he was making love to me. A girl there, who in love with Jerome herself and was jealous when she saw us together, started the story. It spread all over town and now I'm so ashamed I hardly dare to show my face" (62). May's explanation for the events, while untrue, draws her closer to Maud, and thus, for a while, she begins to take an interest in living life again.

The story then recounts the actual events of the afternoon in the woods, but the real story is not nearly as cut and dried as the townspeople would apparently have it be. May, the perpetual goody two shoes, known for her academic prowess but reticent in social matters, no doubt traumatized by the recent death of her mother, really was attracted to Jerome Hadley, and when he made verbal overtures to her, it did stir something inside: “It was by responding to such words that a woman got herself a lover, got married, connected herself with the stream of life. She heard such words and something within herself stirred, as it was stirring now in herself. Like a flower she opened to receive life” (65). Reflecting upon it later, she has a hard time reconciling these innocent stirrings of love and lust with what actually happened in the woods: “The actual experience with the man in the forest had been quite brutal—an assault had been made upon her. She had consented—yes—but not to what happened. Why had she gone into the woods with him? Well, she had gone, and by her manner, she had invited, urged him to follow, but she had not expected anything really to happen” (67). Through this recollection Sherwood Anderson, without ever actually using the word, is telling us that a rape occurred. This portrayal of the situation brings to mind issues of consent that are debated to this day. In *Boundaries of Desire: A Century of Good Sex, Bad Laws, and Changing Identities*, published in 2015, Eric Berkowitz writes that “In recent decades, the recognition that rape involves more than a stereotypical violent stranger leaping out of the dark, and in fact occurs most often among people who know each other, has brought broad changes to the law. Rape has come to be seen as one part of a web of women-subordinating power dynamics” (205). In the early twentieth century, in a small town in northern Ohio, such dynamics are unquestioningly at play; not only do the townspeople automatically cast May as some sort of fallen woman by virtue of the fact that she willingly went into the woods with Jerome Hadley, but she internalizes this role herself, lamenting to herself

that “It had been her own fault, everything had been her own fault” (67). May Edgley internalizes this guilt and allows it to engulf her. Anderson's nuanced reading of May's situation embodies the spirit of the village rebels by rejecting binaries; not only does it reject the simplistic ideal of the morally superior small town, but it also rejects a simplified reading of May's sexual behavior. Both May and the town of Bidwell feel that she has made a disgrace of herself by going willingly into the woods with Jerome, but Anderson's recounting of the events shows that while, yes, she did go willingly into the woods, she did not willingly engage in sexual activity. This blindness on the part of the town renders it (along with Jerome Hadley's perpetration of rape) the real sin, not anything that May did.

She begins to find new hope, though, in her friendship with Maud Welliver, a new hope that begins with the lie that she tells her:

And then, through the lie she had told Maud Welliver, May stepped into a new world, a world of boundless release. Through the lie and the telling of it she found out that, if she could not live in the life about her, she could create a life. If she was walled in, shut off from participation in the life of the Ohio town—hated, feared by the town—she could come out of the town. The people would not really look at her, try to understand her and they would not let her look down into themselves. (72-73)

We come to learn that this first lie is only the beginning in a series of falsehoods that May weaves as her relationship with Maud develops. The above passage highlights the fact that she creates such falsehoods out of near necessity, as a means of coping with life in a town that has metaphorically cast her aside. In this sense it echoes the process of dissociation that accompanies post-traumatic stress; this course of action makes even more sense when we remember that, though the town sees May as a fallen sinner, she is actually a victim of sexual violence. This

dissociative response is her reaction to both her rape and being cut off from the community around her just when she needed them the most.

May also displays dissociative behavior in wanting to distance herself from her physical body: “All through the weeks that had passed since that day in the wood May had been obsessed by the notion that she was unclean, physically unclean” (74). She takes baths every day, leaving the water cold: “During that summer May took a bath every afternoon, but did not bother to put the water out in the sun. How good it felt to have it cold![...] Her small body, dark and strong, sank into the cold water and she took strong soap and scrubbed her legs, her breasts, her neck where Jerome Hadley's kisses had alighted. Her neck and breasts she wishes she could scrub quite away” (75). Here the cold water, combined with the fact that her neck and breasts are the parts she most wants to wash away, suggest not only a wish to rid herself of the traumatic experience but also a kind of punishment for the idea of sin that she has so internalized.

For Maud Welliver, who has been cooped up inside due to her ill health, with barely a chance to even participate in the life of the town, May's tales serve a different function: they give her the confidence to go forth and live beyond the confines of her house. Writes Anderson: “She felt like one being admitted into some strange world filled with romance. For her May Edgley's tales had become golden apples of existence, to taste which she would risk anything” (84). She reminisces about her time in Fort Wayne, Indiana, where her family had lived before moving to Bidwell. There, right after her graduation from high school, she had struck up a friendship with a widowed grocer in her neighborhood. That summer a letter arrives from the grocer, who is in the area for a Knights of Pythias convention and wants to know if Maud would like to bring another girl along to meet up with him and his friend for an evening on Sandusky Bay. For Maud, May's stories are what give her the courage to accept the proposition: “In fancy she saw the little bright-

eyed grocer standing before May, the hero of the passage in the wood with Jerome Hadley, the woman who lived the romance of which she herself dreamed” (93). While's May's fantasy world is a survival mechanism to her to deal with the trauma of her rape and her subsequent ostracizing by the community of Bidwell, it becomes another kind of survival mechanism for young Maud; it becomes a way for her to deal with life beyond the confines of her house, to really begin living. Both young women, in other words, have to embark on this dissociative process in order to adapt to life in the harsh conditions of the town.

The idea of going to Sandusky Bay is appealing to both of them. For Maud, it is a chance to escape from the confines of her house, and for May, it carries the promise of new freedom, “the opportunity to step unknown into the presence of people who had never been to Bidwell and had never heard of the Edgleys” (124). Her dream is soon defeated, though, when some young men from Bidwell show up at the dance hall on the bay. One of them, Sid Gould, points May Edgley out to his friends:

“There she is—that little chicken over there by the wall.” Sid laughed and leaning over slapped his knees with his hands. The twisted swollen face made the laugh a grotesque, something horrible. Sid’s companions gathered about him. “There she is,” he said, again pointing a wavering forefinger. “It’s the youngest of that Edgley gang, the one that’s just gone on the turf, the one that was so blamed smart in school. Jerome Hadley says she’s all right, and I say she’s mine. I saw her first.” (130)

Here, Sid’s references to her as being a “chicken” and having “gone on the turf” are obvious statements about her sexuality; just as May wants to dissociate from her own body, the town does not believe her body should belong to her either. Because she is not a virgin, these young men think that she is automatically available to them sexually. Here again Anderson shows us the folly of the character’s action by characterizing his smile as “grotesque.”

When Sid asks May to go for a walk outside, she goes willingly, without a struggle. Yet, once they are along the beach, she grabs a big stick of driftwood and attacks him violently, bashing him over the head multiple times. To her, the situation is reminiscent of her earlier attack by Jerome Hadley: “In her mind the thing that was happening was in some odd way connected with the affair in the wood with Jerome. It was the same affair. Sid Gould and Jerome were one man, they stood for the same thing, were the same thing” (131). This time, though, May is the one with the power. It is only once she has left the confines of her constrictive town that she can take control and defend herself. This desperation for freedom takes a dire turn when May, vowing to never go back to Bidwell, rushes into the surf and drowns herself. Like the characters in *Winesburg, Ohio*, May Edgley shows us the quiet (and sometimes not so quiet) desperation of those who don’t fit into the prescribed social roles of the small town. While the misogyny that May encounters is certainly not endemic to the small town, her geographical location makes it more difficult for her to overcome the judgments against and to get the help she so desperately needs. Her only method of coping with her situation is through dissociation. In giving us May’s story, Anderson certainly undermines any notion of small towns as uniformly neighborly constructions.

Sinclair Lewis also gives us a story, though a far less tragic one, of a woman negotiating the restrictions of small-town life via his portrait of protagonist Carol Kennicott in his 1920 novel *Main Street*. While this work, a novel written in linear-narrative form, provides a more conventional narrative pattern than does either *Spoon River Anthology* or *Winesburg, Ohio*, it continues with the modernist mission of bringing a multiplicity of marginalized voices to its portrayal of the small Minnesota town of Gopher Prairie. Titled *The Village Virus* in an early draft, Lewis’s novel is less forgiving in its picture of small-town provincialism and bureaucracy;

Lewis himself wrote that, at the time he wrote *Main Street*, he “felt that the ghetto-like confinement of small towns could—not always but so easily could be—a respectable form of hell” (215). Lewis also felt his object was not so much regionalism as the questioning of how these small communities could be hellish throughout the United States during this period. He prefaces the story of Carol Kennicott and *Main Street* by telling the reader that “The town is, in our tale, called ‘Gopher Prairie, Minnesota.’ But its Main Street is the continuation of Main Streets everywhere. The story would be the same in Ohio or Montana, in Kansas or Kentucky or Illinois, and not very differently would it be told Up York State or in the Carolina Hills” (2). For Lewis, eroding the inherent supremacy of the village was more important than any regional distinction.

While this project will chart the aforementioned paradigm shift put in motion by these original village rebels throughout the era of the Great American Century, it also pushes back against this latter notion of Lewis’s by exploring the ways in which different geographical regions experience rurality. We start with *Kings Row*, a 1940 bestseller from Henry Bellamann. While this novel has long been out of print and rarely registers on anyone’s cultural radar, Bellamann’s novel is a perfect successor to the work of the original “revolt.” In depicting the small town of Kings Row, Missouri, at the turn of the twentieth century, Bellamann uses the thematic precepts established by the village rebels to present a wide spectrum of nonhegemonic narratives against the backdrop of the repressive small town. In particular, this project will examine the ways in which Bellamann uses this structure to promote the validity of a larger scope of masculine performances. Like *Masters, Anderson, and Company*, Bellamann also sets his tale in the America Middle West, a locale which, I argue, is integral to the particular development of these masculinities. I present the Midwest as a kind of liminal space, both

geographically and culturally, between the perceived wild and untamed West and the sophisticated, urbane East. In this sense, the “revolt from the village” movement itself is a progression of not only modernism, but of Midwestern progressivism. I argue that we should see authors such as Masters, Anderson, and Bellamann not as cynics looking to deface the pastoral legacy of the Midwest, but as forward-thinking progressives who were among the first to narrate beyond a simple urban-rural binary.

The next chapter will take us into the 1950s as it explores perhaps the most famous village to ever be the subject of a revolt, Grace Metalious’s *Peyton Place* (1956). While this particular novel caused a sensation with its forward depictions of sexuality, I argue that it needs to be reevaluated from the perspective of the paradigm shift that began with the village rebels. In her construction of the town of Peyton Place, New Hampshire, Metalious brings modernism to the masses. While much of Bellamann’s work centered around masculinities, Metalious creates a feminine space that gives mobility and agency to her female characters in the face of the repressive New England town. When it comes to the region itself, I explore how Grace Metalious uses the region’s Puritan heritage and legacy of tourism as motifs through which to question and subvert patriarchal values.

This will then lead into an analysis of Larry McMurtry’s 1966 novel *The Last Picture Show*, a text that also undermines the urban/rural binary, albeit in a more depressing manner. Coming during the transition from modernism to postmodernism, *The Last Picture Show* gives us a picture of what appears to be small-town America’s dying breath. This impending death has been brought on, ironically enough, by the forces of modernization themselves. In dissecting McMurtry’s setting of Thalia, Texas, I also explore the cultural legacy of the American West and show how advancing modernism has eroded the dream of the frontier.

The conclusion of this project will speculate on the future. If the era of the Great American Century continued to build on the legacy of the original village rebels, we see a sudden shift in the 1970s. Having reached its apotheosis with the urban supremacy of this period, there is little room to legitimately question the village; it has already been questioned to death. Rather, depictions during this period often present a blatantly postmodern view of small-town America, one in which the over-the-top image of the friendly Main Street exists alongside violence, brutality, and apathy. Overall, literary conceptions of the small town have undergone a seismic shift during the previous century, one that this project will connect back to this small group of Midwestern “rebels” after the closing of the frontier.

Chapter One: “‘Wild-Blooming Things’: Modernism, Masculinity, and Midwestern Regionalism in Henry Bellamann’s *Kings Row*”

Perhaps the most enduring cultural artifact of Henry Bellamann’s 1940 bestseller *Kings Row* is a scene from Sam Wood’s 1942 film adaptation, in which Ronald Reagan, as Drake McHugh, awakens one morning after a terrible accident to find that his legs have been amputated and shouts “Where’s the rest of me?!” Reagan himself was apparently so taken with this line (and with the sexually promiscuous McHugh, which he considered his “biggest and best role”) that he actually titled his 1965 autobiography *Where’s the Rest of Me?*, a move that is not only somewhat puzzling but also serves to underscore the connection between *Kings Row* and Ronald Reagan in the public eye (Wills 26). It is more than a little ironic that such an important figure in the history of American conservatism would come to be associated with Bellamann’s story, because, as this chapter will detail, *Kings Row* actually presents a highly subversive and problematic rendering of small-town America.

Certainly, Bellamann’s novel deserves recognition as much more than a seemingly incongruous footnote in Reagan’s pre-Presidential career. Of the aforementioned line, Mark R. Scherer writes that it “might have been delivered on behalf of the novel from which it was derived. For in order to bring Henry Bellamann’s 1940 bestseller to the screen, the film’s creators were required to perform ‘surgery’ on the novel that was nearly as drastic as that suffered by Reagan’s character” (255). Indeed, it is ironic that *Kings Row* is now more associated with conservative icon Reagan than with anyone else, for the novel itself paints a picture of a community that, while postcard-perfect on the surface, is also an important site in which characters transgress a variety of social norms and depicts a place that, even in the late-nineteenth-century Midwest, could not be part of the simulacrum that was Reagan’s America. In

characterizing the Reagan presidency, Garry Wills contrasts him with his predecessor, Jimmy Carter, noting that “Carter spoke of limits, of lowered goals as well as thermostats, of accommodation with the Russians and other unpleasant realities” (2). Much of Reagan’s success, he argues, is due to his reassuring rhetoric, the fact that he glosses over these unpleasant realities. One could liken such a strategy to the pastoral myth that surrounded interpretations of the American small town for so long. In this sense Bellamann (much like his “revolt” predecessors), in calling attention to the “unpleasant realities” of the village, stands for a rhetorical strategy different from that of Reagan as President.

Such subversion of conservative values speaks to the modernist nature of *Kings Row*. Bellamann published the novel in 1940, at the tail end of the modernist movement, and set its storyline around the turn of the twentieth century, during the advent of Freudianism. Originally a musician and music teacher by trade (Jay Miles Karr, in his introduction to the 1981 Kingdom House reprint of *Kings Row*, notes that "Juilliard started under the direction of Henry Bellamann" in 1924), he had first established himself as a novelist in 1926 with *Petenera's Daughter*, a piece set in the rural Midwest that deals with the issue of illegitimacy, amongst other controversial topics, not unlike the most famous works of the “revolt from the village” movement (ix). *Kings Row* builds upon these precepts, giving us a text that contains material much more shocking than even the most scandalous narratives in *Spoon River*. The public appetite for the novel (it was the ninth best-selling book of 1942, two years after its initial release) and its watered-down film treatment attest to the fact that what started as an experimental outgrowth of modernism was now permeating popular culture, further illustrating the literary small town’s paradigm shift from overt pastoralism to a site of critique regarding the treatment of small-town America in literature. Yet, despite this surge of popularity, *Kings Row* is

now out of print, and largely forgotten. Furthermore, it is conspicuously absent from the literary canon. As was the case with Grace Metalious's *Peyton Place* nearly a generation later, the controversy surrounding the novel aided book sales but also hindered its staying power, relegating it to the realm of the potboiler. A careful reexamination, though, reveals a novel that is not only thoughtfully written but one that also provides an important cultural touchstone in the legacy of the American small town. While Anthony Channell Hilfer argues that the "revolt from the village" ended rather abruptly around 1930, *Kings Row*, and its ensuing popularity, I claim, pushes back against the notion of an unfettered return to the pastoral. Rather, I posit, *Kings Row* is the first in a series of important bestsellers that illustrate the growing perception of the small town as backwards and repressive.

Along these same lines, I argue that one particularly relevant aspect of *Kings Row* is its complex treatment of issues of gender and sexuality, and I argue that the Midwestern small-town setting is key in understanding the novel's non-hegemonic stance of many of these issues. In *Writing Out of Place: Women, Regionalism, and American Literary Culture*, Judith Fetterley and Marjorie Pryse explain that "Regionalism offers unconventional, noncanonical, and counterhegemonic stories of... development across the life cycle; and because these stories are so ... absent from the texts generally understood as 'American literature,' regionalism calls attention to the paucity of cultural locations in which women and nonwhite and nondominant men might find affirmation" (30). In the case of *Kings Row*, the small-town Midwestern locale functions as a cultural locus from which to "revolt," so to speak. Bellamann presents the story of *Kings Row* through the lens of several key non-hegemonic "outsiders," and, in so doing, embraces a more modern, progressive view of issues of gender and sexuality. The contrast between the "unconventional" characters and the ideals of the personified "Kings Row" itself

makes this modern stance even stronger than it would be in an urban setting. In light of such issues, it stands to reason that, while Henry Bellamann's name will probably never have the academic leverage of, say, Faulkner, that does not mean that *Kings Row* should never hold a place in any sort of literary or cultural canon. In *The Epistemology of the Closet*, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick makes the case that "The invaluable forms of critique and dismantlement within the official tradition, the naming as what it is of a hegemonic, homoerotic/homophobic male canon of cultural mastery and coercive double-binding, can only be part of the strategy of an antihomophobic project. It must work... with the re-creation of minority gay canons from currently noncanonical material" (58). Through the cultural lens of the twenty-first century, now that we have evolved beyond the "trash" label that aided Bellamann's sales but denied him staying power, we can legitimately consider how and why *Kings Row* may fit into such a minority canon.

The possibilities behind such an undertaking are many, as there is so little scholarship on either the novel or the author. Harry McBrayer Bayne writes that his 1990 unpublished dissertation "A Critical Study of Henry Bellamann's Life and Work" is "the first attempt at a critical biography of Henry Bellamann"; what he could not foresee was the fact that it, along with Jay Miles Karr's unpublished typescript *Rediscovering the Author of Kings Row*, is the only substantive biography of any kind, a fact that remains nothing less than shocking, given the fact that Bellamann was such a prominent figure in the American literary landscape, albeit for a relatively short period of time (i). (He died not long after the initial success of *Kings Row*, and his subsequent novels never achieved a similar level of success.) The lone critical analysis of the novel itself remains Leslie Jean Campbell's 1978 MA thesis, "Henry Bellamann's *Kings Row*: A Re-Evaluation of a Forgotten Bestseller," which makes a compelling case for viewing the novel

not as a lurid bestseller, but as a philosophical novel. Through close textual analysis, Campbell demonstrates the overarching philosophy of the novel as a kind of anti-naturalism; Bellamann's characters, while facing a variety of misfortunes, ultimately demonstrate the idea that all we can control in this world are our very selves. She ends her treatise with a call for further research that has gone largely unrecognized: "From whatever direction, *Kings Row* should continue to be critically explored. Henry Bellamann's complex philosophical vision and his careful technical construction provide fertile critical ground for literary scholars. Perhaps, with their attention, *Kings Row* will finally be received as the fine work of American literature it is" (81). Sadly, Campbell, who went on to become a librarian at Middle Georgia College and maintained the only Henry Bellamann website, was killed in a car accident in 2002.

This chapter is an attempt to re-establish a critical conversation surrounding this sprawling, complex novel, and, more specifically, to situate it within the important conceptions of "rural decline" that sprung from the revolt from the village. I maintain that the lack of scholarship available on the novel does not negate its worth in the canon, for some of the very traits that made *Kings Row* so popular also made it, initially, difficult to place in the literary landscape. While certainly influenced by high modernism, the novel also goes above and beyond the "scandals" that tarnished the likes of *Winesburg* and *Gopher Prairie*, and deals, in a complex and poignant manner, with a variety of issues that are still able to generate controversy even today. His treatment of homosexuality is more frank and in-depth than even that of Oscar Wilde, and certainly goes far beyond mere innuendo. But it is not just his mention of the topic, but the open-minded discourse that ensues as a result. While the subject may have registered as shock value in 1940, I argue that the ease with which Bellamann introduces the idea of non-hegemonic (and even non-binary) sexual definitions and orientations constitutes what Sedgwick would refer

to as an aforementioned “antihomophobic project.” In this sense, he uses his non-hegemonic characters not just to illustrate the outdated and repressive nature of the small-town mindset in the face of burgeoning modernism, but also to normalize the depiction of such characters in literature. While these characters are “outsiders” in their geographic community, they are not outsiders in the text; rather, through the text’s close identification with these characters, the town becomes the real outsider, thereby reinforcing a paradigm shift away from the small town as an idealized locale.

In order to do this successfully, we must first hearken back to the revolt itself. Bellamann’s early writings make many references to it. In fact, in the Henry and Katherine Bellamann Collection at the University of Mississippi, there exists an early draft of *Kings Row* in the form of “fifty-six poetic monologues, reminiscent of Edgar Lee Masters’s *Spoon River Anthology*.” Jay Miles Karr adds that “On a certain page, his handwritten *Kings Row* notes break off, and he lists the landmarks of the small town novel: ‘Sherwood Anderson, Spoon River, Dreiser, Lewis, Twain’” (xi). As someone who left his own small Midwestern town as a young adult, Bellamann certainly fits the pattern of a member of the movement. Like these authors, the town he presents us in his fiction serves not as an outright backwater, but as a complicated locale within which we can assess the problems with the pastoral ideal of small-town America. In one of the more overtly philosophical passages of the novel, *Kings Row*’s Catholic priest, Father Donovan, takes a walk along the outskirts of the town:

He had walked today along his favorite way. Up the creek for a mile, then through the woods, and out where the hayfields and slanting meadows were ablaze now with late fall flowers. The Spanish nettle, rich gold of a lingering summer, was fading. The goldenrod plumes waved handsomely. The stately joe-pye held its rose-purple plumes high in every corner. Father Donovan stood leaning against an old rail fence. He plucked sprays of Indian paintbrush and stroked his fingers with the silky clusters. A breeze set the whole

field of yellow blossoms to running madly. How gay they were! A world of little people in festival. Father Donovan wished he could raise his hands and give them a blessing.

They were happy and good—these flowers. And when you looked closely they were all different. Each one had its own face. He smiled down into the crowd of them about his knees. Some of them had a comic look, some were serious, but none of them was sad.

He raised his head, and shaded his eyes with his hand as he gazed for a long time at the roofs of Kings Row, just showing here and there through the trees. If one could see all of the people of the town gathered together like this they would look alike, too, just as the black-eyed nettle flowers did. But, like these wild-blooming things, they too were different when you looked close. Each one different—some gay, some thoughtful, but, alas! a great many of them sad. (346)

Here, Bellmann uses the metaphor of the nettle flowers to illustrate the danger of failing to see past a town's conformist surface. The text does not paint a uniformly negative picture of the town nor its inhabitants, but instead pushes for a greater understanding and acceptance of the town's more marginal characters (and, thus, textually rebels against the town's act of marginalization).

This rebellion against conformity certainly echoes larger sentiments of modernism. While the novel itself appeared in 1940, the storyline unfolds over the course of about 20 years, from 1890 until approximately 1910. This chronological discrepancy is important for two key ideas relating to the broader movement of modernism. For one thing, the text's look back at the past calls to mind Raymond Williams's famous "escalator" into history, a metaphor he invokes to illustrate the conflation of the rural with the past in the modern era. This chronological setting clashes with modernist mantra of "Make it new," and thus illustrates the more "backward" (both chronologically and metaphorically) nature of the small town in relation to the city.

The year 1890 also marks a crucial turning point in American, and more specifically Midwestern, history. While the year 1920 marked the first United States Census that showed more people living in urban areas than in rural ones, the year 1890 set an important precedent for

this later milestone, in the form of the death of the frontier. I maintain that we cannot overlook this particular juncture when assessing portrayals of the American small town. If we view literary portrayals of rural America as largely bucolic and pastoral in the nineteenth century, we cannot separate such feelings from the romance of the American frontier. Those who revolted against such a village were not only questioning what it meant to be rural, but what it meant to be American.

Such questioning is key in the development of *Kings Row*. As a town in the center of the United States, Kings Row is portrayed as a place entrenched in the difficulties of the death of the frontier; we find Kings Row, during the setting of the novel, at an important juncture in the history of this very death. Kings Row itself was, obviously, part of the frontier, as Colonel Skeffington, a prestigious lawyer and a symbolic elder statesman, remembers fondly. Skeffington, who had come to Kings Row from distant Virginia, associates his early attraction to Kings Row to its “wild” frontier qualities: “He loved [Kings Row]—always had. Loved it when he first saw it sixty years ago. It was like home then—like the lovely Shenandoah Valley, but wilder, and that wildness had appealed to him then. The people... Made a state, a real state, out of a raw territory” (356). Here the depiction of “making” a state from “raw” and “wild” territory posits Kings Row as a kind of liminal space; it is wild, but part of the appeal of that very wildness is to craft one’s own civilization from it. The frontier Kings Row is not just a pastoral paradise, but a blank slate upon which to model a new society.

The text makes it clear, though, that Kings Row no longer carries the possibilities of the frontier. Skeffington himself, despite the fact that he “always had” loved the town, echoes the idea of the death of the frontier when he insists that “Pioneer times are over—past and gone” (275). In this same conversation, longtime resident Tom Carr, a bereaved widow who is about to

leave Kings Row, tells Skeffington that he plans to leave for “out West,” adding that he “always meant to go on further out. Just got stuck here” (275). This statement refers to the now apparently outdated idea that perhaps the frontier that Tom had so desired as a young man can be realized with a move further West. It also reiterates the precarious nature of the Midwestern (i.e., not quite Western) small town at the turn of the twentieth century. Kings Row is no longer part of the mythic frontier; it is just a place along the way wherein one can become “stuck.” Though the idea of revolting from the village might conjure up images of the supremacy of the city, as opposed to the country, Bellamann makes it clear that part of the problem is that, with the loss of the frontier, Kings Row is not country enough. A typewritten synopsis of the story, which accompanies an early draft of the novel in Bellamann's papers at the University of Mississippi, tells us that *Kings Row* “is, in its basic structure, the story of a town in the Middle West covering a period of significant change (1890-1920) when such towns lost their individual character with the disappearance of the ‘second wave’ pioneers, and merged into standardized imitations of small cities with the consequent loss of much that made them interesting.” Like so many other “revolt” authors, Bellamann does not present the city as a panacea; part of the problem with Kings Row is that it looks too far beyond its country past and tries too hard to be like the city. Like Dreiser in *A Hoosier Holiday*, Bellamann embraces much of modernism’s style and ideals, but is also apprehensive of the encroaching uniformity that accompanies this period of modernization.

This middle position of Kings Row, both geographically and chronologically (via the fact that the frontier advanced continuously westward; thus, the middle portion of the country experienced the transition from the frontier to civilization in between similar events in both the East and the West), ironically, robs it of its liminality to a large extent. The Midwest of the

popular imagination is not the urbane East, nor is it the frontier West. It is simply a middle ground. Among the stereotypes that Bellmann (and his modernist predecessors) was rebuffing was a kind of universal conflation of the Midwest with the pastoral. Here I use “pastoral” to signal not the wild, untamed frontier but the peaceful, tame countryside that is frequently invoked in popular rhetoric to this day. James R. Shortridge links this conflation back to the turn of the twentieth century, which was not only the immediate aftermath of the “death of the frontier” but also, as he notes, the time of “the emergence of the Middle West as a regional name,” thus reiterating the connection between the death of the wild frontier and the emergence of the American Midwest as a more middle-ground pastoral space. Shortridge goes on to explain that “The two concepts—pastoralism and Middle West—which initially were similar in several respects, rapidly intertwined and soon became virtually synonymous” (28). William Barillas, in *The Midwestern Pastoral*, explains that

The Midwest is the nation’s middlescape, its “heartland,” a regional label that associates geographical centrality with a defining role in national identity and emotional responses to place. Not only books but paintings, films, and other media have reinforced this image of farms, bucolic woods and streams, and small towns populated by plain-speaking, upright citizens. The Midwest, according to pastoral myth, is what America thinks itself to be (4).

With this in mind, it is important to note that the key figures of the “revolt” were all from the Midwest, thus making their revelations all the more shocking. While a great deal of literature dealing with similar themes was emerging from the American South during this time, it was not popularly viewed as the kind of affront that was, say, *Main Street*, because of the very “Othering” of the U.S. South that was so important in constructing the post-Civil War American identity. While the South functions as the nation’s “Other,” as demonstrated by Leigh Anne

Duck in *The Nation's Region: Southern Modernism, Segregation, and U.S. Nationalism*, the Midwest stands in for the nation as a whole.

While authors such as Edgar Lee Masters, Sherwood Anderson, and Sinclair Lewis gave us portraits of a rural Midwest full of corruption and hypocrisy, *Kings Row* is less of a cultural monolith. The town certainly features small-town gossip and vice, but it simultaneously hearkens back to conceptions of the Midwest that were popular at the time of the novel's setting. In his article "The Emergence of 'Middle West' as an American Regional Label," James R. Shortridge explains that the Middle West of the period, due to its relative novelty as a viable living space, was more progressive than the stuffy towns of the East Coast: "Self-satisfaction, dilettantism, corruption, and loss of idealism were... factors linked to old age and therefore to the East. Opposing traits such as progressivism, pragmatism, and idealism were the glory of the younger Middle West" (216). Thus, even though *Kings Row* is a less modern space due to its rural nature, it is, in many ways, a more progressive space due to its Midwestern location. One early draft of the novel situates the story's locale by explaining that:

The people who settled here came from many distant parts of the country. New England, the Eastern states, the Carolinas, Virginia, Kentucky, Tennessee and Louisiana. Altogether a fair mingling of the societies contrasting North, East, and South. These diverse elements played upon each other, and interplayed until there resulted that fusion which was a new people with a new point of view, new manners of living, and a new thought. It was the Middle West (2, 3).

Such a characterization undermines the idea of this region as a staid, unchanging heartland, and instead presents us with a melting pot full of new and different ideas. Bellamann's portrait of the town takes the conventions of the "revolt from the village" and builds upon them, giving us a picture of a place where non-hegemonic ideas coexist with the more staid ideals of small-town America. In the aforementioned typewritten synopsis, Bellamann emphasizes the fact that

“Kings Row is no Main Street town. It had charm and it had some very fine people – the best types of Americans. Nor is this book written with hatred of the town. On the contrary. There is social criticism, and of a kind meant to be severe, but Kings Row was a victim of the age and moreover of its self (*sic*).” Like Sherwood Anderson before him, Bellamann’s goal was not to write off all of the town’s inhabitants as small-minded or intolerant; on the contrary, some of his characters are developed with a sensitivity and caring that rivals much literature of the period. The tension between the two further undermines a blatantly pastoral view of the rural Midwest. Bellamann himself explained that “For every mean, small person in a little town you will find three good ones (but) the very obstacle lies in the frequent inability of the fine characters playing the game decently and according to rule in combating or even surviving the actions and tongues of the petty and vicious who too often are in the seats of the powerful” (Karr xxiii). The tension between the “petty and vicious” establishment of the American small town and these iconoclastic characters serves to further undermine a blatantly pastoral view of the rural Midwest.

Bellamann pushes back against this pastoral view from the very beginning of *Kings Row*, in opening paragraphs that describe the physical landscape of the town:

Spring came late in the year 1890, so it came more violently, and the fullness of its burgeoning heightened the seasonal disturbance that made unquiet in the blood.

On this particular day, the twenty-eighth of April, the vast sky seemed vaster than ever – wider, bluer, higher. Continents of white clouds moved slowly from west to east, casting immense drifts of blue over the landscape which seemed alternately to expand and to shrink as sunlight and shadow followed in deliberate procession.

The green distances of the land were gashed and scarred with wandering roads, lumpy and deep-rutted from the heavy wheels that had groaned and strained through the winter mud. These roads came from the outlying regions, springing up, like casual streams, marking themselves more and more deeply in the soil as they moved between rail fences, widening as they wound toward the county seat. Scattered in their beginnings, they drew nearer to each other, converged and straightened as they approached the town.

They were like the strands of a gigantic web, weaving and knitting closer and closer until they reached a center – Kings Row, the county seat. “A good town,” everyone

said. "A good, clean town. A good town to live in, and a good place to raise your children. (3)

Here he invokes this physicality in a manner reminiscent of the bucolic ideal of rural America, but amidst these invocations of nature he inserts images of destruction; the beginning of spring is not marked by blossoms in bloom, but it comes "violently," marks a "seasonal disturbance," and makes "unquiet in the blood." This uncomfortable juxtaposition of springtime and violence brings in mind another set of opening lines, those of T.S. Eliot's "The Waste Land": "April is the cruellest month, breeding/ Lilacs out of the dead land, mixing/ Memory and desire, stirring/ Dull roots with spring rain" (545). Such a reference reinforces *Kings Row*'s ties to the experimental stylings of modernism. Note also that the green landscape is "gashed and scarred" with roads that are "lumpy and deep-rutted from the heavy wheels that had groaned and strained through the winter mud." An earlier draft makes the influence of modernism even more apparent as it commingles sexuality in the midst of all of this violence, adding that "when Spring came down the great valley it did not come with maiden shyness as in southern climates, but with the whoop and clamor of conquest" (2). The endorsements of a "good, clean town" and "a good place to raise your children" make no mention of anything specific to the town itself, and thus come off as mere empty platitudes; even today, communities that most don't see as particularly exciting are said to be a "good place to raise children." This is certainly not a bucolic paradise. Rather, Bellamann uses the rhetoric of the pastoral to dismantle the movement's own viability. The gashing roads even suggest the threat of encroaching urbanization, showing us that it not only the large cities whose landscapes have been disturbed. It is as if to say that the only true pastoralism involves land that completely untouched by urbanization of either the big city or the small town and, in this way, romanticizes the old notion of the American frontier.

Another way in which the novel pushes back against more simplistic definitions of the small town is in Bellamann's depiction of non-normative gender roles. The novel features female characters who defy traditional notions of femininity in many ways, and Bellamann's complex treatment of masculinities is perhaps even more ahead of its time. In *Masculine Style: The American West and Literary Modernism*, Daniel Worden explains the confluence of modernism and masculinity thusly: "A gender historically saturated with privilege, masculinity is a site for modernist writers to produce new visions of social belonging..." (1). He goes to connect the modernist vision of masculinity with a Butlerian iteration of gender as a performance, noting that, in much modernist literature "performative masculinities critique and rework norms by attaching masculine styles to unusual bodies or developing new political valences for masculinity" (4). I argue that Bellamann's novel does all of the above, utilizing a wide variety of expressions of masculinity as a means to question these very norms. While Bellamann does "revolt from the village," he also, via the text, revolts from traditional modes of masculinity; more specifically, it revolts from what R.W. Connell labels "hegemonic masculinity," which she defines as "the masculinity that occupies the hegemonic position in a given pattern of gender relations..." (76). Bellamann creates a Midwestern modernist space in which masculinity exists in a wide variety of bodies and performances and, in reconciling them all, we see how *Kings Row* subverts traditional notions of small-town America.

In order to set the stage for just how these masculinities are non-hegemonic, we must first briefly examine the hegemony against which Bellamann is operating. While *Kings Row* is, in many ways, a classic modernist tale and makes reference to the very "European intelligentsia" enumerated in the Connell quotation above, it is very much an American story. While the 1940 text never overtly refers to the town of Kings Row as being located in Bellamann's native state of

Missouri, there is strong contextual evidence for such a location. For the novel's characters, a trip to "the city" means a trip to St. Louis; even the town's young characters are expected to have been to that city, as we see when, early in the novel, the young Drake McHugh expectantly asks his friend, Parris Mitchell, "You been to St. Louis, ain't you?" (42). Bellamann makes such references many times in the course of the story. When the family of Parris's friend, Renee, suddenly relocates, his grandmother explains that she thinks that they went "down toward the Ozark mountains" (64). A handwritten early draft of the novel, located amongst Henry Bellamann's papers at the University of Mississippi, situates the story even more firmly in the Show-Me State, by noting on the very first page that "to the north lay the great prairies stretching away to Iowa and on to Kansas and Nebraska. The southern reaches broke into the high river hills where the turbulent Missouri cut across the state" (1). In evaluating the story's ostensible Missouri setting, we must remember that the Midwest was once the West; in the age of manifest destiny, Missouri was part of the open frontier for which so many people set out.

Worden, for one, explicitly connects modernist masculinity with the frontier, noting that he wants to "complicate the ways in which we value cosmopolitan urbanity in modernist literature" and that "a critical focus on cosmopolitanism creates a myopia when it comes to the very important claims of nationalism, regionalism, and rural environments on modernist texts" (9). Indeed, he makes such a case by connecting modernist-era performances of masculinity to mobility, writing that "modernist masculinity is a style of self-presentation that insists on the mobility of hierarchical signifiers" (6). This idea of hierarchical mobility is similar to the physical mobility of the American frontier, and thus the frontier becomes a natural expression of masculine space. Connell reinforces this notion: "Exemplars of masculinity, whether legendary or real – from Paul Bunyan in Canada via Davy Crockett in the United States to Lawrence 'of

Arabia' in England – have very often been men of the frontier” (185). In his book *Manhood in America*, Michael Kimmel explains early westward migration as, at least in part, a masculine reaction to the increasing feminization of the home in the Eastern United States; says Kimmel, “Part of the struggle was simply to get out of the middle-class house, now a virtual feminine theme park, where well-mannered and well-dressed children played quietly in heavily draped and carpeted parlors and adults chatted amiably over tea served from porcelain services [...] Women were not only domestic, they were domesticators, expected to turn their sons into virtuous Christian gentlemen” (40-1). To demonstrate the extent of this masculine migration, he then goes on to note that “The rush westward reached its apotheosis with the California Gold Rush of 1849. Never before or since have men created such a homosocial preserve on such a scale. Nearly 200,000 men came to California in 1849 and 1850 alone, composing 93 percent of the state’s population” (42). As the frontier slowly receded, performances of masculinity refocus this sense of mobility; rather than moving westward on the frontier, we can see an emphasis on mobility within and beyond the hierarchical strata of American society. Worden reiterates this idea when he explains that “It is this emphasis on mobility that gives masculinity such power in American culture and, at the same time, endows it with the promise of resisting the very hierarchies that it signifies” (6). We see a similar progression in the text of *Kings Row*, where the older residents perform masculinity through physical and hierarchical mobility, and the younger, more “modern” residents (who form the core of the narrative) use their own mobility to negotiate within and beyond their proscribed social roles.

We see vestiges of traditional “frontier masculinity” in the older citizens of Kings Row, who spend much of their time lamenting the loss of the old frontier values and the accompanying post-industrial urban mentality that has the power to reach even Kings Row, Missouri. One such

character is Skeffington, whom we first meet walking down the street with a commanding presence that creates an almost hypermasculine tableau: “The old lawyer walked slowly up Walnut Street. His great beard flashed and sparkled in the sun, and the clouds of smoke from his cigar gave him the appearance of a walking conflagration” (25). Here Bellamann emphasizes Skeffington’s masculinity through pure biology. His great beard not only emphasizes his status as a male but also evokes the scruffiness of the frontier West, and his cigar reinforces this, as nineteenth-century Kings Row sees smoking as very much a masculine behavior; indeed, we see evidence of this when Bellamann reveals that protagonist Parris Mitchell is, as a child, embarrassed of his grandmother’s own smoking habit: “One thing he was self-conscious about. His grandmother smoked cigarettes. He had seen country women smoke pipes, and it seemed quite the same” (21). Here Bellamann does not mention young Parris’s having a problem with men smoking cigarettes, but only women. His association of the habit with “country” women also reinforces the modernist superiority of the urban over the rural; even though Kings Row itself is not exactly a metropolis, Parris can still look down on the farm women who engage in such backwards activities as the smoking of cigarettes. One should note that Skeffington himself, as mentioned earlier, came to Kings Row from Virginia and, before he dies towards the novel’s end, laments the loss of the brand of frontier masculinity that brought him West: “It had been like that... He dreamed then. All young men, he imagined, dreamed similar dreams. The great names were still echoing – Jefferson, Adams, Franklin. You felt that the living force of the colonial Americans still moved. All of those things were history now – cold, dead history” (356).

From early on in the novel, we see Bellamann construct a definition of masculinity that extends beyond the conventions of the bearded frontiersman. One scene that poignantly illustrates this is the funeral of Robert Callicott. Callicott was a music teacher and a poet (not

unlike Bellamann himself) rumored by the townsfolk to have had affairs with members of both sexes. His eulogy comes not from a family member but from his friend Miles Jackson, the editor of the local newspaper. Bellamann introduces Jackson's speech thusly: "We have come here today to honor a man." [Jackson's] voice sounded thin and high-pitched – a little rasping. A sarcastic sound, Parris thought" (164). Here Bellamann reinforces the masculine nature of his subject with the phrase "to honor a man"; yet, Jackson's apparent sarcasm serves to undermine notions of Robert Callicott as traditionally masculine. The rest of the eulogy, though, makes the point that, just because one does not embody hegemonic masculinity, it does not mean that that person has less value: "This universe was not conceived in beauty. It was conceived in tragedy and travail... In the midst of that continuous hurricane of destruction and death there are... men who resolve this disorder. They are poets, musicians, and artists. That is their answer to the ugliness of the world. They do not ask to be understood. They do not even ask to be liked. But without them we should find the universe an intolerable habitation" (165). Despite this seeming plea for tolerance, Bellamann makes it clear that Callicott did not fit in with the binarized definitions of gender espoused by the establishment of Kings Row. In an early draft of the novel, Bellamann includes a scene in which he gives us the thoughts of young Parris as he studies music with Callicott:

Callicott's talk was like his playing – sudden, rapid, flying this way and that like a distracted bird. Parris warmed to Callicott more and more. His talk was really like flight, it didn't seem to touch the earth at all. It was hard to think while it was going on, but some sober factor in Parris' attention stirred uneasily at the paradoxes, and exaggerations. It was all right, here in this room: it was all right, say, for Robert Callicott... Parris searched uncertainly for some sort of conclusion... but he knew that Berdorff, or Doctor MacLaughlin at Aberdeen, or Tom Carr wouldn't – wouldn't what? – wouldn't understand, or wouldn't approve, or... you simply had to keep certain things and certain people separate. But which was right? (196)

Here Callicott's talking, just like the "high-pitched" intonations that Jackson affects "sarcastically" when invoking Callicott's masculinity, suggests a kind of stereotypical gay speech. Drew Rendall, Paul L. Vasey, and Jared MacKenzie, in their article "The Queen's English: An Alternative Biosocial Hypothesis for the Distinctive Features of 'Gay Speech,'" explain such a stereotype thusly: "First, effeminate speech is supposed to involve higher voice pitch. Second, it is supposed to involve more variable or dramatic pitch-modulation patterns" (188). We can certainly see such patterns in Callicott's "flighty" pitch, and Parris can sense the ways in which such speech fails to live up to the normative masculinity espoused by the establishment of Kings Row. Here Parris invokes the examples of more traditionally masculine authority figures, such as Tom Carr, Doctor MacLaughlin (a professor of his at the local college, where he takes classes as a teenager) and his main music teacher, Herr Berdorrf, and their potential disapproval as means of emphasizing the ways in which Callicott does not fit in.

This idea of the necessity of multiple modes of masculinity is especially apparent in Henry Bellamann's depiction of the younger male characters of *Kings Row*. Despite their growing up in a small, rural community, the masculinities that these characters express go beyond the ideals of the frontier, and instead often reflect the growing urbanization of the newly modern Midwest. Michael Kimmel writes that, in the beginning of the modernist era, "Rapid industrialization, technological transformation, capital concentration, urbanization, and immigration – all of these created a new sense of an oppressively crowded, depersonalized, and often emasculated life" (68). We see elements of this even in the small burgh of Kings Row. One of the characters who best illustrates this "emasculatation" is the novel's protagonist, Parris Mitchell. Leslie Jean Campbell notes that even his name suggests a kind of European/American hybridity (13). We first meet Parris as a boy of twelve; having been orphaned at an early age, he

is under the care of his European grandmother, Madame von Eln. Because of this continental upbringing, other children, “for the most part, thought him a bit queer...” (19). Here, Bellamann’s use of the term “queer” reinforces American ideals of masculinity, as it equates Parris’s European upbringing with non-hegemonic masculinity. Indeed, as the young Parris struggles to come to terms with his outsider status in Kings Row, he fears that such status will somehow render him less masculine in the eyes of the town. In an early scene, the adolescent Drake McHugh scoffs at Parris’s use of the French and German languages, saying that “‘It’s funny for an American boy to be talking any other kind of talk but American’” (40). Here, Drake’s use of the term “boy” suggests that Parris’s trilingual status renders him an Other not just rhetorically, but in terms of his gender as well. Parris then expresses his insecurity by asking “Does – does it sound sissy, the way I talk?” (40) This, of course, also links hegemonic masculinity with structures of American nationalism; Worden, for one, refers to hegemonic expressions of masculinity as “a normative requirement for national belonging at the turn of the century” (2). We must also remember, of course, that this was at the time of the death of the frontier, and the specter of World War I hung over the globe, a fact not unknown to Bellamann, who, we must remember, published in novel in 1940, in the midst of another world war. Whereas the mobility of the “frontier man” signified a certain kind of American nationalism, Parris instead uses his mobility to project a masculinity that, in going back to Europe, rejects the conflation of masculinity with pure nationalism.

While such insecurities are obvious in the young Parris, they are not enough to stop him from expressing his own brand of queer masculinity. Here I use the term “queer” to extend beyond the character’s sexual experience, and to emphasize the ways in which he presents a non-normative expression of manhood, whether overtly correlated with heteronormativity or not.

David M. Halperin defines “queer” as something “at odds with the normal, the legitimate, the dominant” (62). In the case of Parris, he is always in touch with his emotions in a manner that undermines the self-reliance and stoicism of the frontier man. Regarding the man of this particular time period, Kimmel writes that “Emotional outbursts of passion or jealousy, which had been associated with manhood in the eighteenth century, were now associated with lack of manhood; it was women, not men, who were said to feel these emotions most acutely. Real men held their emotions in check, the better to channel them into workplace competition” (87). Indeed, Parris is very prone to such outbursts. In the beginning of the story, he lies awake one night and thinks about the fact that his elderly grandmother will die someday, some day that is, most likely, not so far into the future. His reaction is clearly one of fear, fear that causes him to weep: “Terror seized him. He took the edge of the quilt between his teeth so he wouldn't cry, but it was no use - he was already crying. His throat felt like stone” (21). This instance is only the first of a series of crying episodes on the part of Parris Mitchell that continue even as he becomes a young man. When Parris is fourteen, he loses his virginity to his friend and neighbor, Renee Gudrun; after the two of them are caught *in flagrante delicto* by a neighbor, Renee's father, Sven, beats his daughter violently and soon ends up moving his entire family to another locale (which is most likely the Ozarks, as mentioned above) to avoid the shame of having Renee's sexual activity known to the town. After Sven takes Renee away, Parris walks around the yard of her house in an effort to somehow reconnect with his lost love and, in the course of his exploration, stumbles upon a barrel full of garbage; in with the debris he finds presents that he had brought for her from a recent trip to Philadelphia. After all, as a modern youth with European connections, Parris has access to the urban realm in a way that many of his peers do not. Here, Parris's reaction to seeing Renee's presents in the garbage does not bring on anger in

the form of brute force; rather, his sense of dejection expresses itself in the form of a crying episode: “Then he began to cry, a broken whimper that puffed out his lips and hurt his throat. He leaned against the barrel and held to the rim with both hands while tears ran down his face and dripped into the barrel. The drops fell on the soil and crumpled silk and made round, dark spots. He cried with long hoarse sounds, weakly, hopelessly – filled with despair and a harsh pressing realization of his own helplessness” (66). This is not the powerful resolve of the frontier man; rather, Bellamann overtly emphasizes the “weakness” and “hopelessness” behind such vocalizations. Years later, as an older Parris remembers the loss of his first love, he has to consciously invoke the model of his friend Drake McHugh’s masculinity in order to keep his natural instinct to cry at bay: “He was near to crying, but he thought of Drake. He was sure Drake wouldn’t cry about a girl” (102). Parris’s constant reminding himself to *not* cry, of course, reminds us of the limited ways to express masculinity in the small town of Kings Row. These episodes also certainly invoke the element of melodrama, an element that Nina Baym, in “Melodramas of Beset Manhood: How Theories of American Fiction Exclude Women Authors,” ties specifically to the American frontier when she writes that such a trope “narrates a confrontation of the American individual, the pure American self divorced from specific social circumstances, with the promise offered by the idea of America. This promise is the deeply romantic one that in this new land, untrammelled by history and social accident, a person will be able to achieve complete self-definition” (131, 132). In the post-frontier Kings Row, though, the romance is not only gone but is completely inverted; America is not where Parris achieves self-definition. He can only have that after spending five years in Vienna. In this way Bellamann once again presents rural America as no longer liminal, but limiting.

While Parris's gender nonconformity does render him something of an outsider in Kings Row, he is not entirely a social pariah. In fact, he forms a number of close relationships over the course of the novel. His friendship with Drake McHugh is an important example. Even though Parris is bookish and emotional, he nevertheless forms a close bond with Drake, who acts as his foil in many ways. While Drake does, early on in their relationship, express incredulity at Parris's foreign ways (as in the aforementioned comment regarding American boys "talking American"), he comes to express open admiration for Parris's modern lifestyle. Before Parris leaves for medical school in Vienna, Drake tells him "I don't know much of anything, Parris. I'm not smart like you are. You think about things... I never think about anything unless someone makes me. I never could figure out anything much for myself. I guess I never even wanted to, and I guess that's just exactly the difference between a smart person and somebody that ain't" (142).

While Drake admires Parris's more urbane, modern brand of masculinity, there is much that Parris admires about Drake as well. From the story's beginning, Drake's masculinity manifests itself in ways more normative than those of his European counterpart. While the two are still schoolboys, Drake impresses Parris with his physical maturation: "Drake McHugh said he would have to shave next year. Drake already boasted the possession of a razor of his own" (50). It is the sexually precocious Drake McHugh whom Parris channels when he loses his virginity to Renee at the age of fourteen: "He scarcely knew what he did, but he knew with an amazing clarity how Drake McHugh's talk had prepared him for this moment" (59).

Parris's ease with sexual matters does not end there. Years later, when he is studying under the tutelage of the reclusive Dr. Tower, the latter's daughter, Cassandra (also known as "Cassie") seduces him: "Cassandra lowered the shades and closed the door. In just a few minutes

the room became hot and close. In the flashes of lightning [Parris] saw her fling the shining green dress across a chair. A white slip followed. Then she stepped out of a fluffy circle of frills that lay around her feet... Then she dropped beside him, and her deft fingers loosened his tie” (150). This particular scene is important for a number of reasons. For one thing, the ease and freedom with which the teenage Parris expresses his sexuality is indicative of the very mobility that Worden associates with modernist masculinity. Kimmel points out that, while sexual continence was an important feature of hegemonic masculinity in nineteenth-century America, this view began to change during the Freudian era: “Freud was a fierce opponent of sexual puritanism... To Freud the sexual instinct was just that, an instinct, inherited and normal...” (89). For Parris, sexuality is not suggestive of sin, but a “fact of life,” so to speak, reflecting the idea espoused by Michael Trask in *Cruising Modernism: Class and Sexuality in American Literature and Social Thought* that “social science after 1900... had wrested sex from its basis in physiology and encouraged its adherents to understand desire as a function of psychology and environment in tandem with biological predisposition” (12). In his attitude, Parris, despite his youth, aligns his understanding of sex more with the new social science than with the staid traditions of Kings Row.

Being the budding psychoanalyst that he is, Parris’s attitude toward sex is very reminiscent of these new scientific ideals. He feels no shame or guilt for having sex outside of marriage; in fact, when Drake mentions marriage when the two of them are twenty years old, Parris balks at the idea, saying, “I just never had thought about either one of us being old enough to get married” (243). When Drake mentions the fact that Parris has been “old enough” for sexual activity for years, Parris responds with “Ye-es, I know. I never have been sorry, either” (244). For Parris, as for Freud, sexuality is “inherited and normal.” There is no bravado or

machismo in his sexual expression. He does not need to prove his masculinity by sleeping with women; it is something that just happens naturally. This is another example of Parris's queer masculinity. This becomes even more apparent when we note that it was Cassie who seduced him, and not the other way around. Parris does not wish to dominate women, but to enjoy sexual relationships with consenting partners. When, after they finish making love for the first time, Cassie laments that Parris must think that she is a "terrible girl," Parris instead tells her that he loves her (150). Later on, after Parris learns that his grandmother is dying of cancer, we see Parris, yet again, express his emotions in a manner that belies hegemonic masculinity. He begins to cry in front of Cassandra: "All at once he felt unbearably desolate and tears started in his eyes. He held his head carefully to one side, but Cassie felt a drop on her shoulder. She put up her hand to his face" (225). We then see a further reversal of traditional gender roles, as it is she who comforts him, just as it was she who initiated their sexual relationship. Of course, Parris's holding his head "to one side" reinforces the idea that Parris is fully aware of the hegemonic norms that he is violating amongst the establishment of Kings Row.

While Parris keeps company with the rakish man-about-town Drake and the beautiful Cassandra Tower, he also befriends Jamie Wakefield, a classmate who, as we come to learn, is a homosexual. After Jamie makes sexual advances toward Parris, Parris rebuffs him and grows angry. We soon learn, though, that homophobia is not what motivates Parris's behavior; rather, it is the fact that the experience brought back traumatic memories of his encounter with Renee and the ensuing abandonment: "He wanted to hit Jamie. He realized that it was the first time he had ever wanted to hit anyone – not for this night but for a strange ugly trail that Jamie was breaking across an area in his memory he had thought inviolable" (101). Here the notion of violence (presented in the form of Parris wanting to hit Jamie) reinforces complicated notions of

masculinity; Parris considered using aggression as a means of dealing with his emotions but, in the end, did not do so. The fact that this incident was the “first time” that he had ever wanted to hit anyone further serves to reinforce the unorthodox expression of Parris Mitchell’s masculinity. The situation becomes even more complicated the following day, when Parris remembers the incident with Jamie on a walk around his grandmother’s property:

His resentment against Jamie was less violent today. After all, he was just as much to blame if anybody had to be blamed. He wasn’t sure it was a question of blame. Jamie – well, Jamie was just different, that was all. He did seem kind of like a girl, sure enough – as Drake McHugh said. Now if Jamie were really a girl... that thought crossed another which he must not let himself think. Jamie was – yes, he was really beautiful, and he made you like him just for that. And that was strange – Parris couldn’t exactly make sense of it. Beautiful in the way a girl is beautiful, and that always made you feel you had something to do about it... He flounced about and lay face down, shutting his eyes in the crook of his arm. He pressed his face hard against his rough sleeve, and his breath came back hot and damp against his face. He shut his eyes tight. Pictures shaped in the reddish pulsing dark – rather meaningless pictures – Drake and Jamie, and over and over, Renee – and again, Jamie and Cassie Tower. He came wide-awake and stirred. Cassie Tower... what was she doing her with Drake and Jamie – and with Renee? (104)

This passage is significant because it is one of the instances in which we see that Parris is not homophobic, but instead accepts the fact that Jamie is “just different.” Not only does Parris tolerate these differences, but the fact that he would not allow himself to think about what would happen if Jamie were a girl suggests a degree of bisexuality; Bellamann reinforces this as Parris sees members of both sexes in his imagination as his breath comes “hot and damp against his face.”

While Parris’s sexual experiences are furtive and complicated (due not to any sense of shame on his part but, rather, due to the imposing morality of parents and the town itself), young Drake openly boasts of his sexual bravado. He brags of his numerous sexual encounters to Parris, often invoking the names of two of his favorite paramours, sisters Poppy and Jinny Ross; after

his guardians die and leave him their house, he becomes even more transparent about his conquests: “All this time I’ve been taking Poppy Ross out to Moore’s tobacco barn! I just kind of forgot that I’m my own boss and live in my own house! Say, I’m going to get her to come up there – her and Jinny. Hot-choo, Parris, we can have us a time right in my own house” (133).

This almost hypermasculine brand of sexual expression would not, at first glance, seem to violate the stereotypical bravado of the hegemonic masculinity that was in place during this period, yet Bellamann still effectively uses the character of Drake McHugh to undermine conventions of masculinity in many ways. For one thing, Drake, like Parris, is very accepting of the character of Jamie Wakefield. “Aw, Jamie’s all right,” Drake says when asked. “A little sissy, but that don’t hurt anybody” (117). In *Masculinities*, Connell writes that homophobia is deeply “connected with dominant forms of masculinity.” Not only is Drake not homophobic, but he admits to engaging in homosexual acts with Jamie Wakefield as a youth: “When we were kids, of course we fooled around and – kind of experimented, and played little games and all that stuff. That was all right, I guess. Didn’t do anybody any harm” (305). This harkens back to the Freudian, modernist ideals which I mentioned at the beginning of this essay. Connell explains that, “Confronted with the facts of inversion, Freud offered the hypothesis that humans were constitutionally bisexual, that masculine and feminine currents coexisted in everyone” (9). Bellamann brings this sophisticated, modernist view of sexuality and brings it to small-town Missouri; in the character of Drake McHugh, he shows that even the most voracious womanizer can explore other modes of sexual expression. One should note, though, that Drake does see homosexuality as something lesser than heterosexual encounters, something that he himself has outgrown. He explains to Jamie that “There’s one kind of natural sex stuff, and all the rest is – just crazy” (306). He supports his hypothesis by telling his friend that only one mode of sexual

expression “gets kids into this world” (306). This latter statement is ironic and only serves to undermine his argument as, despite all of the sex that happens throughout the course of the novel, no pregnancies occur. Drake’s brand of arm’s-length acceptance of Jamie’s sexual orientation is very much in line with Freud’s theories; even though Freud did accept the idea of innate bisexuality, he still viewed homosexuality as pathological. Connell (again) writes that “inversion,” according to Freud, stemmed from “failure to separate from mother” (89).

Drake also defies hegemonic expectations in his ultimate choice of a romantic partner, Randy Monaghan. As a youngster, as Randy unashamedly demonstrates feats of athleticism for Drake and Parris in the railroad icehouse, she literally strips off her feminine restraints: “She flipped her dress over her head and hung it carefully on a projecting plank. Her frilled and starched white petticoat followed. She stood up, round and stocky in waist and drawers [...] She swung up on the parallel bars with ease and flung herself through the double roll” (43). Not only does Miranda Monaghan choose to go by the masculine moniker of “Randy,” but, as illustrated earlier, she keeps company with the boys in her class, preferring athletic activities to more conventionally feminine behaviors. As a teenager, Parris thinks of Randy as “like a boy” (46).

After Parris leaves Kings Row to study psychiatry in Vienna (a move that not only signals a modernist flight from the rural to the urban, but also suggests not so subtly the modernist influence of Freud), Drake and Randy begin an affair that, while having a sexual component, is about more than just sex. It is not a masculine conquest, but a mutually satisfying relationship; as Randy explains, “Listen, Drake, when a girl acts the way I do about you, she means it. It’s because I want to, because I like you better than anybody in the world” (298). Their affair becomes a source of scandal in the town, but Bellamann also presents us with characters who are perfectly comfortable with Drake and Randy’s more modern views of sex. In

one of the more humorous scenes from an early draft, Parris informs Colonel Skeffington's wife of the accident in which Drake has lost his legs:

“Well, this really began when Drake’s accident happened. Randy wrote me, or cabled me...”

“Excuse me. Want to interrupt you there. Tell me something. Was Drake rolling that girl in the grass before he got his legs cut off?”

Parris drew back. But something in Mrs. Skeffington’s eyes surprised him. He looked steadily at her for a minute.

“Yes,” he said swiftly.

“Good, I’m glad to hear it. That’s been worrying me for a long time. Was afraid he hadn’t. Go on with your story now” (992).

Along these same lines, Drake does not see Randy as a ruined woman, but wants to marry her, although, ultimately, it is she who decides when they do get married. When they do marry, it is only after Drake has lost both his inheritance and his legs due to separate misfortunes, thus diminishing his hegemonically masculine presence in their household; it is she who takes care of him, and not the other way around. Bellamann makes note of this gender shift via a tableau right after Randy decides to marry him: “Drake raised his arms and clutched the head of the bed. Then he turned his face to the wall again, but one hand reached out for hers. He held it so tight she winced, but she held perfectly still... It seemed to Randy that all of the balances of life were slowly turning in the singing silence of the little room” (380).

This shift in gender “balance” brings us to the topic of female masculinity. In her book of the same name, Judith Halberstam explains that “masculinity must and cannot and should not reduce down to the male body and its effects” (1). If, indeed, we continue to utilize the previously established definition of masculinity as performative in nature, then certainly we can afford to explore the instance of biologically female bodies conducting such performances to get an even greater glimpse into the problematic nature of small-town America as presented in *Kings*

Row. While Halberstam argues that “female masculinities are framed as the rejected scraps of dominant masculinity in order that male masculinity may appear to be the real thing,” Bellamann’s masculine female characters actually serve to underscore the queerness of their male counterparts. Despite this “imbalance,” so to speak, *Kings Row* does not embrace feminism in the way of the later *Peyton Place*. *Kings Row* is still very much a male novel, told from a male point of view. Rather, female characters display masculinity as a means of queering the landscape for the main male characters. When women perform masculinity in the world of *Kings Row*, it often corresponds with a loss of power in a linked male character.

We see this most clearly, as enumerated above, in the case of Drake McHugh and Randy Monaghan, where Randy’s increasing masculine “power” corresponds with Drake’s physical weakness and sexual impotence (i.e., Drake’s loss of the very “mobility” that marks the masculinity of frontier America). It is also evident in the relationship between Parris and Cassie. Of course, there is also Madame von Eln, Parris’s masculine cigarette-smoking grandmother, his sole guardian and the sole owner of her estate, around whom Parris’s world revolves. When she dies, Bellamann emphasizes the importance of this woman in her grandson’s life by describing Parris’s reaction immediately after her death: “Parris went downstairs and out on the terrace... He felt as if everything had stopped still. He looked with a bewildered curiosity at the familiar surroundings. It appeared to be the same, but he knew it was not. He knew that the heart of whole world had stopped” (292). Parris feels powerless because of the loss of this beloved and dominant figure in his life, and Bellamann reinforces this powerlessness with the same melodramatic language that is key in advancing the cause of queer masculinity in the text.

Another character whose depiction challenges notions of hegemonic masculinity is the aforementioned Jamie Wakefield. Just as Randy is always “Randy” and not “Miranda,” the text

always refers to Wakefield, even as an adult, as the diminutive “Jamie” rather than “James,” thereby undermining his status as a fully realized adult male. From the novel’s very beginning, other characters consistently comment on how he is not like other males. As his schoolteacher, Sally Venable, looks at the twelve-year-old Jamie, she thinks “He’s pretty, that boy... Too pretty for a boy” (4). This thought reinforces hegemonic notions of masculinity, i.e., that one must look a certain way to be “a boy.” The character’s opposition to such norms becomes even more apparent as he matures; even though the 1940 novel dared not show us the word in print, Jamie Wakefield is clearly a gay character. Bellamann's typewritten synopsis refers to the character as "a born homosexual," a description that not only helps to completely clarify the character's sexual orientation but also displays progressive thinking in Bellamann's assertion that someone can be born gay, an idea more humanizing than Freud's theory of “inversion.” Jamie's homosexuality becomes blatantly obvious to the reader during the aforementioned scene in which Jamie makes a pass at Parris: “Jamie had strange hands – small, and plump for so slight a boy. His fingers left a tingle where they touched... Without warning – Jamie leaned forward and kissed him on the mouth. Parris was too amazed to move, too amazed to think. He felt as if a gust of flame swept him from head to foot. He was not too clearly aware of anything for a while except Jamie’s caresses and his flattering hands which carried both violence and appeasement in their touch” (101). Here we see a rejection of hegemonic masculinity not only in Jamie’s advances but also in Parris’s reaction to them. He does not invoke the homophobia which, as enumerated earlier, we typically associate with traditional masculinity; not only does he not dislike the experience but, as we see via syntactical choices such as fingers that “left a tingle” and “flattering hands,” he does enjoy it on some level. The fact that Parris associates his friend’s touch with both “violence and appeasement” illustrates the Freudian rejection of sexual binaries

that is so important to the burgeoning modernism that is so important to the time period and even to the town of Kings Row itself.

Jamie has a similar power over Drake McHugh. As Bellamann makes the reader privy to the character's innermost thoughts, we realize that, even though Drake decries adult homosexuality as "unnatural," he maintains sexual feelings for his male friend that have lingered beyond the days of youthful "experimenting": "Jamie was much as he had always been. He looked no more than sixteen, Drake decided. His face was as soft of contour and warm and lovely in coloring as ever... Drake slapped the horse with the reins, and half-whistled under his breath. He would not have liked for anyone to know just what he was thinking at that moment, or how Jamie actually made him feel" (303).

Despite his powerful sexual allure, the text underscores the harsh, conformist environment of Kings Row by contrasting Jamie's sympathetic inner feelings with the judgment of the outside world. As a young adult, now living a hopelessly unfulfilled life working in father's bank, Jamie reflects on the his childhood:

During all of those years the town of Kings Row was no more to him than a mechanical arrangement of place and people. It was without physiognomy and without any aspect of either friendliness or unfriendliness to him. He had played along much of the time because his mother wouldn't permit him to be out of her sight. He hadn't minded that much because he liked to play alone, and to go through long imaginative adventures which no other children cared to share. He remembered that he had had a doll once which he kept a secret from everyone. He couldn't recall where it had come from. Later his mother embarrassed him somewhat by saying to everyone that he was so delicate and refined that he didn't like to play with rough companions. That wasn't true, of course, but he hadn't disputed it. He never disputed anything. His mother taught him to sew and to embroider, but his father had put a stop to that, rather to his regret. He really liked to do fancywork. (313)

This passage reinforces the fact that, as with Parris, the town of Kings Row punishes Jamie for his gender nonconformity not by outwardly scorning him, but by treating him with a kind of invisibility. Of course, the passage also implies that this lack of outright disdain stems from Jamie's being able to follow the unwritten rules of the small town, such as keeping his doll and his sewing skills (the latter, of course, through the force of his father) a secret. While this may make the town seem more welcoming outwardly, it also underscores the sense of secrecy and hypocrisy that make it such an important part of the "revolt from the village" dynamic. The passage also highlights the presence of a more problematic aspect of the Freudian reading of "inversion," as discussed briefly earlier, as it suggests that Jamie's non-hegemonic masculinity is perhaps due, at least in part, to the presence of an overbearing mother.

Moments later, he recalls his teen years: "Then had come the revelations of adolescence. The at first unbelievable stories the other boys told him, the experiments, the 'games,' as Drake called them. No one, he supposed, could ever understand the strange, almost unbearable excitement and thrill of those adventures. It had been Val Meacham, really, who taught him a lot of things. Big, handsome Val Meacham, five years older than he was" (313). These lines suggest that it was not only Jamie and Drake and Parris who engaged in homosexual "experiments" with one another; here the term "the other boys" makes such experiences sound almost commonplace, thereby reinforcing both the text's tolerance of non-hegemonic expressions of sexuality and also the hypocrisy behind those who condemn such behavior. Like the previous passage, it also bears a Freudian influence, once again suggesting a universal degree of bisexuality. Of course, Bellamann also problematizes this tolerance with the note that Val Meacham was "five years older" than Jamie, suggesting possible pedophilia. The rumored sexual encounters between Jamie Wakefield and Bob Caldicott reinforce this common stereotype of the male homosexual at

this time. And yet, Bellamann also debunks this stereotype in the case of Jamie personally, when Drake, seeing his own bisexuality as a youthful “experiment,” suggests that Jamie is continuing such “games” with “younger and younger kids,” Jamie blatantly rebuffs him. Later on, when Jamie is in the privacy of his own room, Bellamann tells us that “Drake had been mistaken in warning him—almost threatening him” (313). Once again, everything is not as it seems on the surface in the complex world of Kings Row.

Henry Bellamann’s complicated characterization of Jamie Wakefield most likely comes, like so much of the novel, from his own life and experiences. Early drafts of *Kings Row* refer to Jamie’s character by the name “Bertie,” which was the nickname of Bellamann’s close friend, Albert Sartor Berghauser. Bayne refers to Berghauser as “a Fulton native and Henry’s childhood and college friend” (17). The two continued to be close long into adulthood, long after Bellamann’s marriage to fellow music teacher Katharine McKee Jones in 1907. Bayne writes that “Berghauser’s interest in Henry Bellamann transcended that of mere friendship; there existed between them an emotional (and, in all likelihood, homosexual) bond that [Katharine] could not dissolve” (17). Many of the letters and postcards in the Henry and Katharine Bellamann collection were written during several different periods when the two men lived together and traveled through Europe, while Katharine stayed behind in the United States. Even though there is such strong contextual evidence for Bellamann’s own bisexuality, he still, like Drake, displays a lack of understanding of gay men in a matter similar to that of Drake McHugh. In these letters, Bellamann often characterizes his annoyance with Berghauser with references to his feminine nature. In one letter, dated July 21, 1910, he laments that “Bertram was out tonight and tried to sing and that was also ‘verrie sadt.’ He sings worse and worse, or should me say worsely? He is doing nothing this summer but some dainty sewing – also he comes out nearly

every afternoon and interrupts me. I do not know in all the world a more demoralizing influence...” Here the term “dainty sewing” not only serves to underscore hegemonic masculinity of the part of his friend, but it also calls to mind Jamie Wakefield’s “fancywork.” Later on, in the same letter, Bellamann appears to lampoon these same qualities when he refers to his friend as “L’Idiot Rose—the Pink Idiot!” While Bellamann certainly showed a great deal of affection for his gay friend (and his gay characters), he stops short of fully embracing a gay identity.

While much publicity of the day focused on the “scandal” that lay beneath the perfect Midwestern small town, Bellamann’s treatment of queer masculinities suggests that perhaps (as was the case with Bellamann’s early modernist predecessors) the scandal lies not so much in the queerness itself but in the town’s treatment of it. *Kings Row* uses the repressive small-town environment to explore ways in which masculinity can be queer and how treating queerness as problematic actually undermines, rather than enhances, the pastoral nature of the American small town. In the end, Bellamann’s novel is not an outright condemnation nor is it an outright endorsement of the American small town; rather, the world of *Kings Row*, like the more urban environment, is a complicated place wherein a variety of “wild-blooming” flowers show us their differences when we take the time to give them a closer look.

Chapter Two: “Modernism, Mobility, and the Mass-Market Paperback: Feminine Space in Grace Metalious’s *Peyton Place*”

“Published in 1956, *Peyton Place* became America’s first ‘blockbuster,’” writes Ardis Cameron in her introduction to Northeastern University Press’s 1999 reprinting of New Hampshire-born Grace Metalious’s debut novel (viii). “In an age when the average first novel sold two thousand copies, *Peyton Place* sold sixty thousand within the first ten days of its official release. By year’s end, almost one in twenty-nine Americans had purchased the book, putting it on the top of the *New York Times* bestseller list, where it stayed for fifty-nine weeks” (viii). In her 2015 book *Unbuttoning America: A Biography of Peyton Place*, Cameron goes on to note that, “at 12 million copies sold,” *Peyton Place* became the bestselling novel of the twentieth century (3). While recent books such as Cameron’s and Sally Hirsh-Dickinson’s *Dirty Whites and Dark Secrets: Sex and Race in Peyton Place* (2011) have invigorated a modicum of scholarly interest in the bestseller, today *Peyton Place* still remains little more than a sensationalistic footnote in the literary landscape of midcentury modern America. If one knows anything about the novel, it is its association with scandal and lowbrow taste. Cameron herself, referring to Senator Lindsey Graham’s famous shout of “Is this Watergate or Peyton Place?” at the Clinton impeachment hearings in 1998, writes that “*Peyton Place* had migrated to the historical margins of the political, reduced to common shorthand for idle philandering, its edginess dulled by the mystic chords of memory” (178). The lasting reputation of Metalious’s novel is one that exemplifies, perhaps more so than any other major bestseller, the perceived discrepancy in quality between the realm of the bestseller and the upper echelons of that esteemed entity known as the literary canon.

This chapter will reexamine the legacy of *Peyton Place*, a novel known for salaciously transgressing the ostensible sexual mores of 1950s America within a small-town American setting. The cover of the massively popular paperback version, published by both Pocket Books and its main competitor, Dell, lured readers with the tagline “The explosive best seller that lifts the lid off a respectable New England town.” In his 1971 retrospective “Farewell to Peyton Place,” Otto Friedrich jokes that “Once one lifts the lid off a respectable New England town, apparently one finds lots of sex, or at least that is what Mrs. Metalious seems to have found” (161). But to focus only on sexuality in the novel would be to overlook the myriad ways in which the text, in its ostensible critique of a “respectable New England town,” constructs an inclusive space that brings modernism to the masses, and at the same time anticipates postmodernism by pushing back against the often sexist and classist limitations of the modernist movement.

While *Peyton Place* was not taken nearly as seriously by scholars as many of the classic “revolt from the village” texts, the influence of the movement on Metalious's prose was hard to deny. In the review of *Peyton Place* in *The New York Times Book Review*, Princeton professor Carlos Baker makes an overt connection with the author's high-modernist predecessors, noting that “Sinclair Lewis would no doubt have hailed Grace Metalious as a sister-in-arms against the false fronts and bourgeois pretensions of allegedly respectable communities.” In her biography of Metalious, Emily Toth delineates a key difference between the author and these other authors, noting that, “until *Peyton Place*, the dissectors of village personalities and mores were virtually all men. Though interested in women characters, the male novelists in revolt rarely portrayed women from the inside, nor made them their central figures” (83). While this argument seems to overlook the fact that the protagonist of Sinclair Lewis's *Main Street* is a woman, it does

illustrate the fact that the female characters in *Peyton Place* are not the creations of a male author, and are not merely women trying to navigate a male-dominated landscape. In this chapter I will take Toth's assertion one step further and argue that, via the text, Metalious actually creates an inclusive space for women, a space wherein women symbolically protest the limitations of a male-dominated society through their own mobility. This space is not only distinctly female, but also distinctly regional in the way that it embraces and also critiques popular elements of New England history and geography. The community of Peyton Place, in many ways, echoes early Puritan communities in both structure and behavior, but also embraces more progressive aspects of regional history. This is particularly evident in the character of Allison MacKenzie, who displays a reverence for nature and distrust of authority in a manner very similar to that of the Transcendentalists of the nineteenth century.

In unpacking the significance of *Peyton Place* with regard to the original "revolt," it becomes necessary to note its connection to its thematic predecessor, *Kings Row*. While the latter text was enormously successful after its original publication, the numbers pale in comparison to the amazing sales record of *Peyton Place*. And, while *Peyton Place* now remains little more than a salacious cultural signifier, it has fared better than *Kings Row*, which has been all but forgotten. Friedrich asserts that *Peyton Place's* racy reputation was "quite possibly increased by the fact that the author was a woman" (161). Certainly the amount of sex scenes in Metalious's novel was comparable to those in the work of popular male authors of the period, such as John O'Hara, Erskine Caldwell, or even William Faulkner. What made *Peyton Place* different was that its frank depiction of sexuality was authored by a woman, and not just any woman, but a housewife and mother.

The shock of an ordinary housewife authoring such a tome brings up issues of space and place beyond the confines of the fictional village itself. In writing the story of *Peyton Place*, Metalious also oversteps the boundaries of a woman's place, which in the 1950s, was still very much associated with the domestic, or “private” sphere. Feminist geographer Doreen Massey emphasizes the fact that “the attempt to confine women to the domestic sphere was both a specifically spatial control and, through that, a social control on identity” (179). Similarly, Marsha Marotta asserts that “fixing mothers in certain spaces solved a momentous problem in patriarchal society—the mobility of women, which posed a threat to the patriarchal order” (230). As noted in the previous chapter, Daniel Worden associates the “frontier masculinity” that helped to shape the myth of American exceptionalism with mobility; such a definition necessarily implies a corresponding lack of mobility on the part of women.

But much of what gives *Peyton Place* its appeal is that, while it critiques simplistically pastoral evocations of the small New England town, it also lends a sense of mobility to women both within and without the text. Of course, the public was ostensibly scandalized by an uneducated housewife going beyond her “place” and writing a novel with sex scenes, but that was just the beginning. Metalious, as a working-class housewife with three children before she was thirty, displayed remarkable mobility and agency by writing a novel at all. Massey, in her primer on feminist geography, *Space, Place, and Gender*, defines modernism by noting that that it “points to the possibility of progress and change,” but qualifies that statement by following it up with “Things may be patriarchal now (including, OK let's admit it, modernism itself), but they need not always be so” (213). *Peyton Place* was a novel full of suggestions for progress and change, but it also went beyond the tradition patriarchal and often classist structure of modernism and brought the possibility of change to the masses. A surface inventory of canonical

modernist authors points to a field that is very much male-dominated, and the few female authors who have made their mark in the modernist canon (such as Gertrude Stein, Virginia Woolf, Djuna Barnes, and H.D.) often did so by fitting into the exclusionary structure that modernism embodied, whether it that was via embracing an urban, cosmopolitan, often upper-class way of life (or being born into such a way of life), or not bearing and/or raising children. Woolf famously remarked that a woman needs “money and a room of one’s own” to be a successful writer; Metalious had neither, but she wrote anyway, and people read it.

In so doing she merged the professional space of the writer with the domestic sphere, two worlds that entwined for most of her life. At the same time, her merging of these spaces illustrates just how difficult it was for a woman to enjoy such mobility. Toth writes that Metalious began writing voraciously as a child, and, as a working-class girl in the mill town of Manchester, New Hampshire, she had to hide in the bathroom and write in the bathtub in order to hone her craft (7). As she entered adulthood she continued her productivity, although such productivity necessitated a negotiation of these seemingly incompatible spaces, as her children “would appear on other people’s porches, their noses running with the cold, because Grace had locked them out. The neighbors watched them, and condemned Grace as a bad mother...” (Toth 59). This judgment of her as a “bad mother” for daring to move beyond the restrictive space of the domestic sphere illustrates just how incompatible these two worlds were for women, and yet the fact that she did it anyway signals mobility and the possibility of progress. In this sense, Metalious’s life imitated her art, as the female characters in *Peyton Place* show us the problems of the male-dominated midcentury town, but they do so via their own mobility within and between different material and discursive spaces.

We see this sense of mobility not just in the lives of Metalious and her characters, but in the life of the novel itself. Friedrich explains that “*Peyton Place* sold more than a third of a million copies in the hard-cover edition, and some 9,000,000 copies in paperback” (161). The fact that the paperback edition was so much popular than its hard-cover counterpart makes sense given the cheap cost of paperbacks and their subsequent enormous popularity during the era of late modernism. But the paperback format also lends itself to a kind of mobility not seen in the days before the popularity of the pulps. In *American Pulp: How Paperbacks Brought Modernism to the Masses*, Paula Rabinowitz notes that part of the large appeal of mass-market paperbacks was that they were “designed for maximum portability and could move seamlessly from private to public spaces” (4). Ardis Cameron, in her interviews with myriad and diverse *Peyton Place* readers, recalls numerous stories in which the experience of hiding the book was an important and memorable aspect of the novel’s appeal, writing that one of the most powerful core images to emerge from these oral histories was “that of a solitary reader reading *Peyton Place*, often at night, under bedcovers, a flashlight illuminating the guilty pleasures of a daring act” (15). The experimentation and unconventionality of modernism, via the cheap and highly portable paperback, could now be experienced by a wide variety of readers, and not just an elite few. Given the “separate spheres” ideology that still (perhaps more so than before) pervaded American culture in the 1950s, such mobility becomes particularly appealing in the case of female readers; Rabinowitz explains that “the portable book, the pocket book, as the earliest brand was called, could move from inside the home to inside the pocket or pocketbook and then be pulled out at any free moment, seems especially emblematic of modern femininity” (11). Not only did Metalious write while maintaining her status as housewife, but her book gave millions

of housewives the chance to read transgressive material that they might not have had access to were it not for the popularity of the paperback.

This portability is in direct contrast to *Kings Row*, as Henry Bellamann was an upper-class, mobile, childless male whose novel was more a nod to the heroes of high modernism than a precursor to the pulps. Yet a surface reading of both texts makes it clear that there would be no *Peyton Place* as such without its predecessor. Toth describes *Kings Row* as a personal favorite of Metalious, writing that “*Kings Row* showed Grace Metalious the kind of book she wanted to write: an anatomy of a small-town virtues and vices, with sordidness and notability, seriousness, and humor” (141). The influence of Bellamann’s text is felt from the very first lines of *Peyton Place*:

Indian summer is like a woman. Ripe, hotly passionate, but fickle, she comes and goes as she pleases so that one is never sure whether she will come at all, nor for how long she will stay. In northern New England, Indian summer puts up a scarlet-tipped hand to hold winter back for a little while... Those grown old, who have had the youth bled out of them by the jagged edged winds of winter, know sorrowfully that Indian summer is a sham to be met with hard-eyed cynicism. But the young anxiously await scanning the chill autumn skies for a sign of her coming...

One year, early in October, Indian summer came to a town called Peyton Place. Like a laughing, lovely woman Indian summer came and spread herself over the countryside and made everything hurtfully beautiful to the eye. (1)

Compare this with the aforementioned opening to Bellamann’s novel: “Spring came late in the year 1890, so it came more violently, and the fullness of its burgeoning heightened the seasonal disturbance that made unquiet in the blood” (3). Here, the feminine imagery in Metalious’s opening lines is readily apparent, and Toth acknowledges this when she writes of the text’s “lush opening reminiscent of *Kings Row*—but Henry Bellamann’s descriptions are general, not particularly female” (140). To take this a step further; while Bellamann’s beginning is not

overtly feminine in the images it provokes, David Willbern suggests in his 2013 publication *The American Popular Novel After World War II: A Study of 25 Best-Sellers* that “the phrase ‘fullness of its burgeoning’ echoes Metalious’s purple prose, but suggests a tumescence more specific to a masculine imagination than to a feminine style of spreading and hurting” (24).

While Willbern’s assessment perhaps smacks a bit of essentialism, it emphasizes the analogous but different ways in which these authors conflate the seasons, and the land itself, with male (Bellamann) and female (Metalious) sexuality. These opening lines not only establish a thematic link between both novels, but they also demonstrate the different ways in which these authors traverse the formerly sacred ground of the American small town. And herein lies perhaps the point of most pivotal importance in assessing Metalious’s work within the paradigm shift stemming from the so-called “revolt from the village”: *Peyton Place*, unlike any text discussed heretofore in this project, and certainly unlike any other “village novel” of similar popularity, complicates popular notions of the small town by presenting it through the lens of female characters, and critiques the small town as a patriarchal establishment by illustrating the myriad and complicated ways in which women take up space and move between spaces in both the eponymous town and the novel of *Peyton Place*. Both passages also foreground textual emphases on sexuality, with the opening lines of *Peyton Place* being certainly more gynocentric but also more complicated, heralding the fraught situations that the female characters encounter in the town because of their sexuality. There is a sense of agency in a metaphorical image of a woman who is portrayed as “laughing” and as having the agency to be “hotly passionate” and “fickle.”

Annette Kolodny, in *The Lay of the Land: Metaphor as Experience and History in American Life and Letters*, writes of the pervasiveness of “what is probably America’s oldest and most cherished fantasy: a daily reality of harmony between man and nature based on an

experience of the land as essentially feminine—that is, not simply the land as mother, but the land as woman, the total female principle of gratification—enclosing the individual in an environment of receptivity, repose, and painless and integral satisfaction” (4). But the natural scene that Metalious paints in these opening lines turns the nature-as-woman trope on its head in giving us an entity that is unpredictable, that comes and goes as she pleases. This not only “revolts” from the patriarchal roots of American pastoralism, but also foregrounds the agency and mobility that her own female characters display.

This juxtaposition of nature and sexuality also echoes the "heretical" (to borrow a term from Peter Gay) and open sexuality that was such a hallmark of modernism. While *Peyton Place* still, for the most part, lingers outside the walls of the canon, Metalious's prose marks a distinct effort to bring the influence of modernism to the masses, what Paula Rabinowitz, calls “secondhand modernism.” In writing *Peyton Place*, the working-class housewife who grew up reading the canonical authors of high modernism, was able to pass along some of the stylings of modernism to a broader audience and thus anticipates postmodernism in its inclusivity. The fact that this passage so closely mirrors Bellamann's, which itself suggests the beginning of T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*, further cements this idea of a secondhand modernism. A closer look at this section also echoes the anti-pastoralism of the original “revolt from the village” movement, as Metalious suggests that the beauty of the New England countryside is not necessarily what it seems on the surface, and that those “who have had the youth bled out of them” know better than to fawn over the false promises of Indian summer.

The novel's famous opening lines also serve to situate the story geographically. More specifically, it invokes a kind of American regionalism. As Cameron explains: “In the first few sentences of *Peyton Place*, Metalious tweaked the mythologies of tourist New England, turning

the familiar postcard portrait into a voluptuous pinup poster” (x). In explaining this conflation of geographic region and human sexuality, it first becomes necessary to explore what the term “New England” signifies in midcentury constructions of American history and geography. While the South functions as “the nation’s region” and the Midwest, as we have discussed, represents the United States as a whole, New England remains the nation’s first region in many ways, the first to be settled *en masse* by European immigrants and the most rigidly structured. J. Samaine Lockwood explains that “New England was often understood as somehow supranational, operating imperially within the United States as a cosmopolitan region associated (erroneously) with whiteness and at the forefront of an imperialist enterprise abroad, a notion well captured in the moniker ‘Yankee’ coming to refer to any American in foreign lands rather than a New Englander” (16). If these popular mythologies viewed the U.S. South as somehow inferior to the nation as a whole, and the Midwest as the same as the nation as a whole, then New England fits into the picture by actually being *superior* to the nation as a whole.

In his essay “Inventing New England,” Stephen Nissenbaum notes that “its boundaries are clearly defined (something that is true of no other American region)” (105). The name itself invokes colonialism, yoking itself to the ancestral homeland of England and yet separating itself with the term “New.” Joseph A. Conforti, in *Imagining New England: Explorations of Regional Identity From the Pilgrims to the Mid-Twentieth Century*, explains that “During the years of sustained English migration surrounding the Pequot War, Puritan writers represented New England as a region that resembled the homeland and that held the promise of becoming a second England in pastoral, ordered beauty and productiveness” (21). While this sentence directly invokes a sense of pastoralism, it is overtly different from the unspoiled and uncharted freedom seen later in evocations of the Middle West; it is a beautiful, new country, but it is an

orderly and productive country that seeks to retain the traditions of England, while, with Puritan idealism at the forefront, also seeks to emphasize its newness not in terms of rugged individualism, but in terms of moral superiority. Conforti reiterates this early mentality by noting that “New England, indeed America, would transcend the vices, the poverty, and the historical burdens that remained the scourge of Europe [...] In short, the founding of New England, with the Puritan’s aggrandizing moral militancy, consuming self-consciousness, and rhetorical proficiency, launched the development of a self-righteous American identity” (27). While the days of the Puritans are long past in *Peyton Place*, Metalious’s novel suggests that this communal self-righteousness continues to prevail.

The image of New England as a region was at a bit of a crossroads in the midcentury modern era. In *Marsden Hartley: Race, Region, and Nation*, Donna Cassidy explains that “in the 1930s there was growing resentment about the cultural hegemony of New England and the Northeast more broadly, and that this part of the country was considered a Europeanized locale and source of the unethical business practices that had contributed to the Depression” (37). This led to an aggressive campaign, spearheaded by the Works Progress Administration, to market New England as a kind of rural idyll, a place unsullied by the evils of urbanization. This was especially effective in the guise of the magazine *Yankee*, which launched in 1935 and “published essays on the region’s distinctive culture—its history, fiction, poetry, folklore—and created a New England of small towns, farm kitchens, covered bridges, schooners, steepled meetinghouses, past customs, traditional foodways, democratic town meetings, and stone walls” (38). Right from the beginning Metalious subverts this premodern image with her sexualized tableau, and continues to broaden conceptions of New England via the mobility of her characters,

who move back and forth between the beautiful and the horrendously ugly in their experience of an authentic New England.

In depicting a kind of perverse pastoral ideal in the opening lines of *Peyton Place*, Metalious also questions the original pastoral ideal of the American small town. In recounting the story of John Winthrop (who famously referred to his Massachusetts Bay colony as a “city upon a hill”) and his fellow Puritan forebears, Page Smith, in *As a City Upon a Hill: The History of the American Town*, explains that “The American small town found its original and classic form in New England. From this seedbed a multitude of new communities spread out across the nation” (3). While the Midwest may stand in for the country as a whole in present-day parlance, treading upon the image of the New England town is to tread upon American history.

While she refutes simplistic, touristic images in her depictions of New England, Metalious does maintain a cultural connection with Puritanism. The New England of which she writes has, in many ways, more in common with the New England of the Puritans than with the metropolis of Boston of the present day. The novel frequently emphasizes the fact that *Peyton Place* is in not just New England, but “northern New England.” Nissenbaum, writing in 1998, claims that “the pastoral heart of the region has been moving steadily north,” and that “now that Connecticut is little more than a suburb of New York and Massachusetts is center of high-tech and academic culture, [the] rural northern areas have become the last true bastion of Yankee spirit—as it were, ‘New England’s New England’” (105, 106). This again reinforces the almost heretical nature of Metalious’s prose; by situating her story in rural northern New Hampshire, she suggests that even these last bastions are ripe for examination via the critical lens of this modernist revolt.

Smith writes that the original Puritan settlers in New England formed what he terms “covenanted communities”; he defines such a community as one “close-knit, devout, its settlers sharing the same ideals, the same theology, working out the colony’s destiny with transcendent courage, resourcefulness, and determination” (5). While the idealism behind such a settlement could certainly be seen as a boon to any developing nation, Smith notes that this same sense of togetherness made the harsh demands of Puritan morality all the more stringent: “The individual had to be concerned not only with his own behavior but with that of the total community. One’s own sins imperiled the group; one could, by failing to observe the stern demands of the covenant, bring down God’s wrath upon one’s neighbors as well as oneself. In such a crucible was the spirit of the covenanted community forged, wracked by anxiety and yearning, tormented by self-doubt, exalted by hope, cemented by faith” (7). People took responsibility for their neighbors, but that responsibility carried with it an imperative to keep others free of purported sin. In his 1980 sociological treatise *Small Town America: A Narrative History*, explains that, in these early Puritan communities, “Each man checked the conduct of the others, for under Puritan belief each man *was* his brother's keeper, obliged to watch his conduct as carefully as he presumably watched his own” (30). While there are obvious benefits to such a sense of community, especially in the strange new world that was the American continent of the seventeenth century, the drawbacks to such an arrangement have repeatedly manifested themselves in retellings of Puritan history. One need only look to events such as the Salem Witch Trials or a novel such as Nathaniel Hawthorne’s *The Scarlet Letter* to see the dangers of being one’s brother’s spiritual keeper.

Such moral imperatives most certainly extended to the sexual lives of these communities’ inhabitants, partly out of socioeconomic necessity. As Stephanie Koontz explains in *The Way We*

Never Were: American Families and the Nostalgia Trap, “In early America [in this case, white, Puritan New England in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries], reproductive and productive activity took place in the same settings, and both were subject to extensive community supervision. Many sexual norms and rules were directly linked to regulation of household work and social hierarchies, which meant that the notion of a purely private sexual life or personal sexual identity was unthinkable” (192). Forging a new life in a “virgin land” required a great deal of communal cooperation in nearly every way imaginable.

We can certainly see vestiges of this regional communalism in the world of *Peyton Place*; although now, in the mid-twentieth century, the sins of the community manifest themselves not so much via physical punishment as via verbal tongue-lashings. In this village, the fear of “being talked about” haunts every potential sin, and people go to great lengths to avoid the verbal backlash of the community at large. One of the most telling examples is that of Constance MacKenzie, a successful businesswoman who actually alters her daughter’s birth certificate in an attempt to disguise the baby’s illegitimacy. Though Constance was living in New York when she became pregnant by a married man, we learn that her mother, Elizabeth Standish (whose name is an overt reference to Myles Standish, one of the leaders of the original Plymouth Colony), lived every day in Peyton Place with the fear that the community would discover her daughter’s sin: “From the day Allison was born, Elizabeth lived with fear. She was afraid that she had not played her part well enough, that sooner or later someone would find out about the birth certificate that had been tampered with, or that some sharp-eyed individual would spot the fact that her granddaughter Allison was a year older than Constance said she was. But most of all, she was afraid for herself. In her worst nightmares she heard the voices of Peyton Place” (16). These last lines are telling, as we see that, ironically, this very emphasis on the thoughts and feelings of

the community has actually rendered the individual to place her own welfare above that of the community.

The fear of these voices becomes a huge motivator in the life of Constance herself. As Cameron notes, these voices are “a central character in the novel... and everyone fears the voices of Peyton Place” (124). While, like *Kings Row*, *Peyton Place* often functions as a *bildungsroman*, with a great deal of the storyline being filtered through the experiences of the young adult characters (the most important of which is Constance’s daughter Allison), it also gives the reader more from the perspectives of the older characters than does its thematic predecessor. The most prominent of these is Constance, who often functions as a foil for Allison. Metalious introduces their relationship by saying that “Constance and Allison had little in common with one another; the mother was of too cold and practical a mind to understand the sensitive, dreaming child, and Allison, too young and full of hopes and fancies to sympathize with her mother” (15). One could construe such a dynamic simply as a result in the difference in the ages of the characters (at the novel’s beginning Allison is thirteen and Constance is thirty-three), but as the novel progresses, we can glean that it is also a result of the experience of living in Peyton Place. Constance has lived in Peyton Place long enough to have become hardened and cynical from her experience (just like those older citizens whom Metalious says have “had the youth bled out of them” in the novel's beginning), while Allison functions much like Parris Mitchell, the adolescent idealist whose dreams extend beyond the confines of small-town life.

In giving us Constance’s history, Metalious briefly highlights the story of her time in New York, when she became involved sexually with her married employer, Allison MacKenzie (for whom the young Allison is named), “a handsome, good-natured Scot who owned a highly successful shop where he sold imported fabrics” (15). After she becomes pregnant, she agrees to

keep the situation a secret so as not to stir up any scandal, especially given the fact that Mr. MacKenzie was already married with two children. In presenting us with Constance's personal view of this situation, the text ties her attitude to the covenanted community of the New England small town: "Constance, remembering her small-town upbringing, knew well the discomfort of getting oneself talked about" (15). In connecting such secrecy specifically to her "small-town upbringing" Metalious emphasizes the power of the covenanted community, even on someone far away. In order to avoid being "talked about," Constance concocts an elaborate ruse to keep the voices at bay, one that she keeps up for over sixteen years. The novel describes it thusly:

But from that moment she began to plan for herself and her unborn child. Through her mother she spread a respectable fiction about herself in Peyton Place. Elizabeth Standish went to New York to attend the small, family wedding of her daughter Constance, as far as the town knew. In reality, she went to New York to be with Constance when her daughter returned from the hospital with the baby who had been named for Allison MacKenzie. A few years later it was a simple thing for Constance to use a little ink eradicator and to substitute a different number for the last digit in her daughter's year of birth as shown on her birth certificate. Slowly, by not answering letters hinting broadly for invitations to visit the MacKenzies, Constance Standish cut herself off from the friends of her girlhood. Soon she was forgotten by Peyton Place, remembered by her old friends only when they met Elizabeth Standish on the streets of the town (16).

While it is certainly understandable, by the standards of the time, why Constance might feel apprehension and even shame about the circumstances behind Allison's birth, her dedication to this particular scheme suggests an anxiety that extends beyond even the norms of the day. After her married lover dies, Constance takes young Allison back to her mother's (who is also now deceased) house in Peyton Place to begin life anew in the small New England town. Just as *Kings Row's* Jamie Wakefield has to perform a kind of disappearing act in plain sight in order to survive in the conservative climate of his hometown, Constance must disappear both literally (in leaving in the first place, and also in staying away for so long and avoiding the

contact to the point where the town “forgot” her) and figuratively (in hiding the true circumstances of Allison’s birth) in order to return to and try to forge some sort of normative existence in Peyton Place.

As her daughter Allison enters puberty, Constance’s obsessive fear of the judgment of the covenanted community plays out time and time again in her own judgment of Allison’s behavior. On the occasion of Allison’s thirteenth birthday party (unbeknownst to Allison at this point, it is actually her fourteenth birthday, due to the aforementioned manipulation of her birth certificate), Constance wanders downstairs to find Allison and her classmates “playing post office” (50). As she watches them secretly, Constance’s paranoid imagination takes over:

Constance stood outside the darkened living room and tried to remember at what age she had begun to participate in kissing games. She concluded that she had been at least sixteen. Could her shy, withdrawn little Allison actually be playing such games at thirteen?

For the first time since Allison’s birth, Constance felt the finger of fear which is always ready to prod at the minds of women who have made what they considered to be “a mistake.”

A quick picture of her daughter Allison, lying in bed with a man, flashed through her mind, and Constance put a shaking hand against the wall to steady herself.

Oh, she’ll get hurt! was the first thought that filled her.

Then: Oh, she’ll get in trouble!

And finally, worst of all: SHE’LL GET HERSELF TALKED ABOUT! (50)

The fact that Constance is able to, upon seeing thirteen-year-olds playing kissing games, make the cognitive leap to Allison “lying in bed with a man” and “getting in trouble” (in this case, almost certainly meaning pregnancy) definitely suggests a degree of paranoia, and the notion that “getting herself talked about” is the “worst” of all of these possible outcomes again underscores the problematic nature of the covenanted community; once again the group (i.e., the town of Peyton Place) takes precedence over the individual (i.e., Allison), apparently even when it comes to potentially dangerous situations. Of course, the over-the-top, almost comic tableau with which

Grace Metalious presents this scene highlights the absurdity of such an attitude, thereby the undermining “the cult of the village” with her own particular brand of humor.

Ironically enough, it is this very fear that ultimately leads to Constance’s secret coming out. It happens during Book II of the three-part novel, during the summer of 1939, or, as the editor of the *Peyton Place Times*, Seth Buswell would later refer to as “the bad time in ’39” (219). During this time, the text tells us, there is a terrible drought in Peyton Place and the lush countryside that had seemed so warm and inviting during the Indian summer of 1936 now “lay burnt and fruitless under the August sun, and there was that peculiar, waiting quietness in the air which comes when every man, woman and child watches the hills which encircle his town” (219). These hills, we soon learn, are the source of wildfires that continue to plague the surrounding countryside for the rest of the summer. The formerly lush, fertile landscape is now “burnt” and “fruitless,” a telling inversion of the picturesque tropes that Metalious invokes in the novel’s aforementioned opening passage.

It is not a coincidence that it is during this dry, fruitless summer that the great majority of the town’s scandals come to the surface. Looking up at the hills, the town doctor, Matthew Swain, thinks of the correlation himself: “For a moment, the doctor entertained the fanciful thought that perhaps the fire was a symbol. The purging of evil by fire, he thought...” (241) This particular evil manifests itself in Constance one evening after Allison and her friend Norman Page return late from a picnic in the woods. Constance, spending an otherwise quiet evening at home with her now-boyfriend, Tom Makris, automatically assumes that their tardiness is due to a sexual encounter, and, after the teenaged Allison returns home, Constance unleashes her rage upon her daughter in one of the novel’s most famous scenes:

Before Tom could stop her, Constance had swung her arm and slapped Allison across the face. The girl fell backward onto the sofa, and a woman Tom had never seen stood over her. Constance's whole body was stiff with rage, her face distorted with it, spotted red with it, and her voice shaking with it.

"You bastard!" shouted Constance at her daughter, and Tom felt sick with the look that washed over Allison's face.

'Stop it!' he said, but Constance did not hear him. She bent over her white-lipped daughter and screamed at her.

"Just like your father! Sex! Sex! Sex! In that way, you're just like him. It is the only thing like him about you! You don't look like him, or talk like him, but you certainly have acted just like him. It is the only thing of his that belongs to you. Not even his name belongs to you. And after the way I've sweated and slaved to bring you up decently, you go off into the woods and act just like a goddamned MacKenzie. The bastard daughter of the biggest bastard of all!" (236-7)

The evil Metalious depicts here is, of course, not Constance's affair or Allison's illegitimacy, but Constance's behavior towards her daughter, which displays both physical and verbal violence. Tom has to try to physically restrain her as she hits her daughter, and she becomes like a different person in her rage, a person whom "Tom had never seen." This passage makes it clear that the real scandal lies in what people will do to avoid the voices of Peyton Place, the covenanted community that has the power to support but also to destroy.

Allison herself, like Parris Mitchell before her, is the outsider through whom we outsiders, the readers, come to learn the truth about the town of Peyton Place. While there are certainly other characters important to the story, it is Allison's inner voice that we hear more than anyone else's. Just as Parris is an only child in the care of his worldly grandmother, Allison lives alone with her ostensibly widowed mother, a woman who defies local conventions with her urban experience and business acumen. Despite Constance's having engineered her and Allison's life around keeping the voices of Peyton Place at bay (or, to an extent, because of such actions), Allison still views the life her mother has given her as subpar, and feels like an outsider because of the rigid cultural demands of Peyton Place. In her small town that thrives on homogeneity,

Allison views her mother's urbaneness as a liability rather than an asset, as we see in the following exchange:

Together, the two went into the kitchen to prepare what Constance referred to as “dinner.” She was, Allison realized, the only woman in Peyton Place who did this. Outside, Allison was very careful about saying ‘supper.’ To others, she also spoke of ‘going to church,’ never to ‘services,’ and of a dress being ‘pretty,’ but never “smart.” Little things, such as different terminology, had the power to embarrass Allison to a point where, thinking about, them in bed at night, she writhed with shame, her face scarlet in the darkness, and hated her mother for her differentness, for making her different. (18-19)

Constance's disappearing act may have succeeded in covering up Allison's illegitimacy, but her time away from Peyton Place, in the sophisticated New York City, has further cemented her status as an outsider. Allison's emphasis on dialect and terminology also brings regionalism into the picture. In *Writing Out of Place: Regionalism, Woman, and American Literary Culture*, Judith Fetterley and Marjorie Pryse suggest that “regionalism represents that point where women recognized their locatedness within the dominant discourse, accept the concept of location, and use it to critique received meanings and construct new ones” (37). Throughout the narrative, as Allison learns more about the community of Peyton Place, and about the ways in which she and Constance fail to live up to community expectations, she also comes to learn about the problematic nature of these expectations (particularly in terms of gender roles themselves).

This passage also emphasizes not only Constance's mobility, but the town's cultural prohibitions against such mobility. Part of the way in which Constance subverts traditional expectations is via her ability to function within a variety of different spaces. Her time in New York signifies not only geographic mobility, but also the difference in terminology that Allison so detests also suggests class mobility. She uses the circumstances of her “widowhood” to open up her own business, and Constance may “accept the concept of location,” but it does not limit

her in the traditional way. While so much scandal and secrecy surrounded her entrée into New York and subsequent return, the fact that she was able to pull off such a feat in the first place suggests a degree of mobility not characteristic of being confined to the domestic sphere. Much of the tension that she experiences, as was the case with Metalious herself, is not so much her inherent distaste for navigating multiple realms but from the reaction that such behaviors incur from society at large. In a world in which women are supposed to be relegated to the domestic, something has to give when a woman tries to move beyond her relegated space. Just as Metalious had to send her children off into the cold to be cared for by neighbors, Constance has to navigate the consequences of her sexually liberated time in New York in the form of crippling anxiety.

Constance's mobility extends beyond the lingering effects of her time in the city. "Soon after her return to Peyton Place," the text tells us, "she opened a small apparel shop on Elm Street and settled down to the business of making a living for herself and her baby daughter" (28). Her ostensible widowhood allows her to leave behind the domestic sphere and enter the working world, a world that takes up much of her time for a great deal of the novel. But this too requires negotiation, and as Constance becomes busier with her shop, Metalious reminds us of the difficulties of navigating these different spaces: "Constance had not much time to spend with her daughter these days. She had bought the vacant store next to the Thrifty Corner [her dress shop] and was now busily engaged in enlarging her shop... She also hired Nellie Cross to come in three days a week to clean house for her" (132). As the novel progresses, her business becomes more successful, but this passage reminds us of the ways in which such activity takes Constance out of the domestic sphere. Not only does it prevent her from seeing much of her

daughter, but it also requires her to outsource the work of the domestic sphere to Nellie Cross, the mother of Allison's friend Selena.

While Constance is able to enjoy a life that allows her freedom beyond the confines of the domestic sphere, the presence of Nellie Cross brings up issues of class that are not immediately evident in the world of the well-to-do Constance MacKenzie and her daughter. Nellie Cross lives with her husband, Lucas, and her children, Selena and Joey, in a tarpaper shack. According to the text, such shacks are in abundance not only in the town but also throughout the region, sitting, “like running sores, on the body of northern New England” (46). Such a depiction surely belies the images perpetuated in the pages of *Yankee*, and serves to not only undermine simplistically pastoral evocations of the American small town, but also to introduce the realities and hardships of poverty, something that Metalious experienced firsthand for most of her life, to her readers. The demotic discursive space that the text perpetuates extends not only to the needs and desires of a variety of female characters, but also to the economically disenfranchised as well.

Naturally, such a space is not without its complications. Metalious notes the irony in Constance's own personal domestic sphere being able to achieve a normative physical appearance only via the efforts of someone who has neither the means nor the time to perpetuate such a façade in her own home, or on her own person. Constance herself notes this irony in starkly classist terms, telling Allison that “Nellie Cross may look like a pig herself... but she certainly keeps this house shining” (133). As the text progresses, and it becomes clear that Nellie is aware that her husband has raped and impregnated her daughter, Selena, Nellie becomes more withdrawn and incoherent, and eventually commits suicide. The place she chooses to enact her demise is not within the walls of her tarpaper shack, but in the MacKenzie home that she has

helped to beautify. In the moments before she ends her life, she enjoys the sensuality of her surroundings in the closet of Allison's bedroom: "... she fingered the strong silk cord of Allison's bathrobe, which hung on a hook just inside the closet door, and she was smiling, a moment later, when she dragged a straight chair into the closet. It took two tries before she could get the end of the silk cord over the two-by-four beam which the closet had been constructed to hide" (321).

This scene creates a powerful tableau in which the seemingly serene domestic sphere becomes a site of carnage, with Nellie appropriating the expensive material of Allison's bathrobe in her demise. She also hangs the cord over a two-by-four that the closet had been designed "to hide," thereby reiterating the fake nature of a perfectly tranquil domestic façade. Nellie's death not only problematizes idealized notions of the domestic space, but also achieves a kind of comeuppance in the fact that Nellie did not go silently within the confines of her tarpaper shack, but dared to make her problems known in a seemingly perfect, middle-class space.

This brings us to the character of Allison herself. When we are first introduced to her, we find her at thirteen (although she thinks she is still twelve at this point, due to Constance's lie) making her routine retreat to a cordoned-off wooded area that the text refers to as "Road's End," apparently so named for the sign that one must pass at the end of a paved road. Like Father Donovan in *Kings Row*, Allison finds rejuvenation in nature, and the text takes care to remind the reader that, in retreating into unspoiled nature, Allison is not just enjoying the natural world around her, but she is leaving Peyton Place behind. In so doing Metalious separates the image of the town even further from simplistic pastoralism. Peyton Place itself is not a place where Allison finds the feeling of being "closer to nature" that Leo Marx iterates in *The Machine in the Garden*; she has to physically leave the inhabited part of town to feel such feelings. If the success of the "revolt from the village" was colored by a distinctly Midwestern brand of progressivism,

Peyton Place, in its questioning of the supremacy of the village, echoes the tradition of New England transcendentalism, a kind of Emersonian self-reliance. Just like her Midwestern predecessors, Metalious uses ideals specific to the region to critique the region, thereby reiterating the fact that this tradition is not about outright condemnation of rurality and/or regionalism, but about using regionalism hand in hand with modernism, to break down the ideal that presents an overly simplistic, pastoral evocation of the more complicated entity known as the village. In *Revolt of the Provinces: The Regionalist Movement in America: 1920-1945*, Robert L. Dorman writes of the gradual dissipation of Puritanism as the main organizing force in New England village life, reiterating historian Lewis Mumford's characterization of the religious movement as a "shell," i.e., an important facet in the outward presentation of the community without much inner substance. Rather, he posits, "instead of collapsing into anomie, this disintegrating Puritanism 'begot' the transcendentalism of the Golden Day, a movement of regional self-cultivation, selecting, adapting, and transfiguring the remnants of its cultural inheritance to suit the needs of a secular and industrial age" (8). Tiffany K. Wayne, in *Woman Thinking: Feminism and Transcendentalism in Nineteenth-Century America*, presents a more overtly oppositional definition of transcendentalism, writing that the movement "came about as a crisis of faith—an intellectual rejection of the Calvinist religious orthodoxy of New England's Puritan heritage" (4). If *Peyton Place* serves, in many ways, as a region defined by this "Puritan heritage," Allison's rejection of the town's establishment, mirrors, in many ways, the nineteenth-century transcendentalists' rejection of Puritan orthodoxy. With these definitions in mind, we can see New England transcendentalism as a kind of precursor to modernism, a questioning of the *status quo*, and an important lens through which Metalious filters the experience of Allison MacKenzie.

Allison's numerous excursions to Road's End, in many ways, echo the New England literary tradition that Elisa New, in *New England Beyond Criticism: In Defense of America's First Literature*, calls the "errand into the wilderness," a trope that she dates back to the original Puritan settlers. Though so much of Puritan ideology focused on the idea of the covenanted community, Puritans believed, New argues, that a spell of isolation in nature could actually reinforce bonds within such a community. As this tradition evolved into the transcendentalism of the nineteenth century, writers placed more emphasis on such an errand as being a means to communing in and of itself—that is, communing with nature. New explains that "getting lost in the woods actually bestows the comfort of the *known*: the wilderness episode confers familiar and even familial nearness" (108). The most famous of these errands, of course, would be Henry David Thoreau's time in the woods, as depicted in *Walden*. Thoreau himself glories in descriptions of getting lost in the woods, explaining that such forays make him feel closer to not only himself but also the community he leaves behind in the town: "... not till we are completely lost, or turned round—do we appreciate the strangeness and vastness of nature.... Not till we are lost, in other words not till we have lost the world, do we begin to find ourselves, and realize where we are and the infinite extent of our relations." While such a sentiment certainly underscores a sense of balance between the country and the town, it also, as we saw in *Kings Row*, it also serves to disrupt a strict urban/rural binary; perhaps the town is not so rural after all, and the only space wherein one can experience true pastoralism is in unspoiled nature, like Walden or Road's End. Allison's relationship with the natural world also underscores her mobility and agency as she undertakes a kind of spiritual quest commonly associated with male philosophers.

While Allison's own errand into the wilderness does ultimately lead to the kind of realization of self and community of which Thoreau writes, her early encounters in the natural world serve to emphasize just how distinctly un-pastoral the town itself is. As we first see the thirteen-year-old Allison in the environment of Road's End, she is not one who is "lost" at all; rather, she displays an intimate familiarity with the natural environment: "She knew where the first arbutus trailed in the spring, when there were still large patches of snow on the ground, and she knew the quiet, shady places where the violets made purple clusters after the snows had disappeared. She knew where to find lady's-slipper, and where there was an open field, hidden in the middle of the woods, and covered in summer with buttercups and brown-eyed Susans" (13). Indeed, it is within the confines of Peyton Place that this young Allison feels lost, as Metalious describes her looking down on the town from the safety of Road's End: "She tried to locate the white and green cottage where she lived with her mother, but she could not distinguish her home from all the others in her neighborhood. From where Allison was sitting, her house was two miles away" (12). Sally Hirsh-Dickinson suggests that, "The visual sameness that obscures Allison's sense of home recalls the aerial photographs of Levittown, which reveal row upon row of tract housing" (147). Such claims reiterate the idea that it is unspoiled nature, and not the midcentury small town, that is the source of true pastoralism, and Peyton Place, like Levittown, functions as a simulacrum, trying to funnel happiness and simplicity through the guise of sameness.

We should also note here that Road's End functions as a distinctly feminine space, free from the constraints of the patriarchal community. Of course, Metalious conflates nature with femininity from the novel's very first lines, both embracing the trope of nature as "virgin land" and simultaneously subverting it. Just as the land represents the physical and sexual aspects of

femininity, Allison, as a teenage girl, is plagued by insecurities about her physical body, viewing herself as “an unattractive girl, plump in the wrong places, flat in the wrong spots, too long in the legs and too round in the face” (11). At Road's End, her insecurities vanish to the point where she catches herself speaking to trees and doesn't even care: “She fancied that the trees were saying, 'Hello, Allison. Hello, Allison,' and she smiled. In one moment of time, precious with a lack of self consciousness, she held her arms wide and called, 'Hello! Oh, hello, everything beautiful!’” (13). Here she experiences a kind of self-reliance that she cannot in the town itself. The only other character who appears to enjoy Road's End as a kind of errand into the wilderness is Norman Page, whom the text codes as feminine in many ways.

Allison's own brand of self-reliance becomes even clearer to the reader as the novel progresses and she becomes less and less enamored with the confines of the domestic sphere. While Constance lives in continual fear of being talked about, Allison truly upholds Emerson's maxim as she matures: “To believe your own thought, to believe that what is true for you in your private heart is true for all men,-- that is genius.” Such maturity becomes particularly apparent in one of the lesser known scenes of the novel, a scene involving Allison's friend Kathy Ellsworth. As Allison develops into the village's unabashed iconoclast, Kathy becomes more and more enthralled by conventional expressions of midcentury femininity, expressions she specifically ties to her small-town locale in the following exchange, when the girls are sixteen years old:

“I'm going to move away,” said Allison, “as fast as ever I can after I finish high school. I'm going to Barnard College. That's in New York City.”

“Not me,” said Kathy ungrammatically. “I'm never going away from here. I'm going to marry Lew [her high-school boyfriend] and live in Peyton Place forever and have a huge family. You know what?”

“No. What?”

“Lew and I are going to *buy* a house after we get married.”

“What's so extra about that? All married people buy houses eventually. It's all part of the whole stultifying, stupid pattern.” (222)

In the late summer of 1939, as the fires continue to rage in the hills outside of the town, Allison and Kathy and Kathy's boyfriend Lewis attend a Labor Day carnival in town. Leslie Harrington, the owner of the local mill and the richest man in town, has apparently held the carnival despite a shortage of staff at that particular time. At one point Allison and her friends wander into a funhouse, where Kathy spies a hole in the ground through which she can see the funhouse machinery, in an opening that the text carefully notes "should have been covered" (262). Kathy then falls into the hole, and Metalious portrays what happens next in a morbid tableau: "Lewis squatted down on his heels and tried to reach Kathy's hand, but Kathy's hand was on the end of an arm no longer attached to her body" (263). Of this scene Hirsh-Dickinson writes that "the missing limb, the distorting effect of the mirrors, the claustrophobia and disorientation of the structure and the space, and the unintentional exposure of the inner working of a (fun)house's secrets in an apparently subterranean space all conspire to uncanny effect, rendering the familiar strange, precisely what such structures are meant to do" (133). This uncanny effect, resulting in the destruction of the female body who most closely resemble the ideal young female in Peyton Place suggests, like the identical white houses, a sense of façade in the outwardly respectable community.

But this uncanny tableau also gives Allison to display her self-reliance in a bigger arena. After the accident, Kathy's working-class family sues Leslie Harrington for thirty thousand dollars, but everyone knows that they will lose before the trial even begins because the jury will be made up of mill hands. Allison appeals to Seth Buswell, the editor of *The Peyton Place Times*, to publish her letter to the editor: "It was time, Allison had written, for men of honor to stand up and be counted. When the time came that an individual in a free American town was forced to fear a prejudiced hearing, it was indeed a time to try men's souls" (285). Mr. Buswell refuses to

print it, though, and despite Allison's impassioned testimony at the hearing, Harrington wins the case. Soon afterward, after graduates from high school, she makes good on her promise to leave Peyton Place.

Later on, Tom Makris, now married to Constance MacKenzie, speculates that, "Although Allison and I never came to understand one another as well as I should have liked, I think she began to think of leaving here right after Nellie Cross killed herself" (379). Such a comment is a reference to the fact that it was Allison who discovered Nellie's "blue-faced, grotesque body" in the confines of her pretty pink bedroom (331). Allison experiences a response of abjection as she realizes the stark differences and harsh realities contained within her domestic space. Nellie's corpse represents not just death itself, but the threat of poverty and the threat of relegation to the domestic. Shortly after that, she leaves such a space behind entirely and makes good on her promise to go to New York and work as a writer.

Even though the text registers such critique of the small New England town, it follows the tradition of *Kings Row* in that it does not present the city as a panacea. While there is much that Allison enjoys about her adult life in New York, she has her problems too. Like her mother before her, she has found herself in an affair with a married man, which she has recently ended. When we meet Allison again she is a young woman of twenty-one, returning home to Peyton Place for the first time since high school. In the final scene of the novel she once again climbs up to Road's End, and takes in the scene around her:

Allison looked up at the sky, blue with the deep blueness peculiar to Indian summer, and thought of it as a cup inverted over her alone. The feeling was soothing, as it had always been, but for a single moment now, Allison felt that she no longer needed to be soothed and comforted as she once had. When she stood up and began to walk again, the sun was high with noontime brightness, and when she came to the sign with the red letters painted

on its side, she had to shade her eyes with her hand to look down at the toy village that was Peyton Place.

Oh, I love you, she cried silently. I love every part of you. Your beauty and your cruelty, your kindness and ugliness. But now I know you, and you no longer frighten me. Perhaps you will again, tomorrow or the next day, but right now I love you and I am not afraid of you. Today you are just a place. (371)

And with that Allison's errand into the wilderness is over. It is through her time in these oppositional spaces, in both the wild, untamed wilderness and the wilderness of the large city, that Allison has come to understand herself and that infinite network of relations. She realizes that the small town is not a pastoral idyll, nor is it evil, but it is "just a place."

The last of the three main female characters in the novel, and the one with the most tragic story, is Selena Cross. In the text's most notorious storyline, Selena becomes pregnant at sixteen after years of sexual abuse at the hands of her stepfather, Lucas Cross. Perhaps the most levelheaded character in the novel, Selena represents a middle ground between Constance's paralyzing fear of the covenanted community and Allison's self-reliance and idealism. Part of this presumably has to do with her working-class upbringing; her daily struggle to survive in an impoverished, shack-dwelling family certainly render the MacKenzie women's problems rather superfluous. In junior high, when Allison retreats into fantasy, "Selena was wise with the wisdom learned of poverty and wretchedness. At thirteen, she saw hopelessness as an old enemy, as persistent and inevitable as death" (31). The one-room shack that is home to her family is one of many that are a continual source of embarrassment for the town's elite, many of whom want to enforce zoning laws in the hopes of getting rid of them. In a community that values appearances above all, poverty is just as shameful as sin.

After Selena becomes pregnant, her hardheaded façade begins to melt a little, as she knows the power of the voices of the covenanted community: "But now, with this terrible thing that had happened to her, she was afraid. She knew her town, and its many voices" (138).

Because of this power, she does not feel that she can confide in anyone, even her closest friends. When she finally goes to the kindly town doctor, Matthew Swain, to beg for an illegal abortion, she refuses to name the father of her baby until he insists that she do so, partly out of fear and partly out of shame.

Doc Swain does eventually give her an abortion, and literally chases Lucas Cross out of town. When Lucas returns unexpectedly several years later and attempts to rape Selena one more time, she kills him by beating him to death with fire tongs and buries him in her family's sheep pen. Selena's story speaks to the poignant reality of childhood sexual abuse, and when she finally kills her abuser, gives her a kind of power and agency that flies in the face of conventional notions of midcentury femininity. Such a story also performs an important act of critical regionalism in her retelling of another story. While *Kings Row* was an important source for the structure and characters of *Peyton Place*, the story of Selena Cross was inspired largely by the story of Jane Glenn, a young woman accused of murdering her father in Metalious's own town of Gilmanton, New Hampshire. Ardis Cameron explains that, "In the village of Gilmanton, New Hampshire, the story of the sheep pen murder often begins with the concealed remains of Sylvester Roberts and how they came to be discovered on the night of September 5, 1947. People are apt to tell you how, the year before, he was shot dead and buried a few days before Christmas, his body dragged to the barn then stuffed beneath, where the earth remained warm and easy to dig" (38). In *Critical Regionalism: Connecting Politics and Culture in the American Landscape*, Douglas Reichert Powell describes the story of "Murderous Mary," a rogue circus elephant who was ultimately executed by an angry mob in his own home community, in similar terms, explaining the details that locals will "always" include. He asserts that such behavior constitutes "constructing a region. Regions are not so much places themselves but ways of

describing relationships among places” (10). Thus, in reiterating the story of Jane Glenn, Metalious is also constructing a region, a region where terrible things like this do happen and their stories are told, thereby undermining perfectly pastoral portraits of rural New England.

But there is something more going on here too. Powell, in honing his own definition of critical regionalism, says: “Recognizing that region is a social that can be and indeed continually is shaped by the practices of its inhabitants, and that region can be a social invention used deliberately to transform the politics and culture of the landscape, a critical regionalism works in solidarity with the historically disempowered populations of its communities to transform their local material circumstances while linking their particular struggles to larger ones” (26). Seen through the light of critical regionalism, Metalious's retelling of the Jane Glenn story is not merely regurgitating local folklore, but taking the local folklore and using to critique not only the institutions behind such a region, but the problem of child sexual abuse as a whole.

In the end, we should note, a jury of her Peyton Place peers acquits her of Lucas's murder, after Doc Swain comes forward and testifies to her abuse and the subsequent abortion. Just as Allison comes to see that her town is “just a place,” Selena learns that the power of the covenanted community can be used for good just as easily as for evil. Selena's ability to transcend class limitations is a testament to her own mobility. At the novel's end, she has become a manager in Constance's dress shop while also raising her younger brother, an independent woman who makes her own money and is not relegated solely to the domestic sphere.

The end of the novel spells out relatively happy endings for all three of its main female characters: Selena has won the support of the community and is an independent, single working woman; Allison has built a successful career in New York and appears to be rebuilding her life after a failed affair, and Constance has settled into a happy marriage with Tom Makris. This

ending certainly falls short of a feminist triumph, especially in Constance's relationship with Tom, a relationship that began with an encounter that can only be read as rape by contemporary accounts, and one that takes less and less of her time away from her business. But just as the text does not attack the village outright, it also stops short of projecting a universal feminist viewpoint. What it does present is choice and mobility, a mobility heretofore denied women in the creation of the myth of American exceptionalism. Regardless of where they end up, these characters are not limited by the idea of separate spheres, and all three of them go on to craft complex lives for themselves via navigating a variety of material and discursive spaces.

Thus Metalious's novel, like those of the "village rebels" before her, is not an overtly scathing indictment of small-town life. Rather, it is encouragement to look beyond the Levittown-like surface of the midcentury village. The text calls on its reader to pay attention to a lot of issues, particularly those affecting women. While some characters' stories end well and others don't, Metalious uses the small New England town to highlight the struggles of her female characters, and to create a feminine space in which women transgress the limitations of a separate-spheres ideology via their own mobility. In a 1950s television interview, Grace Metalious was asked if *Peyton Place* will be remembered 25 years from now, to which she replied, "Oh, heavens, no" ("AMC Backstory"). Yet *Peyton Place*, despite its reputation for scandal, has made a lasting mark on its readership, and has proved to be ahead of its time both in its mapping of the small town, and of the lives of women.

Chapter Three: “Blue Northers and Barbed Wire: Modernization and the Village in Larry McMurtry’s *The Last Picture Show*”

Beginning in 1969, in the beginning of the postmodern era, the American television network CBS instigated what was known as the “rural purge,” cancelling all of its previously popular rural-themed programming (with some of the more well-known examples being *Petticoat Junction*, *The Beverly Hillbillies*, *Green Acres*, and Andy Griffith spin-off *Mayberry RFD*) in the space of just two years. Indeed, the anti-pastoralism of CBS’s head of programming, 33-year-old Fred Silverman (often billed as “the first executive who grew up on television”), was so vehement that it led Pat Buttram, who portrayed the bumbling salesman Mr. Haney on *Green Acres*, to quip that CBS cancelled “everything with a tree in it,” and the casualties extended to even *Lassie* and *Mutual of Omaha’s Wild Kingdom* (Berman). The reason given at the time for such a move involved what was seen as the increasing irrelevance of such settings to modern life, and the following years at CBS saw these programs replaced with the likes of heavier, more urban fare such as *All in the Family*, *The Mary Tyler Moore Show*, and *The Bob Newhart Show*. And with that, simple portrayals of small-town life were all but exorcised from the television landscape for a number of years, and those depictions that did thrive (such as CBS’s drama *The Waltons* and NBC’s *Little House on the Prairie*) often did so by setting their stories in bygone eras, thereby fueling Raymond Williams’s 1973 assertion that Western civilization tends to conflate the rural with a sense of nostalgia. Glimpsing the rural life was a way of looking backward, not forward.

Though there is no similarly dramatic term for trends in American literature at that time, a look at popular novels and even the American canon of this era support the idea of a similar “rural purge.” The fifty years prior had worked to challenge simplistically pastoral evocations of

small-town America, beginning *en masse* with the initial spark of the literary “revolt from the village” between 1915 and 1930, which was spearheaded by such luminaries as Edgar Lee Masters, Sherwood Anderson, and Sinclair Lewis. As we have seen, bestsellers over the intervening years continued to challenge these conceptions, such as Henry Bellamann’s *Kings Row* (1940) and Grace Metalious’s *Peyton Place* (1956). An important bridge between the success of these novels and the “rural purge” of the late sixties and early seventies is Larry McMurtry’s 1966 novel *The Last Picture Show*. While novels such as *Main Street* sought to show what lurked beneath the postcard-perfect exterior of the American small town, by the time we get to *The Last Picture Show*, there is no postcard-perfect exterior to disrupt. McMurtry shows us the inevitable consequences of the increased emphasis on urbanization in the twentieth century; not only does he undermine the heretofore established bucolic ideal of small-town America, but he turns established notions of rural beauty and morality on their heads. While efforts earlier in the modern era shocked readers by suggesting that not everyone in a small town is a paragon of virtue, *The Last Picture Show*’s Thalia, Texas is a community where little virtue is to be found at all. In fact, there is hardly any real community to speak of; everyone exists in their own solipsistic universe, and the tenuous connection to any kind of civic-minded altruism rapidly dissipates when the novel’s moral center, pool-hall owner Sam the Lion, dies a little more than halfway through the narrative.

While we can certainly link the novel to the modernist notions of critiquing a simplistic evocation of rurality, McMurtry’s work, typical of David Harvey’s description of the “antimodernism of the 1960s,” also critiques this very critique by showing us the logical outcome of a society devoted to ever-increasing urbanization. In *The Condition of Postmodernity: An Enquiry Into the Origins of Cultural Change*, Harvey writes that “If the

modernist has to destroy in order to create, then the only way to represent eternal truths is through a process of destruction that is liable, in the end, to be itself destructive of those truths” (17). Indeed, the small postwar Texas town with which McMurtry presents us (while the novel first appeared in 1966, the story takes place circa 1953, further fueling the aforementioned connection between rurality and nostalgia) is a far cry from what Carl Van Doren infamously deemed “cult of the village” in his initial characterization of the literary “revolt,” but there is ample textual evidence that it is a far cry perhaps because of the very forces that initially challenged the cult (146). *The Last Picture Show* presents a community that presents us with a kind of *reductio ad absurdum* picture of the consequences of striving to continually “make it new,” which is, of course, a total abandonment of that which we deem as “old.” With this tension, the text, unlike the town itself, becomes a kind of liminal space, acknowledging the modernist tradition but also paving the way for a more postmodern rendering of small-town America.

In addition to embodying this kind of cultural nadir in terms of depictions of small-town America, *The Last Picture Show* also utilizes numerous regional tropes as aids in demystifying and deconstructing the advent of ubiquitous modernization and its accompanying economic practices. In this sense the text provides us with a kind of critical regionalism, a term first coined by architect Kenneth Frampton, who defines it thusly: “The fundamental strategy of Critical Regionalism is to mediate the impact of universal civilization with elements derived *indirectly* from the peculiarities of a particular place” (21). In honing her own definition of critical regionalism, Cheryl Herr explains that “As a practice, a critical-regionalist cultural studies has great potential for producing a unified but highly adaptable analysis of international flows of capital and resistance to the negative effects of those flows at the local-regional level, toward the

end of a more heterogeneous and tolerant future” (18). McMurtry presents us with a desolate rendering of rural Texas, but the town of Thalia is not an island, physically or metaphorically. The text uses regional tropes and myths associated with historic conceptions of the American West that ultimately show the failings of not just the small town, but the nation and even the world as a whole in the face of late-capitalist practices. In honing his own definition of late capitalism, referring to the global economic practices that first gained a real stronghold in the aftermath of World War II, Fredric Jameson explains that the use of the word "late" here refers to "the sense that something has changed, that things are different, that we have gone through a transformation in the life world which is somehow decisive but incomparable with the older convulsions of modernization and industrialization, less perceptible and dramatic, somehow, but more permanent precisely because more thorough-going and all pervasive" (xxi). This kind of amorphous, less "dramatic" change for the worse is certainly evident in the tone throughout *The Last Picture Show*. In showing us these failings McMurtry provides textually this kind of resistance to which Herr refers. He uses the culture and landscape of a specific American region that exemplify the problems surrounding forces at work larger than those of the region alone. In the introduction to *Critical Regionalism: Connecting Politics and Culture in the American Landscape*, Douglas Reichert Powell writes that critical regionalism addresses “this kind of place, this kind of contradictory moment where something unique and isolated seems to be going on, but something else—something complex and interconnected—is also happening” (18). The isolation that permeates *The Last Picture Show* is largely connected to the town itself, but there are numerous instances in which the reader can glean this sense of something beyond the scope of small-town Texas; indeed, other, more powerful processes are behind the textual unraveling of this rural outpost.

Nowadays, one might dare argue that when most people think of *The Last Picture Show*, if they have heard of it at all, they conjure up the image of Peter Bogdanovich's 1971 film adaptation of McMurtry's tome. As a prominent member of the set labeled the "New Hollywood," directors such as Bogdanovich sought to capture a more youthful, modern world on film, not unlike the way that Fred Silverman did for television. From the very beginning, Bogdanovich's auteurist choice of visuals highlights the desperate anti-pastoralism captured in the novel. In an era in which popular entertainment relied on the use of color more than ever before, *The Last Picture Show* is tellingly shot in a stark black and white. Rather than utilize a Hollywood set, Bogdanovich shot the film on location in Archer City, Texas, McMurtry's own hometown and the not-so-secret inspiration for the novel's Thalia. In addition to the lack of color, Bogdanovich highlights the loneliness and desolation of the landscape by frequently panning across the town's main streets, with such shots being frequently accompanied by rolling tumbleweeds and loud, howling winds.

Such effects emphasize the anti-bucolic sentiment that permeates the novel. In Leo Marx's *The Machine in the Garden*, published just two years before *The Last Picture Show*, Marx underscores what he deems two different types of "pastoral" by emphasizing that both embody "the yearning for a simpler, more harmonious style of life, an existence 'closer to nature'" (6). And, in the popular imagination of most of the modern era, that was the consolation prize for living apart from the ever-increasing urban centers of the United States, a simpler way of life, and proximity to the beauty of nature. But in Thalia, Texas, life is not simple, nor is there any beauty in nature; indeed, the tumbling tumbleweeds are about as good as it gets. In his article "Doing Without," Tom Pilkington writes that, "*The Last Picture Show* indicts Thalia in about every way possible for deadening and constricting the lives of its citizens, for making those lives

as drab and gray as the West Texas sky during a spring duststorm" (120). The town's own moniker takes on a very ironic quality with this landscape, as Thalia was, in Greek mythology, the muse of both comedy and pastoral poetry. The fact that this dusty postwar town could ever be associated with pastoral poetry in any way does lend itself to a kind of comedy, specifically to the black humor that trickles in throughout the narrative.

Larry McMurtry specifically ties this anti-pastoralism to the novel's Southwestern locale in the 1989 preface to his essay collection *In a Narrow Grave: Essays on Texas*, explaining that

Before I was out of high school I realized I was witnessing the dying of a way of life – the rural, pastoral way of life. In the Southwest the best energies were no longer to be found in the homeplace, or in the small towns; the cities required these energies and the cities bought them. The kids who stayed in the country tended to be dull, lazy, cautious, or all three; those with brains, zip, and daring were soon off to Dallas or Houston (xiii).

Such sentiments echo Raymond Williams's own problematization, in his exploration of the process of urbanization in Industrial-Revolution England, of stereotypes regarding who "stayed behind" in the more rural environs: "It is often said of the whole process of industrialisation and urbanism that all of the able people went off to the factories and the towns, or decided to emigrate, leaving only the slow, the feckless, and the ignorant" (184). While Williams does present such sentiments as stereotypes, both he and McMurtry are emphasizing the fact that industrialization does sometimes steal human resources, in addition to natural resources, away from the rural locale.

While the brain-drain phenomenon that McMurtry describes is certainly not endemic to Texas, Thalia's own particular brand of desolation is also closely linked with the regional prevalence of the oil industry. Decades before national conversations turned toward hydraulic fracking or the Keystone XL pipeline, McMurtry shows us the consequences that our

dependence on oil has on the natural landscape. Texas-based historian Walter Prescott Webb, in 1951's *The Great Frontier*, already acknowledges the voracious oil consumption of the late-capitalist era, noting that, "The story of oil and its derivatives is much shorter and more extreme than that of coal. The source supplies only 7.8 per cent of fossil fuel energy. Its use dates from about 1850, but its consumption has been so accelerated that we have already used up 5.7 per cent of the estimated total of petroleum and natural gas" (297). Oil is big business in Thalia, and the continual exploitation of natural resources put a strain on the town in a number of ways.

Not only is it harmful to the land, but, on a larger scale, the oil industry is irrevocably yoked to the forces of modernization and global capitalism. In her 2007 article "System Failure: Oil, Futurity, and the Anticipation of Disaster," Imre Szeman emphasizes this fact by referring to what she terms the "advent of oil capitalism in 1859 (with its discovery in Titusville, Pennsylvania)" (805). Of this particular brand of capitalism, she continues: "From oil flows capitalism as we still know it: the birth of the first giant multinationals—Standard Oil (whose component elements still exist in Exxon Mobil, Texaco, and British Petroleum), DuPont, and the Big Three automobile makers: the defining social system of private transportation—cars, air travel, freeways, and with these, suburbs, 'white flight,' malls, inner-city ghettoization, and so on..." (805). In small-town Texas, not only does this newer brand of capitalism involve damage to the physical landscape, but it also contributes to forces that take people away from such communities. While oil may have been a boon to Thalia's economy at one point, it also literally provides a means from which to escape small-town life, and thus makes what life is left in the town look dull in comparison. In providing the populace with such means of transportation, it also further erodes the urban/rural binary that the original village rebels so challenged.

The importance of the commercial oil business over the natural landscape is illustrated particularly tellingly in a scene in which Sonny Crawford, the novel's teenaged protagonist, first shares an illicit kiss with Ruth Popper, the forty-year-old wife of his high-school football coach, at a Christmas dance at the local Legion Hall: "For a minute they were too silent—Sonny looked over her head, beyond the town. Far across the pastures he saw the lights of an oil derrick, brighter than the cold winter stars. Suddenly Mrs. Popper lifted her head and they kissed" (81). Here McMurtry subverts the association of romantic and sexual acts with unblemished nature; not only is the oil derrick part of the local landscape, but its lights actually shine brighter than those of the stars, thereby visually emphasizing the importance of commerce over nature in the era of late capitalism. It also calls to mind the prologue of McMurtry's first novel, 1961's *Horseman, Pass By* (later made into the 1963 film *Hud*), in which the protagonist, seventeen-year-old Lonnie Bannon, climbs to the top of the windmill on his grandfather's ranch to watch the scene below:

When I knew Granddad was in bed I went back to the windmill and stopped the blades, so I could climb up and sit on the platform beneath the big fin. Around me, across the dark prairie, the lights were clear. The oil derricks were lit with strings of yellow bulbs, like Christmas trees. The lights were still on in the kitchens of the pumpers' cabins, the little green-topped shacks scattered across the plain, each one propped on a few stacks of bricks. Twelve miles away, to the north, the red and green and yellow lights of Thalia shimmered against the dark. I sat above it all, in the cool breezy air that swept under the windmill blades, above it all, in the cool breezy air that swept under the windmill blades, hearing the rig motors purr and the heavy trucks growl up the hill. Above the chattering of the ignorant Rhode Island Reds I heard two whippoorwills, the ghostly birds I never saw, calling across the flats below the ridge. (5-6)

While *Horseman, Pass By* deals more with ranch life than town life in west Texas (note the use of "Thalia," which McMurtry uses as locale in not only *The Last Picture Show* and *Horseman, Pass By*, but also in his second novel, *Leaving Cheyenne*), it presents a similar conflict between

the region's cowboy, pioneer past and its industrial present. Here young Lonnie physically stops the motion of the windmill, which represents an older mode of power, one more often associated with the agrarian past, and gazes out not on pure, unspoiled nature but on the lights of modern industry. The line between nature and industry is blurred further with the anthropomorphic characterization of the rigs "purring" and the motors "growling," while he depicts the real animals as "ignorant" and "ghostly." This grotesque core image seems to have sprung from Larry McMurtry's own childhood in the same region, during the same time period. In his essay "Movie-Tripping: My Own Rotten Film Festival," he paints a similar picture while recalling his Texas upbringing: "I did as a boy sit on the barn my uncles sat on to watch the last trail herds go by, and from there, or, as had been more common (it not being easy to climb barns), from the top of the windmill I could see a long way, into some great sunsets and far back into the mythic reaches of the West, to which, try though I might, I could never belong, nor ever fail to respond" (148). This scene perfectly encapsulates this tension between past and present; he knows that he can "never belong" to that mythic vision, yet he also can't "fail to respond." It's a heartbreaking process, one that haunts the psychological landscape of *The Last Picture Show*.

In keeping with this simultaneously anti-pastoral and yet anti-modern tone, the text does not glorify this emphasis on industry; rather, the juxtaposition of these "machines" with the desert landscape shows us the insufficiency of industry when it comes to conquering the desert Southwest. In the introduction to their edited collection *Regionalism and the Humanities*, Timothy R. Mahoney and Wendy J. Katz explain the importance of the Southwestern United States to studies of critical regionalism, noting that "Its desert, as a supremely harsh environment, provides reassurance of the overriding importance of nature in a culture that otherwise flaunts its ability to escape nature, through means such as air conditioning or

irrigation” (xxii). Or oil derricks, for that matter. Yes, the oil derrick does shine more brightly than the stars, but the stars are still there. Most of the nature with which McMurtry presents us, though, is far more threatening than stars in the night sky; again and again, the text emphasizes this “supremely harsh environment.”

One way in which it does this is via the regular presence of strong winds that the townspeople deem “blue northers”; one particular early passage, in which Sonny performs his job of delivering butane to inhabitants of the surrounding countryside, aptly describes the power of such an event on multiple levels: “Out in the open country the norther gusted strongly across the highway, making the truck hard to hold. Once in while a big ragweed would shake loose from the barbed-wire fences and skitter across the road, only to catch again in the barbed-wire fence on the other side... It occurred to Sonny that perhaps people called them ‘blue northers’ because it was hard not to get blue when one was blowing” (16). Here, Sonny’s mental connection renders the wind as a kind of cyclical objective correlative, an entity that both makes the townspeople feel “blue” and also symbolizes the largely “blue” feelings that permeate the emotional landscape of the novel. We can also examine this phenomenon through the lens of critical regionalism. This powerful wind pushes against the butane truck, making it “hard to hold.” The ragweeds are described as “shaking loose” from the barbed-wire fences that hold them back, only to be caught again. This struggle between elements of the natural realm (i.e., winds and ragweed) and those of the modern industrial realm (i.e., butane trucks and barbed-wire fences) not only highlights the struggle that is life in Thalia, but shows that this struggle extends beyond the forces of nature themselves. In the desert Southwest, nature is a force to be reckoned with, and attempting to subvert it inevitably leads to struggle. It is not merely the landscape itself that makes the area so bleak, but also what modern industry has done to the landscape.

The tension is also enumerated in the text's characterization of Sam the Lion, the elderly proprietor of the local pool hall, the local diner, and the one eponymous "picture show" in Thalia. He espouses an old-fashioned sense of stability that is found in no other characters in the novel; Christopher Baker, in his article "The Death of Frontier in the Novels of Larry McMurry," refers to him as the town's "last remnant of the frontier cowboy culture of the plains" (168). In the novel's first chapter, McMurry furnishes some background on Sam in the form of a brief but tragic biographical synopsis:

Sam the Lion was the man who took care of things, particularly of boys, and Sonny did not like to think that he might die. The reason Sam was so especially good to boys was that he himself had had three sons, none of whom lived to be eighteen. The first was killed when Sam was still a rancher; he and his son were trying to drive a herd of yearlings across the Little Wichita River one day when it was up, and the boy had been knocked loose from his horse, pawed under, and drowned. A few years later, after Sam had gone into the oil business, a gas explosion knocked his second son off a derrick. He fell over fifty feet and was dead before they got him to town. Sam sold his oil holdings and put in the first Ford agency in Thalia, and his youngest son was run over by a deputy sheriff. His wife lost her mind and spent her last ten years rocking in a rocking chair. Sam drank a lot, quit going to church, and was said to be loose with women, even married women.

He began to come out of it when he bought the picture show, or so people said. He got lots of comedies and serials and Western and the kids came as often as they could talk their parents into letting them. Then Sam bought the pool-hall and the all-night café and he perked up more and more. (7-8)

When McMurry presents Sam as a man who "took care of things," this is realized in the text on a number of levels. Not only does he take care of the townspeople (mostly the younger citizens, as this passage indicates) in providing the town's main sources of entertainment, but he is also described as someone who serves as a kind of mentor figure for young boys. We see this in his relationships with many young men in the text, particularly Sonny and Sonny's best friend Duane. Both Sonny and Duane live not with their own parents, but in a local boarding house:

“People thought it a little strange, because each had a parent alive, but the boys liked it. Sonny’s father [who, after a terrible car accident that resulted in the death of Sonny’s mother, has become a prescription drug addict] ran the local domino parlor and lived in a room at the little hotel, and Duane’s mother didn’t really have much more room. His grandmother was still alive and living with his mother in their two-room house...” (15) Both Sonny and Duane work full-time jobs while going to school in order to support themselves. The living situations of both boys not only serve to emphasize the loneliness and isolation of life in the small Texas town, but also to undermine the common conflation of rural life with family and stability. Sam also takes care of Billy, a mentally disabled boy who has already been abandoned by several guardians and who earns his keep by sweeping out Sam’s three places of business each day (9).

But perhaps what is most striking about this passage are the tragic deaths of his three sons. Here the text carefully links each death to a different capitalistic venture: Sam’s experience as a rancher leads to one son to die while herding cattle; his stint in the oil industry leads renders another son dead in a gas explosion, and a third child is run over by a car shortly after his father opens a car dealership. This unfortunate series of events suggests an important connection between modern forces beyond the confines of the rural town (such as large-scale cattle ranching, the oil industry, and automobile traffic), death, and depression. It is only when Sam turns his focus inward, toward his the community itself, when he buys the picture show, pool hall, and café, that his depression begins to lift. Sam elaborates on his financial outcome of his decisions when he tries to dissuade Duane from his dream of becoming wealthy: “Once you got rich you’d have to spend all your time staying rich, and that’s hard thankless work. I tried it a while and quit, myself. If I can keep ten dollars ahead of the bills I’ll be doin’ all right” (52). This statement further connects Sam’s previous ventures to larger channels of modern

capitalism, while investing his money within the community, even if it does not lead to a huge payoff, is, according to Sam, much more worthwhile. This underscores the idea that the problems in Thalia are not always due to the town itself, but to the larger processes of modernization and industry that threaten the community from beyond; these processes form the “something else” of which Powell writes.

We see a similar dynamic at play in the case of Genevieve Morgan, the night waitress in Sam’s café. If Sam serves as a kind of father figure to the town’s youth, then Genevieve is, as Lera Patrick Tyler Lich puts it in *Larry McMurtry’s Texas: Evolution of the Myth*, “an archetypal earth mother” (22). The novel first describes her thusly: “She was a shapely black-headed woman in her mid-thirties whose husband had been busted up in a rig accident almost a year before. He was not well enough to go back to the oil fields, and since they had two boys and were paying on a house, Genevieve had to go to work. The waitressing job was ten at night to six in the morning, and she didn’t like it, but in Thalia there were not many jobs open at any hour” (28). While McMurtry does not give many details about the exact nature of her husband’s injury, he does explain that it came from a “rig accident,” thereby again underscoring the inherent danger of the oil industry. The fact that Genevieve “had” to go to work and works despite her unfavorable hours suggests financial necessity. The dire nature of her financial situation is emphasized further when she tells Sonny, “‘Honey, we got four thousand dollars worth of doctor bills to pay....I’ll probably be making cheeseburgers for your grandkids” (33). Despite the fact that she is not wealthy, though, she, like Sam, brings the community a great deal of joy and is one of Sonny’s most important confidantes. After Sonny breaks up with his girlfriend, Charlene, in the beginning of the novel, he turns to Genevieve to sort out his feelings. Genevieve then

invites him back into the café's kitchen to talk thing over while she watches dishes. Here we see Sonny's affection for her take on a sexual component:

For a minute, lost in her work, she forgot Sonny completely and he felt free to watch her. Gallons of hot water poured into the sink and working over it soon had her sweating. Her cheeks and forehead shone with it; there were beads on her upper lip, and the armpits of her green uniform darkened. The errant strand of hair hung over her forehead when she bent to fish the knives and forks out of the water. As always, Sonny found himself strongly affected by her. (30-31)

The fact that Sonny is clearly attracted to Genevieve even when doing something as mundane as washing dishes showcases the extent of his affection for her. It also eroticizes her work; even though her job is not categorically glamorous, Genevieve's devotion to the café and the community around her shines through. While the text continually frowns upon larger capitalistic ventures, Sam and Genevieve, who turn their focus toward sustaining the town, even if it means less money, are held up as rare gems in the desolate landscape of Thalia.

Speaking more broadly, the rural tableau that the text creates is very much tied to popular conceptions not just of the Southwest, but also of the American West as a whole. In her essay "The Realization of the American West," Patricia Nelson Limerick asserts that one of the defining characteristics of the region known as "the West" is aridity: "The West is more prone to aridity, and aridity is the most significant factor in producing what we now refer to as 'the wide open spaces.' Aridity, moreover, puts a conventional strain on conventional Anglo American notions of proper landscapes and land use" (73). This reference to "conventional Anglo American notions" itself refers back to dialectical conceptions of that institution known as "the American frontier." In his landmark historiography *Virgin Land: The American West as Symbol and Myth*, Henry Nash Smith presents what he terms "the myth of the garden," explaining that,

in so many eighteenth-century writings about the American continent, “the physical fact of the continent dominates the scene. The American interior is presented as a new and enchanting region of inexpressible beauty and fertility” (11). As settlers continued to take advantage of this beauty and fertility, many politicians thought it necessary, Smith argues, to migrate further westward, beyond the verdant fertility of the Middle West and into harsher landscapes, in an effort to establish American domination over the continent, to conquer more “virgin land.” This very migration led to another kind of myth, as Smith notes:

But in the decade following the Civil War the impetus of the westward movement and the implied pledge of the victorious Republican party to develop the West were uncontrollable forces urging the agricultural frontier onward. On the level of the imagination it was therefore necessary that the settler’s battle with drought and dust and wind and grasshoppers should be supported by the westward extension of the myth of the garden. In order to establish itself in the vast new area of the plains, however, the myth of the garden had to confront and overcome another myth of exactly opposed meaning, although of inferior strength—the myth of the Great American Desert. (174-175)

In presenting the town of Thalia, McMurtry utilizes a “Great American Desert” motif throughout the narrative that is directly antithetical to any kind of garden image. In presenting us with a landscape marked by tumbleweeds, mesquite, and oil derricks, McMurtry offers up a kind of “machine in the garden” scenario without any sign of an actual garden. This not only reifies the limitations of a pastoral conception of American rurality (which is based on this very “Anglo American” idea of the national landscape as a kind of green, fertile “garden of the world”), but also serves as a means of de-mythologizing the region to some extent; in connecting the desert landscape with modern American industry, McMurtry suggests that some myths surrounding the American West are just that: myths. In the era of late capitalism, the West, despite its strong winds and tumbleweeds aching to break free from their restraints, is not entirely wild and

untamed but also functions as another type of environment ripe for exploitation. And its small towns are just as domesticated and desperate as those of the Midwest in the 1920s (the era and region most associated with the “revolt from the village”), perhaps even more so. Thus, the paradigm shift that began with “revolt from the village” finds in *The Last Picture Show* an apotheosis not only chronologically but geographically as well; this rejection of simplistic pastoralism extends even into the wild and untamed West.

Metaphorically speaking, the desert landscape continually serves to underscore the loneliness and desperation experienced throughout the text by the citizens of Thalia, that “blue” feeling that Sonny experiences as he drives his butane truck along the desert roads. This sense of desolation is apparent even from the very first lines of the novel, as McMurtry introduces the character of Sonny in a kind of reverse Kafkaesque opening: “Sometimes Sonny felt like he was the only human creature in the town. It was a bad feeling and it usually came on him in the mornings early, when the streets were completely empty, the way they were one Saturday morning in late November. The night before Sonny had played his last game of football for Thalia High School, but it wasn’t that that made him feel so strange and alone. It was just the look of the town” (1). Not only do these lines set up the neo-existentialist nature of the novel in emphasizing the stark loneliness of the character, but they also tie this loneliness directly to the rural landscape, thereby immediately establishing the anti-pastoral tone that dominates the narrative. Of course, it also employs a kind of critical regionalism by playing upon the tradition of the Wild West hero of the dime novels of the previous century. In capturing the essence of this particular trope, Smith invokes Charles Averill’s rendering of Kit Carson as an archetype for the burgeoning Western frontiersman of the nineteenth century, depicting him as an “anarchic and self-contained atom... alone in a hostile... universe” (89). These words aptly describe Sonny’s

situation as well, although, here, McMurtry's use of this trope serves not so much to denote any heroism on Sonny's part, but to emphasize his loneliness and isolation, and the harshness, both physically and metaphorically, of the surrounding rural environs. Sonny is alone in a hostile universe, but he does not desire to tame his environment; in a modernized society in which the environment has already been tamed, the novel's protagonist can only reflect on his surroundings with a profound sense of isolation.

As Sonny pulls into town, he does notice one lone figure, that of Sam the Lion's young charge Billy. When Sonny finds him, he is engaged in the one chore that he is capable of: sweeping. The text tells us here that

Billy lived at the poolhall with Sam the Lion, and sweeping was all he really knew how to do. The only trouble was that he overdid it. He swept out the poolhall in the mornings, the café in the afternoons, and the picture show at night, and always, unless someone specifically told him to stop, he just kept sweeping, down the sidewalk, on through the town, sometimes one way and sometimes another, sweeping happily until someone noticed him and brought him back to the poolhall. (2)

The text suggests that Billy's good nature is due to his simplemindedness, as is evidence by his good-natured sweeping throughout the town, oblivious to the forces of change around him.

Along with Sam and Genevieve, Billy is the only other person in town whose presence always makes Sonny feel better. From the first moment that Sonny spies him on the street, their affection for each other is evident: "Sonny drove up beside him and honked. Billy quit sweeping at once and got in the pickup. He was a stocky boy, not very smart, but perfectly friendly; picking him up made Sonny feel less lonesome" (2). Billy provides a brief respite from the loneliness that permeates Sonny's existence in Thalia.

The text continues to emphasize this loneliness, ironically, by introducing the reader to the various other relationships in his life. At the beginning of the novel, he has a girlfriend, with the lackluster moniker of Charlene Duggs, but McMurtry makes it clear early on that Sonny is only with Charlene because he feels that his options are extremely limited in the small town of Thalia: “Of course Sonny had often considered breaking up with Charlene, but there weren’t many girls in the town and the only unattached girl who was any prettier than Charlene was an unusually prudish sophomore. Charlene would let Sonny do anything he wanted above the waist; it was only as time wore on that he had begun to realize that there really wasn’t anything of permanent interest to do in that zone. As the weeks went by, Sonny observed that Jacy [the girlfriend of his best friend, Duane Jackson, and the most popular girl at Thalia High School] seemed to become more and more delightful, passionate, inventive, while by contrast Charlene just seemed more of a slug” (11). Despite the fact that the two of them, at the novel’s beginning, have been dating for a year, here McMurtry’s use of the term “slug” not only objectifies Charlene but also certainly undermines any real emotional connection.

Sonny’s desire to do things “below the waist” gives us an inkling of what becomes a large and almost obsessive theme in the novel, and that has to do with the text’s emphasis on sex, an emphasis that even more present in the novel than in the then notoriously racy film. Yet the many sex acts that happen in Thalia, Texas serve not to show us the scandal and corruption that lurks beneath the perfect small-town exterior, as was the case with novels such as *Kings Row* and *Peyton Place*, but rather serves to further emphasize the overt loneliness and alienation that permeate the post-industrial Texas landscape. In the world of *The Last Picture Show*, sex serves as a desperate attempt for people to alleviate their existential loneliness, to make whole their fractured psyches in the fractured world of modern rurality, but these attempts fail nearly every

time. In his article “Anatomy and *The Last Picture Show*: A Matter of Definition,” Donald E. Fritz writes that “Virtually all the characters we see may be consumed by their absorption with sex, but none of them derives anything resembling substantive pleasure from it...Of the numerous sexual relationships in the book, not one is a mutually rewarding experience; sex is a matter of giving and taking, never sharing” (189). Sonny and Charlene soon break up, having never consummated their doomed relationship, and the text proceeds to make reference to Sonny having sex with the wife of his high-school football coach, Lois Farrow (the mother of his object of fixation, Jacy Farrow), two prostitutes, and numerous heifers, but never with a fully supportive partner in an open and loving relationship.

It is in the sex lives of these characters that we can glean another dimension to the “aridity” which Limerick describes. McMurtry’s depiction of sex in Thalia corresponds much more with the desert metaphor than with any “beauty and fertility” associated with the myth of the garden. As a matter of fact, just as in *Kings Row*, the sex acts rendered in the text are distinctly infertile, as, despite the prevalence of sexual activity in the novel, no pregnancies result in the town of Thalia. Nor does the text take care to describe a great deal of beauty in any of these pairings, with many encounters leaving one or both partners noticeably unsatisfied. Not only does sex suggest the myth of the garden, but it also, in its often exploitative nature, mirrors the process of exploiting the land that is such an important component of the local oil industry. Even some of the language used to describe sexual acts mirrors this process. After the reader finds out that Lois Farrow, one of the wealthiest women in town, is carrying on a relatively open extramarital affair with the oil driller Abilene, the text visits an evening at home with the bored Lois, who calls Abilene hoping for a tryst. When he rebuffs her, she ridicules his sexual ability by scoffing at him: “‘Well, drill hard,’ she said. ‘You’re better at oil wells anyway’” (50). Lois’s

daughter Jacy, the most beautiful and popular teenager in Thalia, repeatedly refers to sex as “screwing” after learning the term from her more urban friends in the nearby city of Wichita Falls. Describing sex in terms such as “drilling” and “screwing” not only serves to undermine any romance or eroticism, but it also reminds of the drilling and screwing of the land that is happening on a continual basis.

When it comes to her own sexual relationships, Jacy Farrow does display an element of sexual agency not often associated with teenage girls in the 1950s, but she always uses sex as a means to an end, and appears to derive little enjoyment from the act itself. After attending a naked pool party at a mansion in Wichita Falls, she is nearly seduced by Bobby Sheen, the unofficial leader of the popular set in Wichita (as the locals call it), but when he finds out that she is a virgin, he stops short of having sex with her. She then loses her virginity to Duane on a class trip to San Francisco, only to break up with him right afterward, content that she can move on to Sheen. She then embarks on a sexual relationship with Sheen’s friend Lester Marlow, for “she was getting ready to be in love with Bobby Sheen, and she regarded Lester as a necessary stepping-stone” (160). After spending some time with Lester, Bobby does finally seduce her, and she does experience some degree of sexual pleasure, as the text notes that “Jacy tried to concentrate and do everything right but it was actually pretty arousing, screwing Bobby Sheen, and she couldn’t keep her head clear” (162). But this pleasure is short-lived, as within a week she finds out that Sheen has eloped with another young woman.

Her next partner is Abilene, her mother’s lover. If Sam the Lion is the town's last viable connection to its cowboy past, then Abilene represents the diametrically opposing qualities of the oilman; Clay Reynolds, in “Showdown in the New Old West: The Cowboy vs. the Oilman,” writes that “Opposed to the horseman is the oilman or modern rancher, a ruthless individual to

whom rules are absurd, romantic obstacles. His vision is defined in the most base, materialistic terms: money, land, bigger cars, more of everything. The horseman, to him, is a bothersome antique, out of place in a modern world of profit and exploitation” (157). Abilene's overt materialism is clear from his first appearance in the text, as he rolls into town in his fancy car: “Abilene was coming into town in his Mercury. Abilene was the driller Duane worked for. He had spent a lot of money souping up the Mercury, and in Thalia the sound of his exhausts was as unmistakable as the sound of the wind” (6). McMurtry goes on to tell the reader that “Abilene had only the best car in the country, he also shot the best stick of pool. Drilling and pool shooting were things he did so well that no one could decide which was his true vocation and which his avocation” (6). The text emphasizes the tension between the horseman and the oilman in this same scene, when it notes that “Though [Abilene] was the poolhall's best customer, he and Sam the Lion had almost nothing to say to one another” (7). When Abilene seduces Jacy, their act of intercourse takes place in the middle of the night, on a pool table in the very pool hall where we first met Abilene. Though one of the most famous scenes of Peter Bogdanovich's film version involves the lithe, young Cybill Shepherd sprawled out on a pool table, the sex itself is distinctly unerotic, with the text characterizing Abilene as “just going on, absorbed in himself, moving, nudging, thrusting—she was no more than an object” (174). Greg Giddings, in “The Love Song of Larry J. McMurtry: *The Last Picture Show*,” notes that “Even by Jacy's selfish standards, Abilene's behavior is distant and self-centered” (61). This scene highlights not only the futility of sex as a means of alleviating the existential loneliness that permeates Thalia, but it also connects this loneliness to the landscape itself. Abilene's self-absorbed behavior echoes his behavior toward the landscape; as an oilman, his job is to take what he can from the land, and to make the most money for it, without regard to the environmental consequences. McMurtry depicts Jacy as

“no more than an object” as her body becomes like the land itself; she is both “drilled” and “screwed” as Abilene takes what he wants from her. The pool-table locale adds to Abilene's self-absorption, as we see him partaking in his aforementioned two best skills: drilling and playing pool. Like pool itself, she is no more than a game. After their encounter is over, Abilene drops Jacy back off at her house, where he displays similarly callous behavior: “They pulled into the Farrow driveway and he glanced at her. She leaned over and kissed him but he turned his face away. Jacy got out, very puzzled, and walked across the yard. When she was halfway across, Abilene raced his motor and made his mufflers roar, so that anyone in the neighborhood who was awake would know what car was in the driveway. Then he backed out and left” (220). Here Abilene invokes the sound of those distinctive mufflers not only to let Jacy's mother Lois know of his actions, but to let the town in general know that Abilene was here, and Abilene, the modern-day oilman, takes what he wants.

By the last chapters of the novel, when she begins dating Sonny, Jacy has reverted to her formerly chaste lifestyle: “Necking with him might even be fun, but she made up her mind right away that she wasn't going to let him screw her. She had had quite enough of that for one summer—it didn't really work out. She was nostalgic for the days when boys necked with her and wanted her desperately and didn't get her. That was better than actually screwing, somehow” (177). While Jacy is sexually liberated by conventional 1950s standards, her sexual activity does not serve her much good in the end, not for any moral reasons, but because it fails to alleviate her problems, shallow as they may be. For Jacy, sexual activity, like Thalia itself, is not so much a fertile garden to be discovered as an exhausted desert.

Regarding Sonny himself, the closest that he ever comes to a pleasurable romantic relationship are his continuing liaisons with Ruth Popper. But their relationship is far from

normal or healthy or open, and Sonny certainly can't qualify his feelings for her as genuine romantic love. Their trysts begin shortly after Coach Popper asks Sonny to drive his wife to a doctor's appointment in the nearby town of Olney. The fact that we soon learn that her appointment is related to breast-cancer treatment ("I have to have an operation tomorrow for a tumor in my breast," she tells Sonny) underscores the lack of caring that Coach Herman Popper displays for Ruth (460). This lack of connection between the two of them is emphasized in the grotesque manner in which McMurtry portrays their own sex life, and in one scene in particular, which takes place not long after Ruth observes her husband gorging himself on "yellow canned peaches, one of his favorite desserts":

Ruth clenched her fists at her sides. Her chest and abdomen felt crushed, but it crossed her mind that she had crushed herself. What was crushing her was the weight of all the food she had fed Herman through the years, all the steaks, all the black-eyed peas, all the canned peaches. It was particularly the canned peaches: she had never until that moment realized how much she hated them. It seemed to her that pyramids of cans of slimy peaches piled on her abdomen. After a moment the weight became intolerable and she moved a little, to try and ease it. She moved from side to side and stretched her legs, to try and escape it. Herman sweated easily and his sweat was already dripping down her ribs, but what bothered her was the weight of the cans. (119)

This encounter not only serves to highlight the lack of romantic connection between the two partners, but it also presents a starkly grotesque take on the machine in the garden. While the garden myth correlates sexuality (i.e., the "fertility" of the "virgin land") with nourishment (in the physical fruits of the garden), the scene also combines these aspects in a bizarre tableau that reinforces the fate of rural America in the era of late capitalism. In this scene, Ruth clearly associates sex with food, but not in the sense that sex is nourishing. Rather, she is repulsed by the images of the canned peaches that she has fed her husband; she conjures up no whole fruits but canned fruits, the mass-produced, post-industrial version of the garden's bounty. All of this

combined with the distinct lack of sexual attraction that Ruth feels for her partner reinforce a picture of modern rurality as a problematic scenario.

Regarding Ruth's encounters with Sonny, Sonny's feelings for Ruth are complicated at best (he initially refuses to tell anyone about their encounters, partly because of her marital status, but also because she is "so old"), she possesses a genuine if unsettling affection for him. Even though he is the younger and more sexually inexperienced one, McMurtry presents us with yet another role reversal as it is not until she sleeps with Sonny that Ruth is able to experience any kind of real sexual pleasure, although even these encounters do not include the component of physical orgasm. As she becomes more and more comfortable with their affair, McMurtry writes that, "She soon made terms with lovemaking itself, though for a time they were not the best possible terms. She thought that once they relaxed with one another the beautiful thing would happen, the whole moment toward which all the sharp little individual movements tended. She had read about it, she expected it, she longed for it, and came very close to it, but it eluded her" (101). After one incident in which she comes particularly close to achieving such a state, her frustration is evident to Sonny, who does not come back to see her for three days and then, when he does come to see her, she is "so thrilled and relieved that she resolve(s) not to seek the moment if it was going to put everything else in danger" (101, 102). This abandonment of the pursuit of pure pleasure makes clear that Ruth's main goal in the affair is emotional, and not sexual, thereby reinforcing the fog of loneliness that permeates the community. Ruth herself encapsulates this sentiment as she reassures Sonny regarding his own sexual capabilities: "No, look... Nothing was your fault. You have to remember that I've been lonely for a long time. Loneliness is like ice. After you've been lonely long enough you don't even realize you're cold, but you are. It's like I was a refrigerator that had never been defrosted at all—never. All these

years the ice has just been getting thicker” (102). While the image of ice is, on the surface, oppositional to the desert metaphor, it accomplishes the same effect, negating an ideal of community and cohesion in small-town America.

As the story of Sonny and Ruth continues, the text takes on a kind of naturalistic arc as Ruth’s newfound freedom eventually becomes a kind of burden to Sonny as it physically and emotionally wears him out; it explains that “All she wanted was Sonny, and he began to feel strangely washed out and restless,” going on to say that “As he grew more tired and less certain of himself, Ruth seemed to grow fresher, more self-possessed, and more lovely, though it was only at odd, oblique moments, lying beside her or coming into her room, that he noticed she was lovely” (114). Sonny’s figurative wasting away as Ruth feeds on him sexually suggests a kind of parasite/host, and especially given the age difference, a kind of predator/prey aspect to their already complicated relationship. This is compounded as Ruth’s feelings for him are portrayed as disturbingly entwined with regrets over her own childlessness, a fact that McMurtry highlights in another grotesque sex scene that takes place the day after Ruth has a dream in which she actually gives birth to Sonny:

The next day Sonny came, and while they were spreading the blue quilt on the bedroom floor Ruth remembered the dream. It was very vivid in her mind as she undressed. She lay quietly, her eyes closed, as Sonny began, but almost before she knew it she became excited, so much so that she could not be still. She thought of the dream again, hoping the excitement would die before she became completely possessed by it, but instead of dying it became keener. Because of the dream, pleasure took her over: with her eyes shut she could pretend she was giving birth. Sonny was inside her but in truth she was bringing him out—it was that which excited her. She grabbed his hands and put them on her thighs, so that he would force them wider. She was filled with a strength she had not suspected and held him with her thighs, just at the entrance, just connected, both of them struggling, until she was finally seized, rent by what she felt. Then she took Sonny back to her, her heart was pounding, her eyelids fluttering; she almost fainted with the relief of delivery. (101)

While Sonny is, at this time, eighteen years old and not a legal minor, Ruth's childbirth fantasy certainly suggests a kind of pedophilic undertone to their encounters. In this sense, it is presented as a kind of deviant sexual act, but such deviance also speaks to the deviance of the environment around them, as they are both preyed upon, their priorities warped by the bleak loneliness of the post-industrial small town. This sense of loneliness is reinforced again and again, culminating in the final scene in which Sonny, having abandoned Ruth when he gets the opportunity to date Jacy Farrow, comes back to her after Jacy ends their relationship. At this point in the novel, both characters have acknowledged the ways in which their relationship is unhealthy. Sonny has certainly expressed his doubts, and we have glimpsed the myriad ways in which his union with Ruth is more depleting than sustaining. And, by this point, even Ruth has her doubts; as she contemplates the possibility of reconciling with Sonny, she acknowledges that "Even if the springs in her would start again it would only be a year or two or three before it would all repeat itself. Something would take him from her and the process of drying up would have be endured again" (219). The fact that, in this final tableau, the text makes it clear that they will both endure this difficult process again reinforces the pervasive loneliness and isolation of the modern small town. Here McMurtry's use of "drying up" connect Ruth's emotional state to the land around them, which is not only a desert but also a landscape that has been sucked dry even further by modern industry.

Ironically enough, the biggest sexual scandals, in the eyes of the collective town, come from instances in which sex has not actually happened. The first of these involves the high-school English teacher, John Cecil. The text characterizes him as nice and cheerful; when we learn that Sonny and Duane both habitually fall asleep at school: "Working as hard as they did, school was the only thing that saved them. Occasionally they tried to stay awake in English class,

but that was only because John Cecil, the teacher, was too nice a man to go to sleep on" (35). As we come to learn more about Mr. Cecil, we learn that his benevolent nature extends beyond the classroom, as he frequently interacts socially with his students: "When he wasn't actually teaching he was always hauling a carload of kids somewhere, to a fair or a play or a concert. In the summertime he often hauled carloads of boys over to an irrigation ditch where they could swim. He didn't swim himself but he loved to sit on the bank and watch the boys" (35). Such actions certainly suggest a degree of benevolence toward the larger community, although the text suggests that these actions may have more complicated motives. His enjoyment of watching the boys swim suggests both homosexual and hebephilic tendencies. Such feelings seem to be expressed solely through voyeurism, though; he himself does not get into the water but watches from a distance.

Nonetheless, his possible inclinations ultimately lead to a kind of Texas witch hunt. The novel announces this subplot in dramatic fashion, right after the high-school seniors return from their class trip: "While the seniors were in California a great scandal rocked Thalia. All the mothers were agreed that it was the very worst thing that had ever happened in the town: John Cecil was fired from his job for being a homosexual" (189). Given both McMurtry's dry humor and the knowledge that the town has been beset by numerous tragedies beyond the realms of the school board, the use of the term "very worst" comes off as hyperbolic and even sarcastic, thereby undermining the idea of such an event as a real scandal. This passage also belies the real prejudices of the town, as it emphasizes that John Cecil was fired "for being a homosexual," without mentioning any actual act. His purported homosexuality *per se* seems to be of more importance than any specific sexual act.

Of course, this is, as we saw in *Kings Row*, in line with historically popular conceptions of gay men as sexual predators. If anything, homophobia was even more rampant in the United States in the 1950s than it had been during the era of Henry Bellamann's bestseller. In "Unacceptable Mannerisms: Gender Anxieties, Homosexual Activism, and Swish in the United States, 1945-1965," Craig M. Loftin points out that "American historians often describe the years following World War Two as an 'age of anxiety.' [...] Perhaps no social group in the U.S. experienced this anxiety more viscerally than homosexuals. Gay men and lesbians became entangled within a growing postwar anti-communist hysteria when the U.S. Senate held hearings on homosexuals and 'other sex perverts' working for the government" (577). The following paragraphs hints at this sense of anxiety, as it notes that, "If it hadn't been for Coach Popper's vigilance and his interest in the welfare of the children, nobody would have known about Mr. Cecil, and a whole generation of innocents would have been exposed to corruption" (189). This corruption could mean actual sexual abuse, but it could also mean that the town feared that the young men might somehow become gay themselves. The events that follow support this interpretation, as we learn that Coach Herman Popper has made a conscious decision, without any evidence of actual sexual activity, to slander Mr. Cecil; McMurtry writes that the idea came to the coach "in a flash: Cecil was a queer" (190). Beside the fact that the coach concocted the idea himself, the fact that he decides that the best way to attack Mr. Cecil is for something he supposedly *is*, and not something he has done, undermines notions of the moral superiority of the American small town. The fact that so many people accept the coach's story and use it as a basis to fire Cecil from his job certainly displays the rampant prejudice in Thalia.

A further irony of this particular situation is that there is evidence to suggest that Herman Popper himself harbors homosexual inclinations. The text explains his reasoning for wanting Mr. Cecil fired in relation to Thalia High School's top athlete, Bobby Logan:

The gist of the matter was that Mr. Cecil had persuaded Bobby Logan to take a summer-school course in trigonometry, in Wichita Falls high school. Mr. Cecil was going to summer school himself, at the college there, so he drove Bobby over to his class every day. That seemingly innocent arrangement was enough to arouse the coach's suspicions. He had been planning to have Bobby work out in the gym every day during the summer, so he would be in good shape when football season came. It was a pleasure to work with a fine young athlete like Bobby, and when Bobby told him about the trigonometry class he was angered. (189)

The fact that Coach Popper can become so enraged by a seemingly minor event suggests that perhaps he enjoys the act of watching Bobby work out in the gym. The text alludes to this particular attraction earlier, when, after learning that he is the "coach's special favorite," we see Coach Popper become violently enraged at locker-room horseplay directed at Bobby: "Duane and Sonny and Bobby Logan were having a little three-way towel fight, and the trouble started when Duane caught Bobby a smacker on the hip. It was just a flat pop and didn't hurt Bobby at all, but the coach happened to be coming out of the shower at that time and for some reason it made him furious" (41, 42). This over-the-top reaction suggests a degree of jealousy toward the boys' playful interaction with Bobby. During the course of his affair with Ruth Popper, Sonny relates to her a tale of a recent encounter between the coach and Bobby: "The week before the coach had taken the track boys to a meet in Fort Worth. Bobby Logan was sharing a room with the coach and in the middle of the night the coach mistook Bobby for Mrs. Popper and kissed him on the ear [...] Sonny repeated the story to Ruth because he thought it might get her to talking about the coach a little [...] She told him that the coach seldom touched her..." (127).

Certainly the sex life of the coach and his wife leaves much to be desired, as evidenced by the aforementioned canned-peaches interlude, and this incident suggests a kind of sexual affinity for Bobby, even if it does get written off as an “accident” in town lore. Ruth Popper’s own perceptions of her husband’s sexual proclivities are so strong that she, normally meek and mild and content to not stir up any hornets’ nests, actually confronts him about the injustice of Mr. Cecil’s firing, asking him, ““Who roomed with Bobby in Fort Worth, John or you? You think I don’t know about things like that? Now you’ve ruined John’s life” (193). Herman Popper’s apparent hypocrisy in this matter certainly suggests that his overt homophobia is a reaction to his own repressed homosexuality. In the 1990 study “Homophobia and Homosociality: An Analysis of Boundary Maintenance,” Dana M. Britton explains that a popular conception of homophobia has long been that of “homophobia as a reaction-formation and a defense against repressed affections for the same sex” (425). This theory becomes even more textually validated when we learn about the school-board president, the one who actually made the decision to fire Mr. Cecil based on the rumor started by Coach Popper: “The school board president was a Pontiac salesman named Tom Todd. When Tom was fourteen years old he had been seduced one night at a family reunion by a male cousin from Jonesboro, Arkansas, and he had felt guilty about it ever since. He went right into action and that very night they got John Cecil before the board and fired him” (191). In giving us these background stories, McMurtry suggests that the homophobia that is so pervasive in Thalia is perpetrated most viciously by those who doth protest too much.

What is most tragic about the situation is that the suggestion of actual molestation was completely made up by Popper. When confronted, John Cecil does not deny his homosexuality, but he does insist that “... I’ve never even touched one of my students” (191). After the scandal breaks, Ruth, enraged by her husband’s actions, goes to Mr. Cecil’s house with a banana-nut

cake in an attempt to show her support for him. She dismisses the idea of his being gay as ridiculous, citing the fact that he and wife have two children as proof of their superior sex life. Mr. Cecil then surprises Ruth by admitting that “It’s kind of amazing to me that me and Irene had the girls [...] I guess it just don’t take much enthusiasm for people to have two kids” (196). This tacit admission complicates the situation. Cecil was fired for being gay with the assumption that his homosexuality might lead him to prey on one of his students; it turns out that yes, he is gay, but he has not acted out sexually with any of his students. This refutes the stereotype of the gay man an automatic sexual predator, and shows just how myopic the community can be when it comes to what constitutes a “scandal.” Soon after he is fired, his wife and daughters leave and Mr. Cecil is forced to start again, working in his brother’s grocery store in the north-Texas city of Plainview. Ruth Popper senses the desperate nature of his situation: “Suddenly Ruth wanted to be home, away from John Cecil. His sadness was so heavy that just being with him made her feel the weight, made her own limbs seem heavier. She made an excuse and left quickly, glad to be outside” (196). In this dusty, barren where so few people seem to genuinely care for one another, Ruth’s sense of pathos reinforce the unjust nature of Cecil’s firing, thus using the stark hypocrisy of the town as a kind of call for great social tolerance; much like the village rebels before him, McMurtry shows us what a community should be by highlighting what Thalia is not.

The second sexual scandal, which erupts shortly after the first, involves Joe Bob Blanton, the son of a local fundamentalist preacher. From the very beginning of *The Last Picture Show*, it is clear that poor Joe Bob is at the very bottom of the social pecking order at Thalia High School. Even Sonny, the text’s most thoughtful and introspective young character, doesn’t seem to question of the treatment of Joe Bob. We first meet Joe Bob in Mr. Cecil’s English class, where we find Sonny copying his homework: “While Mr. Cecil was trying to decide what poetry to

read that day Sonny got Joe Bob Blanton's algebra homework and began to copy it. For a year or two it had been necessary to threaten to whip Joe Bob before he began to want to be popular and handed them over willingly" (36). Over the course of the novel we see Joe Bob become the victim of different school pranks, from hanging him out a classroom window by his ankles to putting foot toughener in his socks in the locker room. Coach Popper ridicules him sexually in front of his basketball teammates, grabbing at his penis (an act that may be motivated by his own repressed homosexuality and asking, "What kind of female you ever gonna get with that thing for bait, Joe? Wouldn't do for a six-year-old girl" (42). We come to learn that his home life is no better, mostly due to the religious extremism of his father, known to the town as "Brother Blanton," a man who forces his young son to preach against his will; the text tells us that Joe Bob "was even a preacher himself, already; the summer before he had gone to church camp and got the call. Everybody figured Joe Bob had just done it to get a little extra attention from the girls at the church camp, but if that was it it sure backfired. So far as Brother Blanton was concerned the Lord's call was final: once you heard it you were a preacher forever. He started Joe Bob preaching sermons right away" (36). He continues to force him to do so despite the fact that Joe Bob decides early on that he does "not really like to preach" (209). We eventually learn that this religious extremism extends to sexual matters as well:

Joe Bob was a seventeen-year-old virgin. For years he had been tormented by lustful thoughts. When he was only fourteen Brother Blanton slipped into his room one night and caught him masturbating by flashlight over a picture of Esther Williams. Joe Bob had torn the picture out of a movie magazine one of their neighbors had thrown away. Of course Brother Blanton whipped him severely and disposed of the picture; he also told Joe Bob in no uncertain terms what the sequel of such actions would be. (208)

According to Brother Blanton, this “sequel” would involve young Joe Bob’s mind being completely destroyed and would eventually involve a mental institution. With this type of parenting it becomes clear why Joe Bob Blanton might be slightly neurotic.

Just as was the case with the John Cecil scandal, McMurtry employs over-the-top hyperbole as a means of announcing the degree of shock on the part of the town of Thalia: “About a week after Bobby Sheen got married, something totally unexpected happened to Jacy, and it was led up to by an event so startling that everyone in Thalia almost went mad with surprise. Joe Bob Blanton was arrested for rape!” (207) The story worsens when we learn that he has been arrested for the rape of a five-year-old local girl, Molly Clarg. Yes, as the story unfolds further, we learn that, just as was the case with John Cecil, no sex has actually taken place. After being arrested with young Molly in his truck, eating a sucker, and with her underwear in his backseat, the townspeople are shocked when Monroe, the local sheriff’s deputy, announces that the girl was not actually raped: “Then Monroe came in with news that the doctor had said Joe Bob hadn’t actually done anything to Molly. Apparently he had just given her the lemon all-day sucker as a bribe to get her to take her panties off, and that was all he had done. It was kind of a letdown” (213-214). The fact that McMurtry characterizes the reception of this news as a “letdown” displays not only his rather dark sense of humor, but it also betrays the insensitivity of the town, and how much it thrives of the idea of scandal; there is a sense of disappointment when it turns out that no rape took place. The actual welfare of the child does not appear to be much of an issue. At least one of the townspeople actually associates the lack of sexual activity with a kind of failure on the part of Joe Bob Blanton: “‘Never had the guts,’ Andy Fanner said. ‘Preacher’s kid’” (214). Such a statement would necessarily imply that a successful rape would

be a kind of courageous act, thereby further undermining any sense of communal morality on the part of the town.

As the chapter progresses, we learn that Joe Bob was actually trying to get himself thrown in jail as a way of getting out of having to preach a sermon at his father's revival: "At any rate, Joe Bob had found the one method available to him for getting out of his second revival sermon" (214). The text even describes his being caught as a kind of relief; while in jail, "He was not feeling too bad, really. Getting out of the sermon had taken a big load off his mind" (215). While his kidnapping a five-year-old and enticing her to take off her underwear is certainly not what most would consider a moral action, the reasoning for his behavior shows fundamentalist religion to be more of a villain in the narrative than Joe Bob himself. The fact that he would rather go to jail for child molestation than preach a sermon for his father's revival makes Brother Blanton's religion seem less than ideal. McMurtry further emphasizes the hypocrisy Brother Blanton when he details his reaction to his son's situation. He tells the crowd at his revival that he wishes his son would actually go to prison, telling his congregants, "'As for Joe Bob, I've given him up to the Lord. I've prayed to the good Lord this very night that they'll send my boy to prison. Yes, to prison! Sometimes in this life things just don't work out, and I believe it is God's merciful will that Joe Bob go to suffer with the murderer and the thief'" (214). Even though the sheriff's office has made it clear that Molly was not physically molested, Brother Blanton preys on the gossip and fear of the community to win himself favor in the eyes of his congregants, and the revival is a huge success. The situations of both Joe Bob Blanton and John Cecil illustrate the fact that Thalia is much more interested in good gossip than in finding the truth, thereby furthering the vision of the original village rebels.

Some of the most uncomfortable sexual situations in the novel come when Sonny and Duane decide to travel “below the waist” of the continental United States to Matamoros, Mexico. As they plan the trip, it all seems like a grand adventure to these boys from small-town Texas: “‘Austin’s the farthest I’ve been,’ Sonny said. It was the same with Duane, and Matamoros was almost twice as far as Austin. It made them all the more eager...” (131) In this case, the sense of adventure associated with having a more urban experience is compounded with the boy’s exoticized othering of Mexico. Mexico is certainly an important aspect of discussing the region known as “the West,” so much of what Smith refers to as conquering virgin land involved land that originally belonged to Mexico. Texas itself seceded from Mexico in 1836, and in 1848, with the end of the Mexican-American War, the United States came to possess “one-third of Mexico’s territory—including Texas, more than half—which now comprises all or part of California, Arizona, Nevada, Utah, Wyoming, Colorado, Kansas, Oklahoma, and New Mexico” (Gutierrez 13). Limerick emphasizes the important of these historical developments in aforementioned list of defining Western characteristics, writing that “The West contains the territory—and the descendants of the people—conquered in the Mexican-American War; it shares a border with Mexico, and that border forms a distinctive, and troubled, line between a very developed and prosperous nation and a very under-developed and poor nation” (74).

This idea of Mexico as a conquered, “under-developed” land becomes central to Sonny and Duane’s trip. In *Walls and Mirrors: Mexican Americans, Mexican Immigrants, and the Politics of Ethnicity*, David Gutierrez reminds his readers that “in the era of Manifest Destiny most expansionists had argued that Mexicans and other inferior races would gradually disappear after Americans established hegemony over the Southwest. The need for cheap labor, however, provided a powerful inducement to southwestern capitalists to change their thinking about

Mexicans” (46). This fraught relationship with their Texan neighbors, this conception of the Mexican as subaltern but also an important commodity, is apparent in the boys’ attitude as they begin their trip. They are particularly interested in the sexual commodities available to them in Mexico, which they believe must be much “wilder” than what is available to them in Thalia. But soon after they get “below the waist” of Texas, the boys’ attitudes begin to change markedly. As soon as they roll into town, a young boy runs up to them and asks “‘Girl? Boy’s Town? Dirty movie?’” and Sonny’s response registers distinct hesitation: “‘Well, I guess,’ Sonny said. ‘I guess,’ Sonny said. ‘I guess that’s what we came for’” (133).

They end up in a small private residence, where a man offers to show them pornographic films via a projector on his wall, and their reaction to this particular proposition is equally underwhelming: “The boys looked uncomfortably at one another. They either had to pay and watch the movies or else refuse and leave, and since they had driven five hundred miles to see some wickedness it was pointless to refuse” (135). Despite their misgivings, they forge ahead in the name of global capitalism; they have traveled to Mexico for cheap outsourcing of sexual labor, and they feel that they must honor that relationship. But their misgivings become even stronger when the projectionist clears two sleeping children out of their bedroom in order to show the movie, and even though their host tries to talk them out of it, they stand their ground: “Sonny and Duane were stubborn. Even though the little boys were asleep, it wouldn’t do; they couldn’t enjoy a dirty movie so long as they were in sight of the displaced kids” (135). Though they do finally watch the pornographic films in an alleyway, this encounter leaves them noticeably disillusioned, as the exploitative nature of their sexual transactions slowly become apparent. It becomes even more apparent to Sonny when he visits a brothel and pairs off with a young prostitute named Maria. As soon as she disrobes, Sonny notices that “her breasts were

heavy, her nipples large and purplish, and she was clearly pregnant” (138). When Sonny asks her about it, she also discloses that she has two children already.

As the exploitative nature of their encounter becomes more and clear, it becomes unbearable to Sonny: “... It came home to him why Ruth had insisted they make love on the floor; the cot springs wailed and screamed, and the sound made him feel as though every move he made was sinful. He had driven five hundred miles to get away from Thalia, and the springs took him right back, made him feel exposed. Everyone in town would know that he had done it with a pregnant whore” (139). Not only is Sonny disillusioned by Maria’s obvious youth, pregnancy, and poverty, but he realizes that he can’t escape the shame and desperation that he feels in Thalia, even though he had driven five hundred miles to escape it. This underscores the idea that it is not the small town alone that is the target of McMurtry’s critique, and that the complicating forces of global capitalism can lead to a similar sense of disillusionment wherever one goes.

This thematic thread is reinforced when Sonny and Duane arrive back in Thalia at the end of their trip: “Evening finally came, coolness with it, and the boys got a second wind. The trip ceased to seem like such a fiasco: after all, they had been to Mexico, visited whorehouses, seen dirty movies. In Thalia it would be regarded as a great adventure, and they could hardly wait to tell about it” (141). Though their trip was a total disaster, both financially and spiritually, it becomes more appealing to them as they re-enter the confines of their small American town; the gossip value is what they really take with them. Despite all of their disillusionment, their experience in the ever-increasing urbanization of the Great American Century leads them to believe that their experience was somehow more valuable because it happened away from the confines of the village, an entity that has been ever more marginalized in postwar America. In

this sense it is reminiscent of an earlier passage, after Sonny and Duane have returned from a smaller, but still disappointing, attempt at a night of drunken debauchery in Fort Worth. McMurtry describes the end of that night thusly: “‘Well, at least we got to go *somewhere*,’ Sonny said, picking up a beer can somebody had thrown out on the lawn. Fort Worth, after all, was a city, part of the big world, and always came back from a trip there with the satisfying sense that he had traveled” (56). Even though both trips are big letdowns, Sonny still *feels* like they should be recounted as something exciting, because they are part of that “big world,” and not the stifling cultural cesspool that he views his small town to be. This suggests that perhaps the biggest problem is not with small-town America itself, but with the larger messages that it is being force-fed by the specter of burgeoning modernization.

The sense of letdown after the Mexico trip is only heightened after they return to Thalia and learn that Sam the Lion has passed away. Duane and Sonny come back to town only to find Sam’s 24-hour café closed. Sonny goes to the courthouse to wake up local gossip Andy Fanner (the same man who disparaged Joe Bob Blanton for not having “the guts” to rape Molly Clarg), who delivers the news unceremoniously, even callously: “‘Oh yeah, you’ve been gone, ain’t you,’ he said. ‘Gone to Mexico. You don’t know about it. Sam the Lion died yesterday mornin’ [...] Quite a blow. Keeled over on one of the snooker tables. Had a stroke’” (178). The death of the moral backbone of Thalia, of the last clear connection to the community’s pastoral, cowboy heritage only serves to isolate Sonny more from his hometown. Though he never leaves, he becomes less and less attached to the things that once mattered to him. The fact that he died while the boys were off in Mexico, attempting to alleviate their existential loneliness through exotic commodification, reinforces the idea of the end of an era.

The idea is reinforced further with the ultimate fate of Billy. After Sam the Lion's death, the eponymous picture show, one of the few sources of entertainment in the dying community, soon closes down. In the novel's final chapter, McMurtry lets us know that "Of all the people in Thalia, Billy missed the picture show most. He couldn't understand that it was permanently closed. Every night he kept thinking it would open again. For seven years he had gone to the picture show every single night, always sitting in the balcony, always sweeping out once the show was over; he just couldn't stop expecting it" (273). While part of this behavior is clearly due to Billy's mental disability, it also reinforces between Billy and the ideals of the old ways associated with Sam the Lion. By the point in the narrative, Billy is one of the only people left in Thalia to whom Sonny feels any serious kind of emotional connection.

This makes Billy's approaching death all the more tragic. One morning Sonny goes into town to find Billy's lifeless body on the street, in front of a cattle truck. He observes the actions of the locals who have gathered at the scene: "They were not paying attention to Billy, but were trying to keep the truck driver from feeling bad. He was a big, square-faced man from Waurika, Oklahoma, who didn't look like he felt too bad. The truck was loaded with Hereford yearlings and they were bumping one another around and shitting, the bright green cowshit dripping off the sideboards and splatting onto the street" (275). Here, the townspeople's focus on the driver, and not on Billy, not only speaks to the general lack of caring and compassion on the part of the community, but it also correlates with the increasing emphasis on commercialization in the midcentury Texas countryside. Just like Sam's biological sons, his surrogate son Billy has now been killed by the forces of modernization, by an out-of-state cattleman driving a huge truck. The inhumanity of this tableau is reinforced by the cattle themselves, cared for as little as Billy, bumping into each other and shitting as Billy lies lifeless on the street.

So, in many ways, yes, *The Last Picture Show* does presage the idea of a “rural purge,” as there is no doubt that its picture of small-town America is a bleak one, and that Thalia is a place that time has passed by. By the end of the novel, the picture show has closed down, and both Sam the Lion and young Billy have died tragically. Jacy has broken things off with Sonny after a failed elopement, and it appears that the only thing that comes close to sustaining him is his fragile and ultimately unsatisfying relationship with Ruth. This town is certainly no pastoral idyll, and in this sense the novel certainly does represent an apotheosis in the paradigm shift that began with the “revolt from the village.” But, by the time when we get to *The Last Picture Show*, the “revolt” has been watered down by the realities of modernization; there is no need to “revolt” from the village as the village, by this point, lacks even the outer veneer of respectability that made earlier texts in the tradition so shocking. While the critique of rural life is obvious, a closer look at the text through the lens of critical regionalism shows a different kind of revolt, a kind of revolt against the revolt itself. The desolate landscape and loneliness of the characters suggests that perhaps the real villain in this tale is not the village itself, nor even any of its often narcissistic characters, but the forces of modernization themselves. This is a critique not just of the town, but of a larger, broken system.

Conclusion: Uprisings and Evil Spirits: The Postmodern Small Town

If *The Last Picture Show* represents a definite low point in the pastoral appeal of the small town in literature, it necessarily begs the question as to where to go from here. The preceding chapters have addressed the evolution of the small-town image over the course of the paradigm shift that began with the village rebels. But, as McMurtry's novel seems to portend, after this point a break occurs. David Harvey refers to this break within culture at large when he writes:

There has been a sea-change in cultural as well as in political-economic changes since around 1972.

The sea-change is bound up with the emergence of new dominant ways in which we experience space and time.

While simultaneity in the shifting dimensions of time and space is no proof of necessary of causal connection, strong a priori grounds can be adduced for the proposition that there is some kind of necessary relation between the rise of postmodernist cultural forms, the emergence of more flexible modes of capital accumulation, and a new round of 'time-space compression' in the organization of capitalism.

But these changes, when set against the basic rules of capitalistic accumulation, appear more as shifts in surface appearance rather than as signs of the emergence of some entirely new postcapitalist or even postindustrial society. (1)

Harvey goes on to pinpoint to the destruction of the Pruitt-Igoe housing project in St. Louis during that year as the moment when modernism died and, necessarily, postmodernism emerged. Fredric Jameson points to a similar shift around this time, writing that the global crises of 1973 ("the oil crisis, the end of the international gold standard, for all intents and purposes the end of the great wave of 'wars of national liberation' and the beginning of the end of traditional communism") are the catalysts that led to "a strange new landscape"; it is this landscape that he connects to postmodernism (xx-xxi). All of these events point, in some way, to fundamental failure of the modern, Fordist impulse, and are coupled with the advent of neoliberal economic

practices and a post-exceptionalist conception of America. Postmodernism is the term that these theorists embrace to try to explain the cultural landscape that been left in the wake of these events.

Thus, it is during this period that we see the birth of the postmodern small town. For a time, the village was not an immensely popular theme at all. Small-town life had been dramatically purged from the television landscape, and surveys of canonical or even popular American literature during this period show few works with such settings. While the village pendulum did not, as this project has shown, simply “swing back” to simple pastoral evocations after 1930, it does slowly swing back during this picture, albeit ironically. The postmodern village tale does not have the moralistic ambitions of the original modernist movement; rather, it presents the good and bad together in a hodgepodge, leaving the reader to sort out the vagaries.

One early example of this is 1977’s *Staggerford*, the first novel by Midwestern author Jon Hassler. In a review of *Staggerford* in *The Globe and Mail*, Douglas Hill situates Hassler’s story geographically by explaining “The Staggerford of Hassler’s title is somewhere in Minnesota... Norman Rockwell might have painted the town portrait, as long as he overlooked the concealed weapons” (E21). *Staggerford* acknowledges that the halcyon days of the “cult of the village” are over, and yet it capitulates to the failings of modernism as well. Hassler blends all of these forces of small-town life, positive and negative, into a kind of postmodern pastiche. According to Fredric Jameson, “Pastiche is, like parody, the imitation of a peculiar or unique, idiosyncratic style, the wearing of a linguistic mask, speech in a dead language. But it is a neutral practice of such mimicry, without any of parody’s ulterior motives...” (17) *Staggerford* provides us with a nostalgic look at an American town that is somehow reminiscent of an older era, yet it

also acknowledges the problems that lie beneath the placid exterior of the Midwestern town. But this text lacks the evaluative component of “the revolt from the village.”

Hassler himself uses the term "burlesque" to describe his narrative style:

The connotation of Staggerford (the second half of the compound as well as the first) is perfect for this story, and for small towns everywhere. . . . Is not our life a fording of the river, a progress from here to the other side? And is it not a clumsy progress? Surely there is nothing surefooted about it. The stones are mossy and slippery and the mud is sucky and the current is hazardous. Our progress to the other side is such a wavering dithering halting sidestepping falling-back strenuous somersaulting stooping stretching hysterical sorrowful giggly process that from a distance it looks funny. It's a burlesque of progress. (48-49)

The postmodern village acknowledges that Pandora's box has been opened, and acknowledges its faults and failings for what they are, without dictating an overarching solution to these problems. Rather, the inhabitants of Staggerford must muddle across Hassler's metaphorical ford the best way that they can. In one of the most contemplative scenes in the novel, Agatha McGee, the elderly Catholic-school teacher, ponders the day's bad weather thusly:

Rain's only value, for Miss McGee, was that it reminded her how precious was good weather. She despised rain. But she knew that to the earth, rain was as necessary as sunshine. Could it be, she wondered, that the vice and barbarism abroad in the world served, like the rain, some purpose? Did the abominations in the Sunday paper mingle somehow with the goodness in the world and together, like the rain and sun feeding the ferns, did they nourish some kind of life she was unaware of? (125)

Staggerford does not attempt to answer this question, but rather bombards the reader with postmodern pastiche.

One way in which we see this played out is in the narrative strategy of the text. While the story does feature one character who stands out as a kind of protagonist (high-school English teacher Miles Pruitt), Hassler also presents us with the perspectives of several other characters in

a variety of different forms. Now this multiplicity of voices is, of course, not a distinctly postmodern phenomenon. In fact, in many ways it is a hallmark of high modernism, as we have already established. But *Staggerford* lacks the thematic cohesion amongst these voices that we see in the modernist texts. This novel is not striving toward ultimate, universal truths. As David Harvey writes in *The Condition of Postmodernity*, “Fragmentation, indeterminacy, and intense distrust of all universal or ‘totalizing’ discourses are the hallmarks of postmodernism,” and we see this played out again and again in the voices of Staggerford (11).

Miles, the text’s most central character, lacks many of the conventional qualities of the protagonist of the “village novel.” While many stories of or inspired by the aforementioned revolt from the village featured, in a fashion fairly typical of the modernist movement, youthful protagonists looking toward the future (which also, as we have established fuels the connection between the rural and nostalgia), Miles, at 35, characterizes himself as middle-aged. He thus becomes a kind of synecdoche for the town itself in this post-modern era, on the border between the old and the new, a liminal figure, if you will. As the man who teaches English to Staggerford’s high-school seniors, Miles recognizes his own liminality in a journal entry. Miles's journal entries, which are interspersed throughout the narrative, are just one method via which Hassler provides us with a multiplicity of voices. He writes this particular entry as he is about to take his high-school students on an annual end-of-year picnic; one the same day, he has to attend a retirement "party" for Fred Vandergar, a colleague whose ostensible retirement is due to terminal cancer, an uncomfortable event due to be held at "the Hub," Staggerford's local diner, and one that Miles fears will be like a "wake for live corpse." He writes:

Life. The light and the dark. Those 18-year-olds sitting on the riverbank in the sun. That dying man in the back room of the Hub. And me standing (in more ways than

age) exactly between them. Me, without my students' optimism and without Fred's despair. Without their fidgets and without his courage. Without their youth and without his cancer. Tomorrow, halfway between the light and the dark, I will end my eleventh year of teaching. (76)

Miles's liminality, in this case, does not render him more malleable; he is not a young character in the process of becoming. Rather, his character, like the postmodern village itself, represents a kind of meshing together of all of these influences, the old and the new, the nostalgia and the scandal. It is not necessarily about growth or change.

It is not only Miles's age that makes him a rather iconoclastic spokesperson for the village. The conventional wisdom (both in the "revolt from the village" novels and in life) is that one thing that keeps people in small towns and away from the allure of the city is a sense of rootedness. People want to live in the town where their parents live; people want to raise children in the same small-town environment that nurtured them. One thing that the small town has always had going for it is a sense of history and family. But Miles is surprisingly rootless. While he did grow up in Staggerford, his present connections to the town are tenuous at best. His mother is dead, his father is in a nursing home in Duluth, and his brother earns his living out in California, having moved there immediately after seducing and ultimately marrying Carla Carpenter, Miles's high-school girlfriend. When Miles's students ask him about his relationship with his father and brother, he replies, "To be honest, the closeness we once felt really doesn't exist any longer. In the seventeen years since my brother moved to California, we haven't exchanged one letter, and in the five years since my father became senile we haven't exchange one thought" (98). Miles has no spouse nor any children, and has, for the past twelve years, lived in a room in the home of the aforementioned Agatha McGee. While he has moments of brilliance and genuine caring in his job as a teacher, he does not seem particularly inspired by his choice of

career. His fraught relationship with teaching is expressed via the metaphor of a briefcase full of student compositions:

He regarded his briefcase. It was full of student papers – 114 essays entitled “What I Wish.” He had been putting off reading them for over a week. He opened the briefcase, then paused, reluctant to look inside. How many student papers had he read in these twelve years? How many strokes of his red pen had he made? How many times had he underlined it’s and written its. Was there ever a student who didn’t make a mischievous younger brother the subject of an essay? Was there ever a student who didn’t make four syllables out of ‘mischievous’? This was the twelfth in a series of senior classes that Miles was trying to raise to an acceptable level of English usage, and like the previous eleven, this class would graduate in the spring to make room for another class in the fall, and he would read the same errors over again. This annual renewal of ignorance, together with the sad fact that most of his students had been drilled in what he taught since they were in the fifth grade, left him with a vague sense of futility that made it hard for him to read student writing. But while he had lost his urge to read student papers, he had not lost his guilt about *not* reading them, so he carried around with him, like a conscience, this bulging briefcase... (10)

He carries this briefcase with him off and on throughout the story, pulling out a student paper, becoming disillusioned, and moving on to something else. This stack of papers literally stays with him until his death at the novel's end, a teacher's worst nightmare of sorts.

While this briefcase serves to undermine any sort of lofty idealism on the part of Miles toward his profession, it also allows the young students of Staggerford High a chance to enter the polyphonic narrative. When Miles pauses to read a student essay, the reader is able to read it as well, and thus to get a better sense of the different perspectives of the citizens of Staggerford. Sometimes the essays exist only for comic relief, a chance to exorcise the demons of the small-town landscape through Miles's experience of bad writing. This is particularly evident in the work of Roxie Booth, one of Miles's more intractable pupils, whose entire essay reads simply: “Living free with nature in my mind of how it is like dad says no mother always agrees. But if

my mind is the one I know no matter whatever rules or whatever. Then why not. Or I'll lose my mind. Isn't it me just to say just to get away from this hassle in a cabin? Before I lose my mind” (40). The insertion of this jumbled mess of a paper is not only humorous, but it also mirrors Hassler's postmodern rendering of small-town America: at times it seems to aiming toward some sort of overarching truth, but it never actually gets there.

These essays can also be quite poignant at times. At one point Miles reflects on the overarching theme of the stack thusly: "Losing. That was the melancholy strain running through dozens of paper every year. Parents lost in death and divorce, fingers lost in corn pickers, innocence lost behind barns and in back seats, brothers and uncles lost in Vietnam, friends lost in drug-induced hallucinations, and football games lost to Owl Brook and Berrington” (11). This sense of loss points to not only the difficulties inherent in the process of growing up, but also to the multilayered hodgepodge of the postmodern small town. The loss associated with death is presented on the same level as that associated with loss of a football game; old-fashioned agricultural implements such as corn pickers, typically associated with the rural America of yore, with drug-induced hallucinations, ostensibly a problem of modernization. Whereas the modernists sought to undermine simplified, nostalgic conceptions of the past and show the more complex, problematic concepts that lurked beneath the misleading exterior, in the postmodern small town both exist side by side, without much judgment of one or the other.

Not only does Miles feel not particularly rooted with regard to his family or his work life, but he also does not feel particularly attached to religion, that cultural backbone of the American small town. Hassler explains this loss of attachment by telling us that "ten years ago, at the age of twenty-five, he had lost his faith in the Father, the Son, the Holy Spirit, the Holy Catholic Church, the Day of Judgement, and Life Everlasting. He had lost the whole works. His faith had

not been crushed by a disillusioning experience; it had not been argued away by a glib heretic, it had simply evaporated. He was not particularly pleased to have lost it, nor did he long to have it back. His faith was gone, and that was that” (29). As we can see in this example, even the fact of Miles’s atheism is presented in a very postmodern manner. It is not a reaction to something; it just is what it is. This is markedly different from the religious crises experienced by numerous characters in the tradition of the village rebels, where choosing to reject religion (specifically, Christianity) was seen as a conscious rejection of old-fashioned values.

Miles's landlady, Miss Agatha McGee, on the other hand, the second strongest voice in the novel, is a traditional Roman Catholic. In fact, Miss McGee is traditional in just about everything she does, which actually makes her stand out as rather ironically untraditional in the postmodern world of Staggerford. She serves as an emblem of the older model of small-town America, one stretching back to before the revolt, when the “cult of the village” reigned supreme. Throughout the novel, Miss McGee laments the state of the world today, reiterating the idea that the “Dark Ages” (as she calls them) have returned in the guise of the modern world. In her mind, this realization actually causes physical symptoms: “[...] a frightening sensation crept up her spine and gripped her heart [...] An imperceptible shudder that moved out along her nervous system and left her nauseous. Her name for it was the Dark Age dyspepsia, because it struck whenever she came upon a new piece of evidence that pointed to the return of the Dark Ages” (22). It is certainly ironic that she refers to modern events as heralding a return to the Dark Ages, for modernity is supposed to be new and forward-thinking. Her anti-modernism actually makes her function as a kind of postmodern character; even though her views are overtly outdated, the humor in her reaction to the modern world blends together in a perfect representative of postmodern pastiche.

One of the most telling examples of this happens early in the novel, when her school, St. Isidore's, is visited by a guest lecturer of sorts, the poet Herschel Mancrief. Miss McGee's own ideas about proper poetry all seem to stem from the ostensible high point of her life, when she was in the first grade and her class was visited by none other than "Trees" poet Joyce Kilmer. She tells her sixth-grade students that "'When I was girl, my class was visited by Mr. Joyce Kilmer, who wrote 'Trees,' the poem every child carries in his heart from the primary grades, and to this day I can recall what Mr. Kilmer said to us. He came to Staggerford a mere two years before giving his life for his country in World War One'" (21). This association of "Trees" with the primary grades holds true even today, as it certainly, by today's standards, suggests a more simplistic and outdated form of poetry with its sing-songy rhyme scheme. Poems such as Kilmer's were what the modernists were rebelling against.

Yet, in the postmodern world of *Staggerford*, this decidedly anti-modern character becomes very sympathetic. This becomes very evident in the novel's depiction of poet Herschel Mancrief. Despite Miss McGee's affinity for a rather juvenile, Mancrief comes off looking even more juvenile in comparison. Depicted as an aging, unwashed hippie, he as much as tells us of his juvenile nature when he introduces himself to the students: "I am here to make you childlike," he began, blinking as he spoke, as though his words have off too much light, 'I am here to save you from growing up'" (25). This becomes more evident as we learn that he writes, among other things, free verse about toilets, explaining his rhetorical choices to the sixth-graders by saying, "'You are surprised I got a toilet into a poem? But poetry takes all of life for her domain. The beautiful and the unbeautiful. Roses and toilets. Today's poet seeks to represent the proportions of life. You don't very often pick a rose, but you go to the bathroom several times a day'" (26). As

he continues to recite his scatological poetry to the class, Miss McGee decides that she cannot take it anymore and abruptly ushers him out of the classroom.

Through the character of Mancrief, and also through Miss McGee's reaction, we see the failure of modernism to sustain its momentum. Mancrief's incorporation of taboo subjects such as toilets into poetry does not come off as edgy but just silly. This is emphasized further after he leaves Miss McGee's classroom to visit the fourth-graders next door, who laugh uproariously throughout his entire visit, which ends in a recitation of a new poem entitled "Be Careful Where You Grab Me." Later, as Miss McGee is leaving the building, she sees Mancrief driving away, "the fourth grade throwing him kisses from the curb" (28). This status as a hero of fourth-graders, while perhaps endearing on some level, hardly heightens Herschel Mancrief's status as a serious poet. His work does not seem truly artistic or forward-thinking at all. If anything, the reader's sympathies are with the elderly Miss McGee at this point.

Another way in which the residents of Staggerford navigate the post-modern landscape is via their relationship with multiculturalism. Staggerford is not a diverse community by any standard, yet the novel does give us a glimpse of the relations of the town to its surroundings. The town is located near the Sandhill Indian Reservation, a Chippewa (Ojibwe) reservation, and a good portion of the story deals with the often tense relationship between the white establishment of the town itself and the nearby Native American community. While so much of the literature of the American village had previously focused upon Euro-Americans and their relationship to the "virgin land" of the Americas, little of it dealt with the ways in which indigenous peoples fit into the picture. While popular conceptions of the rural Midwestern United States often centered around white homesteaders, but when Jon Hassler wrote *Staggerford*, he was in a time and a place that could not ignore the Native presence any longer.

The American Indian Movement (AIM) was first formally organized in Minneapolis, Minnesota, just two hours down the road from the fictional Staggerford, in 1968. While many people then and now associate multiculturalism with a more urban landscape, many of the original members of AIM were, in fact, organizing politically as a means of reacting to their disillusionment with the cities, areas to which many of them had been forcibly relocated; writes Jason Heppler on his website *Framing Red Power: Newspapers, the Trail of Broken Treaties and the Politics of Media*, “The vast evidence of injustice, as they saw it, proved a recurring pattern in history regarding the subjugation of Indians and a legacy of broken laws and promises. Reinforcement for this belief was manifest in disillusionment with the urban centers where many were pushed to under the government's relocation policy, causing many to loose (*sic*) their roots in culture and tradition” (“Founding Years”). This idea also illustrates a failure on the part of the modernist impulse, of the idea that success implies moving away from the country and toward the newfangled city. This narrative of success does not allow for the indigenous peoples whose desire is to reclaim the rural land that their people once inhabited.

It is this sense of injustice that motivates Native activists such as those we see in *Staggerford*. Hassler's original working title for the novel was *The Willoughby Uprising* (with “Willoughby” being the original name of the town), with the confrontation between the Natives and white citizens of Staggerford proper being a central part of the plot. This tension is evident throughout the narrative, but it often manifests itself not much as blatant animosity, but as tragic (and sometimes comic) misunderstanding. In the spirit of integration that permeated so much of public policy during the 1970s, the children from the Sandhill Reservation are now bused to Staggerford to be educated in the newly consolidated school district (Of course, consolidation during this period was prominent not only for integration purposes but also as a testament to

shrinking American small towns, which were—and are—having a harder time maintaining enrollment). Despite this move, indigenous graduation rates remain low, a fact that baffles the white school administrators. Wayne Workman, the principal of Staggerford High School, addresses his plan to ameliorate this problem at a faculty meeting:

“I call my plan 'Befriend an Indian.’” Wayne held up a sheet of paper with a list of names down the lefthand side and the words BEFRIEND AN INDIAN printed in red across the top. “An Indian, like everybody else in Minnesota, can legally quit school when he is sixteen. And most of them do. Every dropout at sixteen decreases our state-aid monies. I have prepared this list of all the Indians in Staggerford High School who will turn sixteen between now and the end of the current school year. You will see that here at the top I have printed, “Befriend An Indian.” That's exactly what I'm asking you to do, befriend an Indian. I will pass this paper among you and you will please write your name next to a name on the list. And then proceed to befriend the Indian with that name.” (76)

Workman's plan, while admittedly acknowledging the presence of Native students, certainly shows a lack of understanding toward their particular needs as students; in fact, the fact that he complains about the lack of state aid suggests that he is not even concerned with the Native students themselves so much as the school's funding. His attempt to aid graduation rates by asking faculty members to arbitrarily "befriend" students with the aid of a sign-up sheet is laughable at best and culturally insensitive at worst.

Wayne Workman's behavior is, unfortunately, in keeping with many of the people of Staggerford proper when it comes to dealing with the reservation. When Miles Pruitt's assigned Indian “friend,” Sam LaGrange, is absent from school on his sixteenth birthday, Workman ironically attributes assume that young Sam has dropped out of school due to Miles's being “prejudiced against Indians” (220). Not long after this event, Jeff Norquist, one of the town's resident Scandinavian-American Minnesotans, get into a fight with Hank Bird, a boy from the

reservation, over Annie Bird, Hank's sister and Jeff's girlfriend. After Miles Pruitt takes the wounded young Hank back to Sandhill, the rumors begin circulating: "Someone said that everybody living on the Sandhill Reservation was planning to come to Staggerford at first light in the morning and seek retribution for what had happened to little Hank Bird. Someone else said that the Indians were going to camp on the football field across the street from the school until Jeff Norquist was scalped" (239). The particular brand of showdown they are envisioning sounds like an old Western, pitting the rural whites against the Natives, and the idea of "scalping" only serves to further the fear in the town. The next day the people of Sandhill, 507 of them, in fact, do roll into town, not to attack the townspeople but to demand Jeff Norquist for, according to Hank and Annie's father, "Satisfaction for what happened to my boy Hank" (245). But the school administrators refuse to release Jeff, and instead bring in Annie herself, who takes the opportunity to kick her own father in the crotch. Instead of reacting with violence, several of the Native leaders erupt into laughter. Hassler tells us that, "At that moment the Staggerford Uprising (as Editor Fremling was to refer to it in *The Weekly*) fell apart. [Chief] Bigmeadow knew it was over. He put his hands up and waved his people back to the football field. Was it a gesture of disgust or relief? Miles wasn't sure. While most of the Indians moved back to the football field, a few went uptown for picnic supplies" (255). This tableau not only highlights an almost comic misunderstanding of the Natives on the part of the school administrators (and the media, who overblow the event to the status of "uprising"), but it also gives us a distinctly postmodern rendering of the Western showdown; it ends not in a gunfight but in a desire to consume, in this case picnic supplies. After this anticlimactic turn of events, representatives from both parties decide to meet that weekend, when their heads are cooler, at the local Pike Park that Saturday.

Despite this rather lackluster ending to the standoff, the administrators, in a wave of paranoia, overreact to the anticipated melee. On Friday, the day before the scheduled meeting at Pike Park, Miles goes searching for a runaway student, Beverly Bingham. When he arrives at her family's small farm on the edge of town, he is greeted by an unexpected scene: "He stopped at the edge of the woods and saw, under the Bingham's yard light, an armed camp. Parked on the slope of the farmyard were four army trucks and six jeeps. Soldiers with rifles strapped over their shoulders were swarming from shed to garage to barn, looking for a place to bed down [...] A soldier sat on the porch with a rifle across his knees" (288). It turns out that local officials have called in the National Guard, and stationed them on the Bingham farm because of its out-of-the-way location in a gulch. When Miles asks a state patrolman why they need the National Guard for "three or four Indians," the patrolman responds, "Three or four? Who you trying to kid? If the American Indian Movement has got wind of this meeting tomorrow we're going to see a hell of a lot more than three or four Indians. We're liable to see Indians from all over America. We could have a real hot time of it, Pruitt [...] Don't you know what happens when minorities get militant?" (289) Such a statement shows an awareness of concerns beyond the insular, mostly white community of Staggerford, but it shows little actual understanding of the concerns of the Chippewas.

The militarization of the countryside seems even more ridiculous when Wayne Workman and his compatriots do show up at Pike Park, and only four people from the Sandhill Reservation are there, including little Hank Bird. Unfortunately, Jeff Norquist and Annie Bird have run away together, and so when Wayne Workman is not able to deliver his human bounty, he overcompensates to comic proportions, nervously offering the Natives everything from a new motorcycle to a community center to renaming the park itself ("I've been thinking, this park

ought to be called Onji Park. I mean why should we call it Pike Park when Zebulon Pike was only here for part of one day in 1806, and all this land was Chief Onji's land long before the white man showed up. If you want me to, I'll see about having the name changed. I'll call the governor''') (319). Wayne Workman and his fellow administrators illustrate a different kind of prejudice than that which the village rebels fought against. They are outwardly biased toward the indigenous population; in fact, they appear to bend over backwards trying to give them everything that they want. But their actions are more motivated by their own image as a community than anything else; they don't want anyone to *think* they would cause trouble for the people from the reservation. Their actions, while seemingly magnanimous, show little understanding and concern for the actual plight of the Natives.

Their overreaction is emphasized all the more when Miles Pruitt is killed suddenly and tragically on that fateful Saturday. He is not killed by the Chippewa; in fact, Chief Bigmeadow and his crew negotiate for only a few brief minutes, with Bennie Bird saying, "If you're serious about that motorcycle, and if you fix Hank's tooth, we'll call it square" (202). On the return trip from Pike Park, Miles, the one member of the Staggerford contingent who has showed real understanding and empathy for the indigenous people, is surprised to see Wayne Workman's wife driving his car onto the Bingham farm, where the National Guard is encamped. Besides young Beverly, the only other resident of the farm is her mother, Corinne, known to locals as "the Bone-woman," "the ghostly figure that came to town in the evening and carried a gunny sack from door to door asking for bones—chicken bones, beef bones, pig bones—which (it was said) she ground up into meal for her chickens" (27). The Bone-woman is clearly mentally ill, but is not receiving any treatment, and the townspeople seem to view her merely as a harmless eccentric.

Beverly, in a stressful moment, has recently confessed to Miles and her classmates in English class that her mother, many years ago, actually murdered a salesman who showed up on their porch, a crime for which her father, who was part Native, was arrested: “He was next to useless on the farm but he was always agreeable, and I think my mother knew she could accuse him of the murder and he wouldn't know what was going on. She knew she could get away with it because he trusted her” (208). After this stunning confession, Miles goes to the authorities, but is rebuffed because all of their energies are focused on militarizing the town, on preventing the “uprising” that never happens. The irony of this situation is made tragically clear when Miles steps onto the Bone-woman's property and it sends her, once again, over the edge: “Miles opened the door and got out of the car. The Bone-woman, insane with fear, and resting her rat gun on the sill of the upstairs window, took aim and fired a .22 bullet that entered his skull an inch above the left eye. She had vowed to herself as she watched the singing, chicken-killing soldiers drive away in their jeeps and trucks that she would murder the next man who set foot in her yard” (212). That man is Miles. With this sudden end to the most accessible character's life the foolishness of the preparation for an “uprising” is made all the more clear; their actions have led to bloodshed, but it is the blood of one of their own, murdered by another white person (the same white person who allowed a Native person to take the blame for her crime years earlier). The fact that Corinne Bingham is known as “the Bone-woman” and hides out in a gulch on the edge of town, only visiting civilization to collect bones for her chickens, associates her with some of the more damaging stereotypes of Native people, as people unwilling and/or unable to live in civilization. The real Natives, on the other hand, are enthusiastic about motorcycles and beer and buying picnic supplies.

Unlike its modernist predecessors, though, *Staggerford* does not take an overt evaluative stance. Miles's death, rather than serving as a call to action or catalyst for change, leads to a depressing denouement filled with uncomfortable black humor. Of all of the citizens of Staggerford, only Agatha McGee and Beverly Bingham seem truly touched by Miles's death. Wayne Workman reports back to Staggerford High School and after the funeral in a frustrated, lamenting that, “On top of it all, I've got to find Sam LaGrange a new friend” (218). In the world of *Staggerford*, the good and the bad, the funny and the tragic continue to bounce around each other aimlessly, without aiming toward any grand notion of universal truth.

These are some of the ways in which *Staggerford* expresses the postmodern condition. The violence is shocking and sad but does not lead to any major revelation or realization on the part of the town. Rather, they continue on with their lives, navigating the postmodern landscape that had so pervaded the country by 1977, even in the far corners of rural Minnesota.

In the following decades, we see this kind of postmodern iteration of small-town America becoming more prominent, as small-town America seemed to once again become a viable source of entertainment. Perhaps one of the most famous examples of such a town is in David Lynch's *Twin Peaks*, a television series that ran on CBS from 1990 to 1991. By the time we see *Twin Peaks*, Washington, come to life on the screen, the façade of the small town as pastoral haven has been all but dismantled. The residents of *Twin Peaks* are all self-consciously aware of the fact that such a place does not exist; in fact, it is only FBI agent Dale Cooper, an outsider, who sees any beauty in the community itself, and his gushing over a “damn fine” cup of coffee at the local diner, or wearing plaid flannel as a means of communing with the natives of the lumber town are so over the top as to be almost parodic, undermining and almost lampooning any notion of supremacy of the American small town.

Perhaps one of the best metaphorical lenses through which to glimpse the inner workings of *Twin Peaks* comes via Leo Marx's *The Machine in the Garden*. In order to explain the concept of this terminology Marx refers to a scene from one of Nathaniel Hawthorne's journals in which Hawthorne's own tranquil meditation in nature is interrupted by the loud whistling of a locomotive. Of this tension, Marx writes that

True, it may be said that agents of urban power had been ravaging the countryside throughout recorded history. After they had withdrawn, however, the character of rural life had remained essentially unchanged. But here the case is different: the distinctive attribute of the new order is its technological power, a power that does not remain confined to the traditional boundaries of the city. It is a centrifugal force that threatens to break down, once and for all, the conventional contrast between these two styles of life. (32)

This breakdown is exemplified right from the beginning in *Twin Peaks*, with an opening credit sequence that situates the machine firmly in the garden. The first shot we see is that of a wren seated peacefully on a log, an image that, within one second, begins to transform into the billowing smokestacks of the Packard Sawmill, *Twin Peaks*'s central industry. Like *Peyton Place* and the aptly named "Lumberton" of *Twin Peaks*'s filmic predecessor, Lynch's own *Blue Velvet*, *Twin Peaks*'s main industry is logging. The fact that the town is able to maintain its "Small Town USA" exterior is, ironically enough, due to the ever-present destruction of the very bucolic surroundings that lend it such a reputation. This opening tableau, though, in a very postmodern fashion, does not highlight this irony but, rather, actually melds the two images together as the industrial goings-on of the sawmill are transposed atop the innocent bird. The sequence then continues with close-ups of the inner workings of the mill's machinery before feasting our collective eyes on the finished product: namely, a giant log. From here the camera zooms out to the highway leading into *Twin Peaks*, showcasing the two beautiful mountains from which the

town ostensibly takes its name, along with the oddly incongruous welcome sign which boasts a town population of 51, 201.¹ The camera then pans to a rich and sensuous waterfall, rushing with violent intensity, before resting on a tranquil river scene, a scene that becomes perhaps less tranquil in the viewer's mind once s/he realizes that it is the site where the body of Laura Palmer is first discovered. All of this takes place with the support of the *Twin Peaks* theme, Angelo Badalamenti's "Falling," a calm and soothing yet somewhat eerie synth instrumental.

The effect of this opening theme very obviously presents us with a machine-in-the-garden tableau, but it is very different from the exemplar that Leo Marx gives us. In *Twin Peaks* the machine is not an obstreperous interloper (like the barreling locomotive in both Hawthorne's story and in Henry David Thoreau's *Walden*) but rather a soft and almost serene part of the landscape that seems to coexist on an equal level with birds and mountains and waterfalls. This, of course, presents with a distinctly postmodern view of small-town America. According to Fredric Jameson in *Postmodernism, Or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, "Postmodernism is what you have when the modernization process is complete and nature is gone for good... one in which 'culture' has become a veritable 'second nature'" (ix). We see this again and again in the world of *Twin Peaks*; there is certainly plenty of nature in the town, but only as a supporting player in a world dominated by modernization, industrialization, and violence. Nature is a product to be consumed. Any sense of Edenic pastoralism is completely lost.

Indeed, if we think of *Twin Peaks* in terms of the American frontier, its position in northeastern Washington state (a location derived from numerous contextual clues throughout the series, such as being four hours from Seattle, being five miles from the Canadian border and

¹ Lynch has said that the population was actually 5, 201, but network executives forced him to change it, saying that no one would watch a show about a town with only five thousand people (McManus). That statement in and of itself speaks volumes about America's love/hate relationship with the small town.

being within walking distance of the state line) takes us about as far west as we can go without running into coastal urbanization (i.e., Seattle). David Lynch's exploration of the Pacific Northwest came to the American public just one year before Nirvana's *Nevermind* album, which put Washington State on the map and made the image of the jaded woodsman (think flannel shirts and baggy jeans) a cultural icon. While the arrival of urbanization in the American West marked the "death of the frontier" back in 1890, exactly 100 years later, in 1990, David Lynch presents us with a depiction of the American West that marks the death of that nature/culture divide, the death of an America in which the small town stands for anything significant whatsoever. The press's treatment of *Twin Peaks* at the time focused on it as a descendent of bestsellers such as *Peyton Place*, which were well known for daring to show us the secrets that lay beneath the exterior of the picture-perfect small town². But in the world of Twin Peaks, there is really no perfect picture to expose. Anything that looks perfect is merely empty postmodern nostalgia, and it fades as quickly as the tweeting wren morphs into the steaming sawmill.

While *Twin Peaks* is full of secrets and hypocrisy and violence, just like its modernist predecessors, it fails to offer the evaluative aspect that made the gulf between image and reality so wide. Instead, it veers into the realm of postmodern pastiche, appropriating the "revolt from the village" theme with quirkiness and even humor. We see this from the very beginning of the first episode, when Laura Palmer's body is first discovered. Here, bumbling sheriff deputy's Andy show of emotion comes off as more silly than anything else, with Sheriff Harry S. Truman sighing and reminding Andy that his behavior is "the same thing as last year in Mr. Blodgett's barn," ostensibly equating human victim Laura Palmer with a barnyard animal, a kind of creature

² In fact, when David Lynch was first asked to do a television series based on *Blue Velvet*, which he did not want to do initially, the first thing he did was to screen *Peyton Place*, and Russ Tamblyn, who played Norman Page in the film version of *Peyton Place*, plays psychiatrist Dr. Jacoby in *Twin Peaks* (Woodward).

commonly viewed as disposable in the economy of rural America. Even the most horrendous crimes are treated with a distinct lack of emotional gravity. Just as in predecessors *Kings Row* and *Peyton Place*, *Twin Peaks* deals with the troubling and all-too-real problem of incest, with Laura's secret diary (which is discovered later in the series, in the second season) strongly suggesting that Laura was repeatedly raped and ultimately murdered by her own father, Leland Palmer. What *Twin Peaks* does differently, though, is to ultimately attribute the abuse not to Leland himself but to BOB, a demon who has found his way into Leland's body. This in and of itself suggests postmodern pastiche, by giving an evil spirit the decidedly non-threatening name of "Bob." While this move is quirky and entertaining and gives viewers a way to engage with conceptions of the supernatural not usually afforded in the small-town drama, it also undermines the very serious problem of child sexual abuse. By passing culpability off to an evil spirit, Lynch is able to wash his hands of addressing the issue of how the community should deal with the problem, and the focus thereby is more focused on the viewer's entertainment than on any substantive evaluation of the small town as an entity (Of course, therein may lie the evaluation – Lynch may be using that voyeuristic impulse as critique, but it is really more of a critique of the viewer than of small-town America).

In keeping with this chaotic fusion of good and evil, machine and garden, the one character who truly believes in the inherent goodness of *Twin Peaks* is none other than the FBI's Special Agent Dale Cooper, an urban fish out of water who becomes our protagonist of sorts, unraveling the town's secrets along with the viewer. Here he becomes almost a parody of *Main Street*'s Carol Kennicott, as he becomes more and more enamored of the town as time goes by, even though this same passage of time is marked by his learning more and more about the violence and tragedy that characterize *Twin Peaks*.

Our first introduction to Dale Cooper comes in the form of his arrival in Twin Peaks, driving into town with slicked-back hair and a perfectly crisp suit, the picture of fifties nostalgia. Ironically, Dale Cooper, the urbanite, is the character whose character and values most mirror those of small-town America, which further serves to undermine any pastoral ideal. In the end, though, Lynch further erodes any sense of urban/rural or good/evil binary by ending the second season with the suggestion that Dale Cooper, now the moral center of the *Twin Peaks* narrative, has been taken over by the evil spirit BOB. Unlike with the village stories of the modernist era, there is no universal truth or moral that we can take from the town.

Depictions of small-town America have come a long way in the previous century. It has now been over 100 years since Edgar Lee Masters's *Spoon River Anthology* first burst onto the scene, and nearly century since the first U.S. Census declared the nation be more urban than rural. While many see the original "revolt from the village" as a dated literary experiment, this study illustrates how these early proponents of modernism put in motions the workings of a paradigm shift in popular conceptions of rurality. The success of such bestsellers as *Kings Row* and *Peyton Place* highlight the nation's hunger for narrations of small-town life beyond binary visions of the scary city and the peaceful countryside. This project, through careful re-examination of several previously popular but now largely forgotten texts, shows the ways in which this binary is transcended, and also the ways in which the small-town setting can serve as a means of establishing viable critique of numerous social institutions and ideas beyond the confines of the small town *per se*. This understanding of the past is important as we head into our uncertain future.

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