

THE SMALL TOWN IN AMERICAN LITERATURE,

1915—1930

A Thesis

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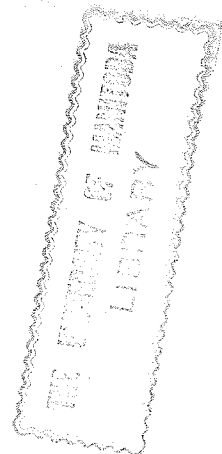
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I

INTRODUCTION

This treatise deals with a selection of nine American works in which the authors have depicted small towns. It does not pretend to be a survey of American literature employing the small town as subject matter, though it might be a chapter in such a field of study. I have treated here a number of works which, taken together, comprise an observable phenomenon in the literature that was produced in America from 1915 to about 1930.

There is a certain unity about the collection. All the works—seven novels, a group of tales, and a book of verse—deliberately deal with the American small town as a manifestation of American life and culture during a period that extends roughly from 1880 to 1930. Behind the deliberate treatment of the common subject matter there is likewise the evidence, in varying degrees, of the characteristic strengths and weaknesses of the post-war literary generation which produced the works: writing of this literary group, Alfred

Kazin points out the limitations while indicating the leading ideas of its members when he says, "Fundamentally... they were in their different ways all enemies of the conventional middle-class order, enemies of convention and Puritanism, members of the 'civilized minority,' rebels against all that conspired to keep down the values of art and thought. But they were at the same time children of the new boom world, the gay exploiters of a new privilege, provincials intoxicated with their release from provincialism; and it was this that gave such rollicking emphasis to their contempt for provincialism."¹

Thus, in the earliest work considered, in 1915 Edgar Lee Masters mordantly exposed in Spoon River Anthology the actions and motives—for the most part degenerate—of a couple of hundred small townsmen who lived in Spoon River, Illinois, during the latter half of the nineteenth and the first decade of the twentieth centuries. With contempt that is fretful rather than profound he portrayed the bigotry and cultural sterility of the dominant mercantile interests which laid down the law and dictated religion in Spoon River.

¹Kazin, Alfred, On Native Grounds, New York, Reynal & Hitchcock, 1942, p. 192.

In 1920 Sinclair Lewis produced Main Street, which mockingly mimicked the speech and manners of the inhabitants of twentieth century Gopher Prairie, Minnesota. Convinced that those traditional pictures were outmoded if not unreal which portrayed the American small town as "the one sure abode of friendship, honesty, and clean-sweet, marriageable girls", and as containing "iron dogs upon lawns, gold bricks, checkers, jars of gilded cat-tails, and shrewd, comic old men",¹ Lewis turned minutely observant but ungenerous eyes upon the surface life of American villages.

In 1918 Willa Cather wrote My Antonia in which she reflected upon a lifetime spent in the prairie town of Black Hawk, Nebraska, as it passed out of the pioneering stage and began to stratify socially. Behind her deeply sympathetic characterization of a courageous and spiritually rich pioneer heroine is a search, pursued with somewhat unimaginative sternness, for cultural health and traditions in America—a search that yielded a discovery of vestiges of foreign, matured cultures retained by the immigrants or found in the universities, but very meager evidences of native culture, the dearth being due, said Cather peevishly, to the numbing respectability of the American, mercantile middle class

¹Lewis, Sinclair, Main Street, Cleveland, World Publishing Company, 1946, p. 288.

majority.

In 1919 Sherwood Anderson's Winesburg, Ohio appeared, presenting a highly selective picture of life in an Ohio village of the early 1900's. Concentrating solely upon the morbid aspects of individual isolation in a small town, and applying Freudian determinism, Anderson described the furtive inner motives and futile actions of a group of everyday characters—farmers, doctors, clerks, teachers, store-keepers, salesmen, telegraphers, ministers—leaving an impression of cultural thinness, spiritual anarchy, and distortion of the sexual and other emotions.

In the following year Anderson published Poor White, in which he was concerned with the impact of the industrial revolution upon the pattern of life in a rural Ohio town of the latter decades of the nineteenth century. Persuaded that the growth of large-scale capitalistic enterprise, promoted solely by the profit incentive and attended by the multiplication of unvarying mechanical tasks, was having deleterious effects upon American life, he looked back to the rural milieu which was transformed by the factory system, and generously invested it with features that made it seem to him a propitious setting for the emergence of a humane, cultured civilization.

In 1918, dealing with the same event and period

that occupied Anderson in Poor White, namely the transformation of American towns into cities by the industrial revolution during the last twenty-five years or so of the nineteenth century, Booth Tarkington's The Magnificent Ambersons described the child-like vanity of an attempt by a wealthy Midland family to cultivate ancestral traditions and a pattern of vibrant social activity—an attempt that was ill-fated because the industrial revolution destroyed the bases upon which the Amberson fortune rested. While Tarkington depicted with poignant charm the harsh contrasts between the gay sociability of the ploughed-under Ambersons and the cold impersonality of the piled-up city-dwellers, between the noble instincts of the Ambersons and the perverting materialism of the newly rich, he restricted his view of the impact of the industrial revolution upon American life and culture to a portrayal of the loss—by the economically successful, at any rate—of the amenities of social intercourse, as a consequence of the national fever for acquiring wealth.

In 1919 Dorothy Canfield (Fisher) made a defense of life in a twentieth century American town in The Brimming Cup, a defense which was more an intended rebuke to the complaints of the revolters from the American village than a celebration of life in a small town, since it was based on the argument that what one

derived from life anywhere depended upon what one brought to it. While her story sought to show that life could be beautiful in an American small town, her picture of the town, because it betrayed an underlying short-tempered impatience with, rather than a broad sympathetic understanding of, the "tiny inhibitions" and the "little passivities"¹ of the townspeople, was not fundamentally opposed to that of other writers in this study.

In 1929 Thomas Wolfe published Look Homeward, Angel, an autobiographical novel depicting a tortured youth spent in a West Virginia town of the first two decades of the twentieth century, and in 1934 he wrote the fragment of You Can't Go Home Again entitled The Native's Return, in which, with intense anguish, he described his home town as it had appeared to him during a visit in the late 'twenties. Believing that he was giving expression to a universal overwhelming grief over a lack of understanding between human beings, Wolfe was actually blindly trying to fight his way through the inarticulateness of provincial America, and was essentially in a seething revolt against the cautions and repressions of the middle class. When he

¹Canfield, Dorothy, The Brimming Cup, New York, Grosset & Dunlap, 1919, p. 292.

asked,

Which of us has known his brother?
Which of us has looked into his father's
heart? Which of us has not remained
forever prisonpent? Which of us is not
forever a stranger and alone?¹

He was, in a sense, an isolated, thwarted provincial,
impelled to a rhetorical expression of the agony of his
frustration by the absence of American cultural roots.

¹ Wolfe, Thomas, Look Homeward, Angel, New York,
Grosset & Dunlap, 1929, p. 2.

II

EDGAR LEE MASTERS:

Spoon River Anthology

In Spoon River Anthology Masters composed over two hundred short poems, each being the autobiographical epitaph of an inhabitant of the village, Spoon River.

Masters had observed life in a small town. He had spent his youth in small towns of Illinois where he went to school. Here, too, he wrote poems for newspapers and read intensively. Introducing his poetry in their anthology, Sanders and Nelson note that "Despite his newspaper and high school work and his writing of verse, he found time between his fifteenth and twentieth years to read Euripides, Seneca, Epictetus, Marcus Aurelius, Shakespeare and other Elizabethan dramatists, Addison, Locke, Goethe, Emerson, Poe, Whitman, Swinburne, and several other authors."¹ His reading sharpened and vivified his impressions, leading him to see

¹ Sanders, Gerald Dewitt, and Nelson, John Herbert, ed., Chief Modern Poets of England and America, New York, Macmillan, 1936, p. 339.

village life as life itself; in the poem "Petit, the Poet" he wrote

Life all around me here in the village:
Tragedy, comedy, valor and truth,
Courage, constancy, heroism, failure—¹
...

The desire grew in him to give his observations expression. The previously mentioned commentators relate that he "had for years planned a novel that should treat the whole life of a small community and thus of society generally, for it was his idea that the small community was but a cross section of the world at large."² This idea of the village persisted. The form, however, in which he put it resulted from his contact with the Greek Anthology to which his attention was directed by William Marion Reedy, a publisher. In his anthology Masters "set to work to depict men and women in a typical community, and thus express life as it was everywhere. It was the idea of the novel long before conceived, carried out in verse and in interrelated interpretations."³

These references of Sanders and Nelson to Spoon River Anthology state the approach to Masters adopted in this chapter. Any efforts on my part

¹Masters, Edgar Lee, Spoon River Anthology, New York, Macmillan, 1919, p. 89.

²Sanders and Nelson, op. cit., p. 341.

³Loc. cit.

to indicate the ~~v~~approach to Masters would be covert paraphrase of them.

The people of Spoon River are differentiated from each other by specific experiences and events which color their views. The town is not a vague background: the economic, political, and moral standards of the citizens are the objects of intense scrutiny by Masters in the productions of his characters. The portraits of these characters reveal a variation in the philosophies and outlooks of the townspeople. A consideration of various types follows.

In Masters' Anthology there are a number of persons portrayed as completely beaten. One of these is Robert Fulton Tanner.

IF a man could bite the giant hand
That catches and destroys him,
As I was bitten by a rat
While demonstrating my patent trap,
In my hardware store that day.
But a man can never avenge himself
On the monstrous ogre Life.
You enter the room—that's being born;
And then you must live—work out your
soul,
Aha! the bait that you crave is in view:
A woman with money you want to marry,
Prestige, place, or power in the world.
But there's work to do and things to
conquer—
Oh, yes! the wires that screen the bait.
At last you get in—but you hear a step:
The ogre, Life, comes into the room,
(He was waiting and heard the clang of
the spring)
To watch you nibble the wondrous cheese,

And stare with his burning eyes at you,
 And scowl and laugh, and mock and curse
 you,
 Running up and down in the trap,
 Until your misery bores him.¹

The poem is a distinct reflection of the restrictions, lack of imagination, and the arrested development in the life of the small town. The town's promises of satisfactions in life are mirages behind which are the withering futility and the numb round of life of the town. Robert Fulton Tanner sees the town as a trap and equates the town with Life. His figures of speech reveal his limited range of vision; he must find them within his own field of experience. He speaks of the "patent trap,/ In my hardware store that day"; of biting the "giant hand" of fate as he "was bitten by a rat"; of the bait of "A woman with money you want to marry". These references are distinctly homely and provincial.

The poem is an expression of the trapped futility which has resulted from living in the town. It is part of Tanner's limitations and defeat that he does not see that it is the town which has thwarted him. His summing up of life is restricted. The climax in the last seven lines tends to be melodramatic.

By way of contrast is the epitaph of Alexander

¹Masters, Edgar Lee, Spoon River Anthology, New York, Macmillan, 1919, p. 6.

Throckmerton, who is perhaps the most thoroughly beaten one in the Anthology.

IN youth my wings were strong and tire-
less,
But I did not know the mountains.
In age I knew the mountains
But my weary wings could not follow my
vision—
Genius is wisdom and youth.¹

He recognizes the failure of his life with an equanimity that contrasts sharply with the self-pitying complaint in the Tanner epitaph.

Another type of person found in Masters' collection of townspeople is the rebelter. One in this category, Julian Scott, is at complete odds with the town.

TOWARD the last
The truth of others was untruth to me;
The justice of others injustice to me;
Their reasons for death, reasons with me
for life;
Their reasons for life, reasons with me
for death;
I would have killed those they saved,
And saved those they killed.
And I saw how a god, if brought to
earth,
Must act out what he saw and thought,
And could not live in this world of men
And act among them side by side
Without continual clashes.
The dust's for crawling, heaven's for
flying—
Wherefore, O soul, whose wings are
grown,
Soar upward to the sun!²

¹Ibid., p. 129.

²Ibid., p. 252.

Julian Scott says that this state of opposition to the attitudes and actions of the town became automatic "Toward the last". That is, after repeated rounds of experience with the townsmen, he acquired the attitude of implacable contempt for them. He sees "continual clashes" inevitable. His revolt has become a matter of course. One of two things has occurred, therefore. Either he has taken the measure of the town, or each of the many bouts with Spoon River has successively robbed him of imaginative and recuperative powers, and whittled him down to an ineffectual revolter. The argument that "god...brought to earth,...could not live in this world of men.../ Without continual clashes" appears to him unassailable in bolstering his stand against the town. It is questionable, however, how far he is using it as a consolatory excuse for his essential capitulation rather than an argument for his attitude. The last three lines do not come off as an exit with flourish. They are rhetoric, and rhetoric, as Yeats has said, "is an attempt of the will to do the work of the imagination".¹

Another revolter, much more successful in holding his own, while defying the town and giving it something lively to think about, is the Village Atheist.

¹Quoted in Kazin, Alfred, On Native Grounds, New York, Reynal & Hitchcock, 1942, p. 462.

Ye young debaters over the doctrine
 Of the soul's immortality,
 I who lie here was the village atheist,
 Talkative, contentious, versed in the
 arguments
 Of the infidels.
 But through a long sickness
 Coughing myself to death
 I read the Upanishads and the poetry of
 Jesus.
 And they lighted a torch of hope and
 intuition
 And desire which the Shadow,
 Leading me swiftly through the caverns
 of darkness,
 Could not extinguish.
 Listen to me, ye who live in the senses
 And think through the senses only:
 Immortality is not a gift,
 Immortality is an achievement;
 And only those who strive mightily
 Shall possess it.¹

The Village Atheist is an active battler, armed and stocked with
 argument. He is indefatigable, prepared to pop up in
 every opening and exploit opportunities for debate. He
 is inwardly volatile and liberated from emotional and
 intellectual sterility to a degree not found in very
 many of the characters of Spoon River. He is the most
 successful revolter in the book: the one who is not
 cowed by insuperable odds but rather makes them his
 life stimulus, and who succeeds in leaving ideas
 behind.

Those in Spoon River who try to fit in, to adjust
 themselves to the life of the town, constitute a third

¹ Masters, Edgar Lee, Spoon River Anthology, New
 York, Macmillan, 1919, p. 250.

class of characters whom Masters depicts. A representative of this group is Mrs. George Reece.

TO this generation I would say:
Memorize some bit of verse of truth or
beauty.

It may serve a turn in your life.
My husband had nothing to do
With the fall of the bank—he was only
cashier.

The wreck was due to the president,
Thomas Rhodes,

And his vain, unscrupulous son,
Yet my husband was sent to prison,
And I was left with the children
To feed and clothe and school them.
And I did it, and sent them forth
Into the world all clean and strong,
And all through the wisdom of Pope, the
poet:

"Act well your part, there all the
honor lies."¹

Mrs. George Reece's adjustment is essentially to the town's canons of respectability. Her life has obediently sought the town's approval in following its codes of success, which she has accepted as a matter of course, since she has known no others. After her husband's imprisonment with its attendant stigma, she applies herself more inflexibly than ever to what she believes to be the necessity of conforming to the town's insistence upon a respectable reputation, and of making herself and her family once more acceptable to the townspeople. Her adjustment to the ways of the

¹Ibid., p. 92.

town, therefore, is an unquestioning adherence to them.

Another figure who fits in with Spoon River is Fiddler Jones. In contrast to Mrs. George Reece, who is herded into an acceptance of the town, he accepts it spontaneously.

THE earth keeps some vibration going
 There in your heart, and that is you.
 And if the people find you can fiddle,
 Why, fiddle you must, for all your
 life.
 What do you see, a harvest of clover?
 Or a meadow to walk through to the
 river?
 The wind's in the corn; you rub your
 hands
 For beeves hereafter ready for market;
 Or else you hear the rustle of skirts
 Like the girls when dancing at Little
 Grove.
 To Cooney Potter a pillar of dust
 Or whirling leaves meant ruinous drouth;
 They looked to me like Red-Head Sammy
 Stepping it off, to "Toor-a-Loor."
 How could I till my forty acres
 Not to speak of getting more,
 With a medley of horns, bassoons and
 piccolos
 Stirred in my brain by crows and robins
 And the creak of a wind-mill—only
 these?
 And I never started to plow in my life
 That some one did not stop in the road
 And take me away to a dance or picnic.
 I ended up with forty acres;
 I ended up with a broken fiddle—
 And a broken laugh, and a thousand mem-
 ories,
 And not a single regret.¹

¹Ibid., p. 61.

The basic reason for the difference between Fiddler Jones' acceptance of the town and Mrs. George Reece's is the existence, in the former, of an inner animation. His view of the town comes from within; it is not imposed from without. There is a sympathetic bond between him and life around him. The town's activity and its people excite his imagination. While he accepts the variegated scene of the town with sensitiveness, and his imagination is charmed by it, his hearty enjoyment of life leads him to rebuke consciously the town's joyless attendance to the increase of material wealth. The terrible profitlessness of the motives of material gain is depicted in Cooney Petter's epitaph.

I INHERITED forty acres from my Father
 And, by working my wife, my two sons
 and two daughters
 From dawn to dusk, I acquired
 A thousand acres. But not content,
 Wishing to own two thousand acres,
 I hustled through the years with axe
 and plow,
 Toiling, denying myself, my wife, my
 sons, my daughters.
 Squire Higbee wrongs me to say
 That I died from smoking Red Eagle
 cigars.
 Eating hot pie and gulping coffee
 During the scorching hours of harvest
 time
 Brought me here ere I had reached my
 sixtieth year.¹

¹Ibid., p. 60.

Consequently the Fiddler makes the sharp comparison between his and Cooney Potter's reactions to "a pillar of dust/Or whirling leaves". Cooney Potter does not stop to live, while Fiddler Jones has a shaping imagination. In his expansive self-sufficiency, Fiddler Jones is the counterpart of the Village Atheist. The latter is intellectually, and the former, emotionally, animated. Both have their differences of opinion with the town; neither cuts himself off from it. The one advocates the bursting of the town's unimaginative canons and calls for rigorous thought and a full life; the Fiddler, by virtue of his inner resources, creates a reciprocal warmth of temper between himself and the town which he accepts as the field for his life.

There are two features of the town which are to be discerned from some of the epitaphs.

One of these is the loss of the stalwart characteristics which inspired the Republic at its inception. In the poem, Rutherford McDowell, these are summed up as "strength...faith...mastery of life...courage.../Which labors and loves and suffers and sings/Under the sun!" The whole poem follows.

THEY brought me ambrotypes
Of the old pioneers to enlarge.
And sometimes one sat for me—
Some one who was in being
When giant hands from the womb of the
world
Tore the republic.

What was it in their eyes?—
 For I could never fathom
 That mystical pathos of drooped eye-
 lids,
 And the serene sorrow of their eyes.
 It was like a pool of water,
 Amid oak trees at the edge of a forest,
 Where the leaves fall,
 As you hear the crow of a cock
 From a far-off farm house, seen near
 the hills
 Where the third generation lives, and
 the strong men
 And the strong women are gone and for-
 gotten.
 And these grand-children and great
 grand-children
 Of the pioneers!
 Truly did my camera record their faces,
 too,
 With so much of the old strength gone,
 And the old faith gone,
 And the old mastery of life gone,
 And the old courage gone,
 Which labors and loves and suffers and
 sings
 Under the sun!¹

Rutherford McDowell's attitude is perhaps romantic: he
 is contemptuous of the character—such as it appears to
 him—of the people of Spoon River; he looks back to an
 era which time and legend make heroic for him. Whether
 or not his picture of a prevalent strength of character
 in the Revolutionary period constitutes a complete
 estimate of the pioneers' character, he discovers no
 strength of character in the people of Spoon River.

The other feature of the town which is stressed by
 some of the people of Spoon River is the existence of

¹Ibid., p. 228.

pervading meanness and cruelty and the absence of a broad humanity. This is illustrated in the poem, Shack Dye.

THE white men played all sorts of jokes
on me.
They took big fish off my hook
And put little ones on, while I was
away
Getting a stringer, and made me believe
I hadn't seen aright the fish I had
caught.
When Burr Robbins circus came to town
They got the ring master to let a tame
leopard
Into the ring, and made me believe
I was whipping a wild beast like Samson
When I, for an offer of fifty dollars,
Dragged him out to his cage.
One time I entered my blacksmith shop
And shook as I saw some horse-shoes
crawling
Across the floor, as if alive--
Walter Simmons had put a magnet
Under the barrel of water.
Yet everyone of you, you white men,
Was fooled about fish and about leop-
ards too,
And you didn't know any more than the
horse-shoes did
What moved you about Spoon River.¹

This study is interested both in what attracts an author's attention in the small town, and what he creates out of the small town as subject matter. On the authority of the two commentators quoted at the beginning of this chapter it was stated that Masters' intention in writing Spoon River Anthology was to describe a

¹ Ibid., p. 184.

collection of people out of an American small town and thereby portray universal characteristics of humanity. In the achievement of this objective Masters does not succeed. There are two reasons for his failure.

First, while Masters depicts over two hundred characters, there is no great variety among them, nor is there much diversity within the several types. Most of the characters may be grouped under one of three or four categories. This failure to provide rich diversity can be illustrated by way of comparison. In the Prologue to the Canterbury Tales Chaucer constructed out of twenty-nine characters a picture of English society that lacked only the royalty to complete it. At the same time, through the selection of details and mannerisms in the delineation of the characters of the pilgrims, he portrayed universal human nature. This Masters does not do. His characters become the expression of his limited attitude and feeling.

This attitude of Masters is the second reason for his failure to "express life as it was everywhere". Pervading Spoon River Anthology is a spirit of querulous frustration. All the epitaphs in one way and another become an expression of this feeling. It arises out of his embitterment by conditions in American village life as they appear to him: cultural ste-

rility, spiritual degeneracy, domination of the town's morals, economics, and politics by a money-making, defrauding minority. He does not rise above Spoon River. He remains a provincial, countering spleen with more spleen. He reveals his knowledge of the social and economic structure of the village with a morbid personal rancor and bitterness. He has a mind that would be bold and versatile, but that is constantly reined in by a frenetic disgust over the town's narrowness and bigotry, which never lack new forms of manifestation. His contempt for the town is emphatic, but not broad.

III

SINCLAIR LEWIS:

Main Street

Carol Milford, the heroine of Main Street, a graduate of Blodgett College in Minneapolis, has taken a position as librarian in St. Paul, Minnesota. Her studies and her employment have left her restless and dissatisfied. She has vague aesthetic aspirations which she hopes to realize in a career of undefined usefulness. The reading of a treatise on village-improvement fires her with notions of transforming any one of the small towns of the northern Middle-West of the United States into a green-lawned, library-and-theater-studded community. Certain that such a town's inhabitants will patiently and eagerly submit to an alien re-organization of their impenitent ways, she feeds her vision of the renovated town with the uncritical zeal of her untrained thought.

She meets Dr. Will Kennicott, a general practitioner of Gopher Prairie, Minnesota, an agricultural town of three thousand people. He proposes to Carol as

attractively as possible in his graceless but insistent way, not failing to offer Gopher Prairie to her as an obvious place to introduce her reforms, which, in the glow of courtship, he feels become Carol very prettily. Two comments, one by the visionary Carol and the other by the unsentimental Kennicott, serve to presage the peevish and in many ways inconclusive spat that Carol is to have with the townsmen of Gopher Prairie. Carol, with typically "woozy" enthusiasm, bounces up after reading the treatise on village-improvement, and says,

"That's what I'll do after college! I'll get my hands on one of these prairie towns and make it beautiful....I'll make 'em put in a village green, and darling cottages, and a quaint Main Street!"¹

Kennicott, wooing Carol, pleads,

"Come on. Come to Gopher Prairie. Show us. Make the town—well—make it artistic. It's mighty pretty, but I'll admit we aren't too darn artistic. Probably the lumberyard isn't as scrumptious as all these Greek temples. But go to it! Make us change!"²

Carol accepts, marries Dr. Kennicott, and goes to Gopher Prairie, more the apprehensive bride questioning her choice of husband and future, than the

¹Lewis, Sinclair, Main Street, Cleveland, World Publishing Company, 1946, p. 19.

²Ibid., p. 31.

clear-headed, competent reformer. During the reactions and adjustments incident to settling into place, however, Carol begins to notice with sharp awakening something of the purely planless way in which the town grew up, of how it seems to stand there for no discernible reason, and of the vacuity of ideal and grub-biness of manner in the townspeople. She has made a breathless tour of the town, greedily photographing Main Street, buildings, streets, and homes, upon her mind. She has been struck in rapid succession by Dyer's Drug Store,

...a corner building of regular and unreal blocks of artificial stone... inside...pawed-over heaps of tooth-brushes and combs and packages of shaving soap...notorious mixtures of opium and alcohol, in the very shop to which her husband sent patients for the filling of prescriptions...;¹

the Rosebud Movie Palace with

...lithographs announcing a film called "Patty in Love";²

Howland & Gould's Grocery, where

...in the display window [were] black, overripe bananas and lettuce on which a cat was sleeping...;³

"a fly-buzzing saloon"; a clothing store

¹Ibid., pp. 49-50.

²Ibid., p. 50.

³Loc. cit.

...with a display of "ox-blood-shade
Oxfords with bull-dog toes"...;¹

the Ben Ten Store, operated by Haydock & Simons', the
largest shop in town, with a

...newness and an obvious notion of
neatness and service...;²

Axel Egge's General Store, where

...in the shallow dark window-space
[werē] heaps of sleazy sateens, badly
woven galateas, canvas shoes designed
for women with bulging ankles, steel
and red glass buttons upon cards with
broken edges, a cottony blanket, a
granite-ware fryingpan reposing on a
sun-faded crêpe blouse...;³

Sam Clarke's Hardware Store, with "an air of frankly
metallic enterprise";⁴ Chester Dashaway's House Fur-
nishing Emporium; Ye Art Shoppe,

...a touching fumble at beauty...a
show-window delicately rich in error;
vases starting out to imitate tree-
trunks but running off into blobs of
gilt—an aluminum ash-tray labeled
"Greetings from Gopher Prairie"—...;⁵

the town's

...damp, yellow-brick schoolbuilding in
its cindery grounds...;⁶

the State Bank, "stucco masking wood";⁷ and a score of
similar establishments. Racing home, she finds the

¹Loc. cit.

⁵Ibid., p. 52.

²Ibid., p. 51.

⁶Loc. cit.

³Loc. cit.

⁷Loc. cit.

⁴Loc. cit.

chain of scenes turn into a stark revelation of the people's lifelessness, the emptiness of their wants and pursuits, and the brutish, shabby attitude toward life, which are all graphically expressed in the exterior aspects and shapelessness of the town she has just traversed.

It was not only the unsparing unapologetic ugliness and the rigid straightness which overwhelmed her. It was the planlessness, the flimsy temporariness of the buildings, their faded unpleasant colors...Each man had built with the most valiant disregard for all the others....¹

Little by little, through attending parties, church, the movies, by drawing out Kennicott, she provokes and discovers the ruling spirit and the pervading motivations of the citizens of Gopher Prairie.

Family parties in Gopher Prairie were attended and planned by

...the entire aristocracy of Gopher Prairie: all persons engaged in a profession, or earning more than twenty-five hundred dollars a year, or possessed of grandparents born in America.²

The party becomes, therefore, a deliberate rounding up of the dominant element of the community, and an oppor-

¹Ibid., pp. 52-53.

²Ibid., p. 90.

tunity for a damning portrayal of the group's manners.

Carol is brought face to face with the respectability of the leading citizens at a party arranged to welcome her to the town. She enters, somewhat uncertainly, upon the assembled guests whom she finds

sitting in a vast prim circle as though they were attending a funeral.¹

This glimpse of the gathering serves as an omen. Carol is announced to the group by the raucous, self-conscious, but friendly, Sam Clark.

His arm about her, he led her in and bawled, "Ladies and worser halves, the bride! We won't introduce her round yet, because she'll never get your bum names straight anyway. Now bust up this star chamber!"²

When she is introduced, the people in the group

...tittered politely, but they did not move from the social security of their circle, and they did not cease staring.³

Carol not only feels the thwarting dearth of affability in the room, but also perceives the existence of a tribal pledge of interests. She dimly realizes that anyone who would threaten the security of this group would be set upon. As she is led about the circle, she is helplessly jockeyed into a groove of automatic conversation and

¹Ibid., p. 56.

²Loc.cit.

³Ibid., p. 57.

safe answers:

"Oh, I'm sure I'm going to like it here ever so much."

"Yes, we did have the best time in Colorado—mountains."

"Yes, I lived in St. Paul several years. Euclid P. Tinker? No, I don't remember meeting him, but I'm pretty sure I've heard of him."¹

She suffers a series of premonitory disillusion. She is introduced to the Luke Dawsons and Mr. Mott, the latter being the superintendent of schools. Her hopes of meeting someone with refreshing imagination are dashed. She discovers further evidence of an emotional and intellectual sterility:

...the Dawsons and Mr. Mott teetered upon weary feet, and smiled at Carol with crystallized expressions.²

Several times during the evening she hears reference made in a recurring pattern of mechanical language to a Percy Bresnahan, spoken of in tones of pride, familiar camaraderie and reverence. Bresnahan is a millionaire automobile manufacturer in Boston, who once lived in Gopher Prairie, and who returns periodically in glory to fish with the select boys. He is the symbol of end success and perfection which were measured by Gopher Prairie in terms of dollars. Kennicott asks Carol,

¹Loc. cit.

²Ibid., p. 59.

"...Did you know that Percy Bresnahan came from here? Born and brought up here?"

"Bresnahan?"

"Yes—you know—president of the Velvet Motor Company of Boston, Mass.—make the Velvet Twelve—biggest automobile factory in New England."¹

Mr. Mott, the school superintendent, "lectured" to Carol:

"There's a fine class of people. I don't like some of these retired farmers who come here to spend their last days—especially the Germans. They hate to pay school-taxes. They hate to spend a cent. But the rest are a fine class of people. Did you know that Percy Bresnahan came from here? Used to go to school right at the old building!"

"I heard he did."

"Yes. He's a prince. He and I went fishing together, last time he was here."²

Harry Haydock introduced himself to Carol:

"How do you think you're going to like the old burg?"

"I'm sure I shall like it tremendously."

"Best people on earth here. Great hustlers, too. Course I've had lots of chances to go live in Minneapolis, but we like it here. Real he-town. Did you know that Percy Bresnahan came from here?"³

Carol receives an inkling of their literary tastes and pretensions. They respond to easy tickling of the

¹ Ibid., p. 54.

² Ibid., p. 59.

³ Ibid., p. 60.

funny-bone, and guiltily bluster about it. Chet Dasha-way, the furniture dealer remarks to Carol,

"Say, uh, have you been reading this serial 'Two Out' in Tingling Tales? Corking yarn! Gosh, the fellow that wrote it certainly can sling baseball slang!"¹

Whereupon others round about, aware that Carol has been to college and has worked as a librarian, suspicious of falling short in her estimation which they instinctively resent, try to impress her and not offend one another. Harry Haydock, the proprietor of the biggest general store in town, tells that his wife reads substantial books such as "Mid the Magnolias" by Sara Hetwiggin Butts,

"But me," he glanced about importantly, as one convinced that no other hero had ever been in so strange a plight, "I'm so darn busy I don't have much time to read."²

With Sam Clark's saying that

"I never read anything I can't check against"³

the literary discussion is ended and conversation is switched to a debate over which shore of Lake Minnie-mashie is better to fish from, a debate which is standard at every gathering, as are the rest of the speeches. Mr. Dave Dyer, after a "discussion" on labor

¹Ibid., p. 67.

²Loc. cit.

³Loc. cit.

unions declared:

"Yep. I get good time out of the flivver. 'Bout a week ago I motored down to New Wurttemberg. That's forty-three--No, let's see: It's seventeen miles to Belldale, and 'bout six and three-quarters, call it seven, to Torgenquist, and it's a good nineteen miles from there to New Wurttemberg--seven-teen and seven and nineteen, that makes, uh, let me see: seventeen and seven 's twenty-four, plus nineteen, well say plus twenty, that makes forty-four, well anyway, say about forty-three or -four miles from here to New Wurttemberg. We got started about seven-fifteen, prob'ly seven-twenty, because I had to stop and fill the radiator, and we ran along, just keeping up a good steady gait--"

Mr. Dyer did finally, for reasons and purposes admitted and justified, attain to New Wurttemberg.¹

Similarly, Carol finds that the diversions at social gatherings are stunts done over and over by persons who are coy about presenting them over and over with the same gestures and protestations. When Miss Ella Stowbody, the spinster daughter of the president of the Farmers' National Bank is asked to recite "Old Sweetheart of Mine", she

...scratched her dry palms and blushed.
"Oh, you don't want to hear that old thing again...My voice is in terrible shape tonight."²

All through the party Sam Clark and his wife are faced

¹ Loc. cit.

² Ibid., p. 63.

with the problem of keeping the guests alive and out of a dead silence.

Sam Clark had been talking to Carol about motor cars, but he felt his duties as host. While he droned, his brows popped up and down. He interrupted himself, "Must stir 'em up." He worried at his wife, "Don't you think I better stir 'em up?" He shouldered into the center of the room, and cried:

"Let's have some stunts, folks."

"Yes, let's!" shrieked Juanita Haydock.¹

The party, in summary, discloses certain characteristics of the Gopher Prairieans. First there is the projection of the fatuity and poverty of the pursuits and minds of the citizens, evident in the repeating pattern of the conversations, which are made up of inane variations upon recurring topics. Second is the underlying theme of the book, which is that the Gopher Prairieans and, by extension, Americans of the 1920's are slothful as they are because their living is founded upon "unimaginative commercial prosperity."²

With cool indifference Lewis breaks down Gopher Prairie's movies into their laughably obvious elements and devastatingly castigates the solid citizens for attending them.

¹Ibid., p. 62.

²Ibid., p. 68

Carol and her husband one evening go to the Rosebud Movie Palace and take in a program of two films. The first is an unabashed glorification of American imperialism, justified on grounds that the American acquisitive instinct, factory system, showiness and lust for wealth have been happily foisted upon a South American people. It portrays the adventures of

...a brave young Yankee who conquered a South American republic. He turned the natives from their barbarous habits of singing and laughing to the vigorous sanity, the Pep and Punch and Go, of the North; he taught them to work in factories, to wear Klassy Kollege Klothes, and to shout, "Oh, you baby doll, watch me gather in the mazuma."¹

The second film featured

...Mack Schnarken and the Bathing Suit Babes in a comedy of manners entitled "Right on the Coco".²

It is a cynically repetitious appeal to a hypocritically moral audience's sex instincts and to its craving for the burlesque.

If the plot lacked lucidity, the dual motif of legs and pie was clear and sure.³

The Gopher Prairieans are given a brutal working over. Because of their herd-like descent upon the movie-house and their uncritical swallowing of the

¹Ibid., p. 219.

²Loc. cit.

³Loc. cit.

fare, their brain-power is shown to be reduced to the point of non-existence.

The movies were almost as vital to Kennicott and the other solid citizens of Gopher Prairie as land-speculation and guns and automobiles.¹

Their rapt attention throughout the program is mercilessly ridiculed. That their credulous eyes are glued almost idiotically to the screen during the presentation of the first film is viciously referred to as

...the intellectual tension induced by the master film.²

The almost subhuman squealing and wiping of eyes resulting from the second film is said to be caused by the comic relief of the

...livelier, more lyric and less philosophical drama... "Right on the Coco."³

The moral hypocrisy and self-righteousness of the townsmen are bitterly assailed. While Carol and her husband prepare to leave, the screen advises that the performance for the next week will again include the inimitable Mr. Schnarken in a

...new, uproaring extra-special super-feature of the Clean Comedy Corporation entitled "Under Mollie's Bed."⁴

¹Loc. cit.

²Loc. cit.

³Loc. cit.

⁴Ibid., p. 220.

On the way home from the movies, Carol says quietly to her unsuspecting husband,

"I'm glad ...that this is a moral country. We don't allow any of these beastly frank novels."

"Yump. Vice Society and Postal Department won't stand for them. The American people don't like filth."

"Yes. It's fine. I'm glad we have such dainty romances as "Right on the Coco" instead."¹

Carol's examination of the community's religious life begins when she meets one of her new relatives. Her husband's Aunt Bessie is a self-righteous busy-body who continually reproaches her and Kennicott for not attending church. While Aunt Bessie's efforts fail to make churchgoers out of the Kennicotts, her incessant prodding makes Kennicott reveal the typical attitude of the townsmen toward the church. The townsmen are unreasoning in their approval of organized religion; they readily blurt out their admission as to why they would not disturb its existence.

Kennicott as a representative townsman tolerates the church with an indulgent, patronising air. He rarely attends. Pressed by Aunt Bessie's nagging, however, he is forced to a confession that is charming in its impudence and in its trueness to his tribe's

¹Loc. cit.

instinct of self-preservation:

"Sure, religion is a fine influence—got to have it to keep the lower classes in order—fact, it's the only thing that appeals to a lot of those fellows and makes 'em respect the rights of property...."¹

Similarly the spectacle of his brain box superlatively empty of the shade of an idea on religion, church and faith makes Lewis wish to kick, weep, and roar.

"...And I guess this theology is O.K.; lot of wise old coots figured it all out, and they knew more about it than we do."²

Carol discovers that the church and its doctrines are used to sanction the actions and the ascendancy of the dominant citizens. She concludes, moreover, that the ruling citizens of Gopher Prairie attend church and prayer meetings to maintain the appearance of respectability and reputations. She is of upright mind. Carol

...perceived that the churches...were
...in Gopher Prairie, the strongest of
the forces compelling respectability.³

In his portrayal of small town America Lewis strives to disgust his readers with the aspect of Amer-

¹Ibid., p. 353.

²Loc. cit.

³Loc. cit.

ican civilization. With all the force of a mimic's imagination he constructs scenes that convey the "unimaginatively standardized background", the "sluggishness of speech and manners", the "rigid ruling of the spirit by the desire to appear respectable", the "contentment of the quiet dead, who are scornful of the living for their restless walking", the

...savorless people, gulping tasteless food, and sitting afterward, coatless and thoughtless, in rocking-chairs prickly with inane decorations, listening to mechanical music, saying mechanical things about the excellence of Ford automobiles, and viewing themselves as the greatest race in the world.¹

There is, however, a dispersion of effects through the absence of an organic discipline in the treatment of his material. For example, Lewis would have the town be an oppressive combination of inertia, fear, and ignorance directed against the efforts of a reformer to lead it to a fuller life. Yet, the reformer he sends to it, in the person of Carol, is a half-baked college graduate against whom the town is justified in rebelling and threatening with ostracism. Lewis almost defeats his purposes two ways: he excites anger against the town for obstructing cultural activity, but fails to

¹Ibid., p. 265.

encourage sympathy for the reformer or artist because of her unrealistic approach, and thereby, in part, nullifies or neutralizes the wrath aroused against the town.

IV

WILLA CATHER:

My Antonia

The prairie town in My Antonia is reflected upon in several different moods. The picture which emerges from each mood counterbalances and supplements the others.

The first glance at the village occurs in the Introduction to the novel. Cather converses with the character, Jim Burden, (the "sensitive observer") through whom she tells the story. While on a train traveling through the West they are recalling the passage of childhood in prairie towns of Nebraska and Iowa.

We were talking about what it is like to spend one's childhood in little towns like these, buried in wheat and corn, under stimulating extremes of climate: burning summers when the world lies green and billowy beneath a brilliant sky, when one is fairly stifled in vegetation, in the color and smell of strong weeds and heavy harvests; blustery winters with little snow, when

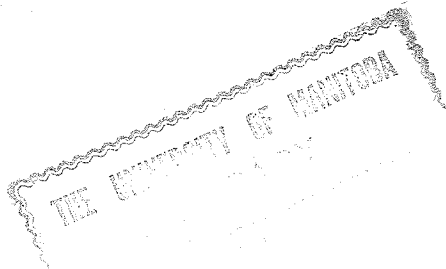
the whole country is stripped bare and gray as sheet-iron. We agreed that no one who had not grown up in a little prairie town could know anything about it. It was a kind of freemasonry, we said.¹

Cather looks retrospectively at the small town. She recalls and reflects upon its features. Life in a prairie town is viewed as a vital experience, appreciated only by those who went through it. Only they know of the fraternal pioneering, the influence of nature, and the deep satisfaction derived from life in a prairie town and from the bonds of understanding which it establishes between those who have lived in it. They are aware of the dominance of the beauty, strength, and cruelty of nature, and the lively responsiveness of the five senses to nature. They are not dogmatically averse to life in the prairie town. They look upon the town as their life's experience, which has been colorful, and rich.

In the story, the town is approached from several angles, from the outside, from the inside, through descriptions of the inhabitants and of their activities.

Jim Burden's first impressions arise from the physical appearance of the town.

¹Cather, Willa Sibert, My Antonia, Cambridge, Mass., Houghton Mifflin, 1918, pp. ix-x.



Black Hawk, [Nebraska,] the new world in which we had come to live, was a clean, well-planted little prairie town, with white fences and good green yards about the dwellings, wide dusty streets, and shapely little trees growing along the wooden sidewalks.¹

The town is seen as a "new world" exciting curiosity and zest. It holds forth the promise of a variety of unpredictable and charming adventures. This promise creates an eager response to the color and shape of the town, about which there appears to be an air of freshness, though also perhaps, a certain placid trimness.

A feeling for the forces of nature which the first generations of the pioneering community learned to respect in their struggle for life, effects the impressions which the town calls forth.

Winter comes down savagely over a little town on the prairie. The wind that sweeps in from the open country strips away all the leafy screens that hide one yard from another in summer, and the houses seem to draw closer together. The roofs, that looked so far away across the green tree-tops, now stare you in the face, and they are so much uglier than when their angles were softened by vines and shrubs.²

The ingrained communion with nature increases the sympathy, the sensitiveness, and acuity of vision with

¹Ibid., p. 165.

²Ibid., p. 197.

which the town is seen and felt. Nature has helped to form the town's character, in which there are suggestions of courage, friendliness, and variety. Nature, moreover, inspires a constantly fresh viewpoint on the town.

In the morning, when I was fighting my way to school against the wind, I couldn't see anything but the road in front of me; but in the late afternoon, when I was coming home, the town looked bleak and desolate to me. The pale, cold light of the winter sunset did not beautify—it was like the light of truth itself. When the smoky clouds hung low in the west and the red sun went down behind them, leaving a pink flush on the snowy roofs and the blue drifts, then the wind sprang up afresh, with a kind of bitter song, as if it said: "This is reality, whether you like it or not. All those frivolities of summer, the light and shadow, the living mask of green that trembled over everything, they were lies, and this is what was underneath. This is the truth. It was as if we were being punished for loving the loveliness of summer."¹

Jim Burden's, or Cather's attitude toward the town has been influenced by the power and variety of nature. Nature has bred sympathy and tolerance. Consequently, repression and thwarting of life in the town engender in her reactions of revolt and regret. She has Jim Burden find, on a tour of the town, that some of its houses seen in the starlight precipitate a mood in which their external features seem to be projections of the

¹Ibid., pp. 197-198.

life that goes on within.

On starlight nights I used to pace up and down those long, cold streets, scowling at the little, sleeping houses on either side, with their storm-windows and covered back porches. They were flimsy shelters, most of them poorly built of light wood, with spindle porch-posts horribly mutilated by the turning-lathe. Yet for all their frailness, how much jealousy and envy and unhappiness some of them managed to contain! The life that went on in them seemed to me made up of evasions and negations; shifts to save cooking, to save washing and cleaning, devices to propitiate the tongue of gossip. This guarded mode of existence was like living under a tyranny. People's speech, their voices, their very glances, became furtive and repressed. Every individual taste, every natural appetite, was bridled by caution. The people asleep in those houses, I thought, tried to live like the mice in their own kitchens; to make no noise, to leave no trace, to slip over the surface of things in the dark. The growing piles of ashes and cinders in the back yards were the only evidence that the wasteful, consuming process of life went on at all.¹

The scene makes him feel desperate and angry. Then again, he is moved to great pity and wrath by the quashing of life that goes on in the town. His boundless curiosity, his joy of living, and his recognition of the frustration of every avenue of expression in this section of the town create in him an emotional tension. This tension is held in perfect balance by

¹Ibid., pp. 249-250.

the underlying surges of feeling which give an inexorable rhythm to his description. The rhythm is set in the first sentence and enhanced by the use of the phrase "to pace up and down".

The tour of the town by night is described in retrospect. It is a search for diversion on the part of a high school boy. In the course of his search he comments upon the various groups of inhabitants and their attitudes.

He has contempt and hostility for the unexciting, respectable people.

In the evening I used to prowl about, hunting for diversion. There lay the familiar streets, frozen with snow or liquid with mud. They led to the houses of good people who were putting the babies to bed, or simply sitting still before the parlor stove, digesting their supper.¹

The two saloons of Black Hawk—

...one of them...admitted, even by the church people, to be as respectable as a saloon could be²

—are places where the farmers gather to eat their lunch, drink beer, and talk. Yet, Jim was asked by the proprietor to stay away because he did not think Jim's grandfather would approve.

¹Ibid., p. 247.

²Loc. cit.

In the drug-store he finds unchanging routine.

One could hang about the drug-store, and listen to the old men who sat there every evening, talking politics and telling raw stories.¹

There are several villagers he visits. He describes these briefly but vividly.

Behind the description of the taxidermist is a mixture of curiosity and a half humorous, half resigned recognition of set ways of mind and habit that cannot be changed.

One could go to the cigar factory and chat with the old German who raised canaries for sale, and look at his stuffed birds. But whatever you began with him, the talk went back to taxidermy.²

The telegrapher is fed up with his job and environment and always imagines that another place is lively and promising. He is restless and petulantly demands excitement which, he is sure, is to be found in some place other than Black Hawk.

There was the depot, of course; I often went down to see the night train come in, and afterward sat awhile with the disconsolate telegrapher who was always hoping to be transferred to Omaha or Denver, "where there was some life." He was sure to bring out his pictures of actresses and dancers. He got them with cigarette coupons, and nearly

¹Ibid., p. 248.

²Loc. cit.

smoked himself to death to possess these desired forms and faces.¹

In the station agent, whom Jim views with decreasing interest, though quizzically, he finds a small collection of engaging but unvarying interests and desires.

For a change, one could talk to the station agent; but he was another malcontent; spent all his spare time writing letters to officials requesting a transfer. He wanted to get back to Wyoming where he could go trout-fishing on Sundays. He used to say "there was nothing in life for him but trout streams, ever since he'd lost his twins."²

These villagers are isolated and turned in upon themselves. Cather's delineation of the types, however, differs from that of Anderson, Masters, or Lewis. Anderson describes them from within; Masters lets them speak for themselves; Lewis sneers at them, but stresses a connection between their characters and their occupations and materialistic pursuits. Cather is aware that their isolation is due to their occupations. She contemplates both the characters and their occupations with a sort of brooding curiosity. She indicates that there is a cultural pattern behind their outlook.

Leaving the company of the villagers, Jim Burden turns to the diversions of the town, contrasts their

¹Ibid., pp. 248-249.

²Ibid., p. 249.

fresh liveliness with the attitudes of the town's dominant elements toward them, and is led into a consideration of social distinctions in Black Hawk.

He finds that the Saturday night dances at Firemen's Hall are frowned upon by the ruling elders.

I made a bold resolve to go to the Saturday night dances at Firemen's Hall. I knew it would be useless to acquaint my elders with any such plan. Grandfather didn't approve of dancing anyway; he would only say that if I wanted to dance I could go to the Masonic Hall, among "the people we knew." It was just my point that I saw altogether too much of the people we knew.¹

The dances, therefore, he discovers provide the freedom of spirit which the dominant element of the town denies. Their easy rhythm contrasts with the restrictive views of the dominant element.

There were never girls enough to go round at those dances, but every one wanted a turn with Tony and Lena. Lena moved without exertion, rather indolently, and her hand often accented the rhythm softly on her partner's shoulder ...To dance "Home, Sweet Home," with Lena was like coming in with the tide...

When you spun out into the floor with Tony, you didn't return to anything. You set out every time upon a new adventure. I liked to schottische with her; she had so much spring and variety, and was always putting in new steps and slides. She taught me to dance against and around the hard-and-fast beat of the music.²

¹Ibid., p. 250.

²Ibid., pp. 253-254.

Conformity to the edicts of respectability results in a cramping of life and personality which is reflected by the daughters of the well-to-do families in their dancing.

When one danced with them their bodies never moved inside their clothes; their muscles seemed to ask but one thing—not to be disturbed.¹

The country girls, like Antonia and Lena, who work in the town to help finance their parents' farms create a situation of social distinctions in Black Hawk. There is a joy of living, a nearness to life which is jarring to the starched manners of the respectable families. The attitude of this group toward the country girls is inherited by its daughters.

The daughters of Black Hawk merchants had a confident, uninquiring belief that they were "refined," and that the country girls, who "worked out," were not.²

Similarly the group's sons are depicted as sufficiently submissive that they avoid the country girls as mates.

The country girls were considered a menace to the social order. Their beauty shone out too boldly against a conventional background. But anxious mothers need have felt no alarm. They

¹Ibid., p. 226.

²Ibid., pp. 226-227.

mistook the mettle of their sons. The respect for respectability was stronger than any desire in Black Hawk youth.¹

The power of the desire for respectability is illustrated by the story of Sylvester Lovett, a cashier in his father's bank. He fell in love with Lena Lingard, one of the hired girls from the country, and courted her furtively. Eventually the attitudes and rules of his community asserted themselves and overcame him.

Sylvester dallied about Lena until he began to make mistakes in his work; had to stay at the bank until after dark to make his books balance. He was daft about her, and every one knew it. To escape from his predicament he ran away with a widow six years older than himself, who owned a half-section. This remedy worked, apparently. He never looked at Lena again, nor lifted his eyes as he ceremoniously tipped his hat when he happened to meet her on the sidewalk.²

The dominant mercantile class of Black Hawk is variously described as to manner and attitude.

A lack of imagination resulting from minds continually intent upon business affairs is alluded to in brief descriptions of the boredom regnant in the homes.

Our young man of position was like the son of a royal house; the boy who swept out his office or drove his delivery wagon might frolic with the jolly country girls, but he himself must sit all evening in a plush parlor

¹Ibid., p. 229.

²Ibid., p. 232.

where conversation dragged so perceptibly that the father often came in and made blundering efforts to warm up the atmosphere.¹

In another vein, Jim Burden describes Christian Harling, the controller of a line of grain elevators, with a youthful romanticism which invests him with dash, power, and adventure. There is also the young Jim Burden's underlying disapproval of the man who appears forbidding in his lack of warm sociability.

Most Black Hawk fathers had no personal habits outside their domestic ones; they paid the bills, pushed the baby carriage after office hours, moved the sprinkler about over the lawn, and took the family driving on Sunday. Mr. Harling, therefore, seemed to me autocratic and imperial in his ways. He walked, talked, put on his gloves, shook hands, like a man who felt that he had power. He was not tall, but he carried his head so haughtily that he looked a commanding figure, and there was something daring and challenging in his eyes. I used to imagine that the "nobles" of whom Antonia was always talking probably looked very much like Christian Harling, were caped overcoats like his, and just such a glittering diamond upon the little finger.²

Similarly, as a contrast to the general type of merchant's daughter described above, Frances Harling is an alert business manager who knows all the farmers and

¹Ibid., pp. 229-230.

²Ibid., p. 179.

their liabilities, and

Her interest in these people was more than a business interest. She carried them all in her mind as if they were characters in a book or a play.¹

Cather's attitude toward the small town may be summarized. Over against the drab, repressive respectability of the town, she juxtaposes three counterbalancing forces. One is nature with its variety and power to charm and chastise.

Second is the character of Antonia whose vibrance and pioneer courage are a rebuke to the stultified manners of the settled, prosperous class. Like Masters, Cather sees that the antecedents of the town's character lie in its pioneer origins. Like Masters, too, she sees that as the town has advanced materially, it has degenerated spiritually. Feeding solely upon the quest for material prosperity, she finds, is insufficient to develop life and character in its inhabitants.

Therefore it is not by chance that as a third antidote or defense against the encroaching sterility of the town, she presents evocative traditions which imply the unfolding of the human spirit and mind. Antonia's reflections upon her immigrant father are

¹Ibid., p. 171.

used to evoke a matured, foreign culture.

"...When I was little I used to... hear them talk—beautiful talk, like what I never hear in this country."

"What did they [Antonia's father and his friend] talk about?" I asked her.

She sighed and shook her head. "Oh, I don't know! About music, and the woods, and about God, and when they were young."¹

Similarly Cather effects a contrast between the Nebraska town's conventions and manners and an ancient, matured culture as this is glimpsed in her section on Jim Burden's college life, where she describes the scholar, Gaston Cleric:

Cleric went through canto after canto of the "Commedia," repeating the discourse between Dante and his "sweet teacher," while his cigarette burned itself out unheeded between his long fingers. I can hear him now, speaking the lines of the poet Statius, who spoke for Dante: "I was famous on earth with the name which endures longest and honors most. The seeds of my ardor were the sparks from that divine flame whereby more than a thousand have kindled; I speak of the Aeneid, mother to me and nurse to me in poetry."²

¹Ibid., p. 269.

²Ibid., p. 296.

V

SHERWOOD ANDERSON:

1. Winesburg, Ohio

i

In the tale entitled Loneliness, Anderson depicts one of his typical characters and the small town setting which produces him. The characters of Anderson are turned in upon themselves, incommunicative, and unsocial. The reason which Anderson's portrayal suggests for this feeding upon themselves is the lack of a tradition or cultural pattern in the town. With no external world to merge into and contribute to, they create a world of their own and they become grotesques. Anderson, however, does not treat them as curiosities, but as engaging human beings, as the following exposition of Loneliness illustrates.

The tale portrays the inturned life and world of Enoch Robinson, one of the grotesque inhabitants of Winesburg, Ohio. With deft strokes Anderson composes a picture of an ingrown personality,

...an obscure, jerky little figure, bobbing up and down on the streets of an Ohio town at evening when the sun was going down behind the roof of Wesley Moyer's livery barn.¹

The introductory background, briefly describing Enoch Robinson's house, presents indirect foreshadowings of his character and conjures up the atmosphere in which he lived. In two sentences Anderson conveys the impression of the stillness and repressive confinement, the settled torpor and drabness, the sort of morbid isolation, and the absence of impulse and excitement in Enoch Robinson's home life.

The farmhouse was painted brown and the blinds to all of the windows facing the road were kept closed. In the road before the house a flock of chickens, accompanied by two guinea hens, lay in the deep dust.²

A closer approach to his character is made in the allusion to his youth, which was marked by isolation, a mixture of openness and reticence.

Old citizens remembered him as a quiet, smiling youth inclined to silence. He walked in the middle of the road when he came into town and sometimes read a book. Drivers of teams had to shout and swear to make him realize where he was so that he would turn out of the beaten track and let them pass.³

¹Anderson, Sherwood, Winesburg, Ohio, New York, Penguin Books, 1946, p. 124.

²Ibid., p. 119.

³Loc. cit.

At twenty-one he left Winesburg for New York City, intending to be an artist, and entertaining vague plans of completing his art education in France. But

...that never turned out. Nothing ever turned out for Enoch Robinson.¹

No maturing occurred within him. He retained the uncritical and unworldly outlook of a child:

...he was always a child and that was a handicap to his worldly development. He never grew up and of course he couldn't understand people and he couldn't make people understand him. The child in him kept bumping against things, against actualities, like money and sex and opinions.²

In New York several incidents occurred in his life, all emphasizing his inarticulateness, his thwarted and arrested growth that turned inward and made of him a self-contained, whimsical being, completely removed from the world about him.

He would invite artist friends to his room in New York. While he withdrew into a corner, they discussed their art excitedly, at times commenting upon his own pictures, which he had on the walls. The remarks of his friends aroused in him the fervent desire to talk. His excitement, however, made him incoherent.

When he tried he sputtered and stam-

¹ Loc. cit.

² Loc. cit.

mered and his voice sounded strange and squeaky to him. That made him stop talking. He knew what he wanted to say, but he knew also that he could never by any possibility say it.¹

He had his interpretation of his picture all formulated, and it was always apparently different from the professional interpretation which his friends gave of it. He "trembled to say" things like this about a picture:

"You don't get the point," he wanted to explain: "the picture you see doesn't consist of the things you see and say words about. There is something else, something you don't see at all, something you aren't intended to see. Look at this one over here, by the door here, where the light from the window falls on it. The dark spot by the road that you might not notice at all is, you see, the beginning of everything. There is a clump of elders there such as used to grow beside the road before our house back in Winesburg, Ohio, and in among the elders there is something hidden. It is a woman, that's what it is. She has been thrown from a horse and the horse has run away out of sight. Do you not see how the old man who drives a cart looks anxiously about? That is Thad Grayback who has a farm up the road. He is taking corn to Winesburg to be ground into meal at Comstock's mill. He knows there is something in the elders, something hidden away, and yet he doesn't quite know..."²

In describing his paintings he spoke about his subject matter so obscurely that he and his friends never found themselves discoursing on the same terms. Enoch

¹Ibid., p. 120.

²Ibid., p. 121.

...always ended by saying nothing.
 Then he began to doubt his own mind.
 He was afraid the things he felt were
 not getting expressed in the pictures
 he painted.¹

Petulantly he stopped inviting these friends who
 could not enter into his world, and he began to live
 more with himself and began to construct an imaginary
 world of people to whom he could express those things
 he had not been able to explain to the real person. He

...presently got into the habit of
 locking the door. He began to think
 that enough people had visited him,
 that he did not need people any more.
 With quick imagination he began to
 invent his own people to whom he could
 really talk and to whom he explained
 the things he had been unable to explain
 to living people. His room began to be
 inhabited by the spirits of men and
 women among whom he went, in his turn
 saying words. It was as though every
 one Enoch Robinson had ever seen had
 left with him some essence of himself,
 something he could mould and change to
 suit his own fancy, something that
 understood all about such things as the
 wounded woman behind the elders in the
 pictures.²

He constructed a world of characters whom he could
 dramatically dominate. His essentially child-like,
 self-centered desire to be the chief attraction per-
 sisted, and he rejected friends as unnecessary and
 intrusive.

¹Loc. cit.

²Ibid., pp. 121-122.

The mild, blue-eyed young Ohio boy was a complete egotist, as all children are egotists. He did not want friends for the quite simple reason that no child wants friends. He wanted most of all the people of his own mind, people with whom he could really talk, people he could harangue and scold by the hour, servants, you see, to his fancy. Among these people he was always self-confident and bold. They might talk, to be sure, and even have opinions of their own, but always he talked last and best. He was like a writer busy among the figures of his brain, a kind of tiny blue-eyed king he was, in a six-dollar room facing Washington Square in the city of New York.¹

Sexual desires asserting themselves in his loneliness drove him to marriage. Like his other enterprises in the real world, his marriage "did not turn out". For a while he tried to bring the self-importance which he enjoyed in his world into everyday scenes and realities.

When in the evening he came home from work he got off a street car and walked sedately along behind some business man, striving to look very substantial and important. As a payer of taxes he thought he should post himself on how things are run. "I'm getting to be of some moment, a real part of things, of the state and the city and all that," he told himself with an amusing miniature air of dignity.²

Eventually he ended the marriage because it intruded on his dream world. He left his family and

¹Ibid., p. 122.

²Ibid., pp. 122-123.

went to live in his old room which he re-rented.

The room became his entire life and preoccupation, wholly shut off from every vestige of the outside. He imagined people who had appealed to his imagination during his life to be in the room, and he directed them to suit the demands of his whimsical imagination.

And so Enoch Robinson stayed in the New York room among the people of his fancy, playing with them, talking to them, happy as a child is happy. They were an odd lot, Enoch's people. They were made, I suppose, out of real people he had seen and who had for some obscure reason made an appeal to him. There was a woman with a sword in her hand, an old man with a long white beard who went about followed by a dog, a young girl whose stockings were always coming down and hanging over her shoe tops. There must have been two dozen of the shadow people, invented by the child-mind of Enoch Robinson, who lived in the room with him.

And Enoch was happy. Into the room he went and locked the door. With an absurd air of importance he talked aloud, giving instructions, making comments on life....¹

At this point Anderson introduces an ostensible digression into the tale, bringing it, as it were, into the field of realities. The rest of Enoch's story is told by Enoch to George Willard, the town's young newspaper reporter. The night is drizzly and cool, the reporter is sad, receptive, and very curious about

¹Ibid., pp. 123-124.

Enoch Robinson, who has sensed the possibility of making someone understand the rest of his story and has invited the reporter to his room for that purpose. The town's reaction to the character of Enoch is injected in passing.

The boy was a little afraid but had never been more curious in his life. A hundred times he had heard the old man spoken of as a little off his head and he thought himself rather brave and manly to go at all.¹

Speaking to the boy, Enoch displays the zealous clutch he has on his fantasy and his belief in it.

From the very beginning, in the street in the rain, the old man talked in a queer way, trying to tell the story of the room in Washington Square and of his life in the room. "You'll understand if you try hard enough," he said conclusively. "I have looked at you when you went past me on the street and I think you can understand. It isn't hard. All you have to do is to believe what I say, just listen and believe, that's all there is to it."²

His dream world in New York came to a shattering end. A woman came to visit him, attracted by his curious way of life. She sat and listened as he told her of the strange world of creatures which he mastered and in which he was of supreme importance. As he explained it to her, he perceived that she was gradually seeing the fantasy of his creation, and he strove in terror to

¹Ibid., p. 125.

²Loc. cit.

keep alive his peculiar world. Suddenly, in the wake of her complete understanding, his world collapsed.

The old man sprang to his feet and his voice shook with excitement. "One night something happened. I became mad to make her understand me and to know what a big thing I was in that room. I wanted her to see how important I was. I told her over and over. When she tried to go away, I ran and locked the door. I followed her about. I talked and talked and then all of a sudden things went to smash. A look came into her eyes and I knew she did understand. Maybe she had understood all the time. I was furious. I couldn't stand it. I wanted her to understand but, don't you see, I couldn't let her understand. I felt that then she could know everything, that I would be submerged, drowned out, you see. That's how it is. I don't know why."¹

He drove her out of the room and she took the whole company of imaginative figures with her.

The old man's voice broke and he shook his head. "Things went to smash," he said quietly and sadly. "Out she went through the door and all the life there had been in the room followed her out. She took all of my people away. They all went out through the door after her. That's the way it was."²

With that Enoch Robinson found his way back to Winesburg, Ohio where he lived out his life.

ii

The tale entitled Sophistication contains Ander-

¹Ibid., pp. 126-127.

²Ibid., p. 127.

son's basic feelings and attitude toward the small town.

The introduction to the tale evinces a commixture of feelings. In the opening passage there is nostalgic tenderness, fresh curiosity, affection, and melancholy. There is also a withdrawn objectivity.

It was early evening of a day in the late fall and the Winesburg County Fair had brought crowds of country people into town. The day had been clear and the night came on warm and pleasant. On the Trunion Pike, where the road after it left town stretched away between berry fields now covered with dry brown leaves, the dust from passing wagons arose in clouds. Children, curled into little balls, slept on the straw scattered on wagon beds. Their hair was full of dust and their fingers black and sticky. The dust rolled away over the fields and the departing sun set it ablaze with colors.¹

Anderson evokes the unsophisticated temper of the people converging on the main street of Winesburg. With a mixture of gentle amusement and sadness he surveys the activity and movement that is unpremeditated and natural.

In the main street of Winesburg crowds filled the stores and the sidewalks. Night came on, horses whinnied, the clerks in the stores ran madly about, children became lost and cried lustily, an American town worked terribly at the task of amusing itself.²

¹Ibid., p. 172.

²Loc. cit.

Out of this background emerge George Willard and Helen White, both a part of it. The first dawnings of maturity influence young George Willard. Retrospection, coupled with thoughts of the future, cause him to stop and reflect upon the movement of life around him. The aspect of life on the Winesburg streets becomes the background of his thoughts, the materials of his imagination, and the impulses to "ambitions and regrets".¹

George Willard, the Ohio village boy, was fast growing into manhood and new thoughts had been coming into his mind. All that day, amid the jam of people at the Fair, he had gone about feeling lonely. He was about to leave Winesburg to go away to some city where he hoped to get work on a city newspaper and he felt grown up. The mood that had taken possession of him was a thing known to men and unknown to boys. He felt old and a little tired. Memories awoke in him. To his mind his new sense of maturity set him apart, made of him a half-tragic figure.²

Life in Winesburg, Ohio, has contributed to his maturing process. He has drawn upon his experiences in the town to construct his interpretation of life. He has reached a point where an unquestioning acceptance of life gives way to a search for meaning in life.

There is a time in the life of every boy when he for the first time takes the backward view of life. Perhaps that is the moment when he crosses the line into manhood. The boy is walking through the street of his town. He is

¹Ibid., p. 173.

²Ibid., p. 172.

thinking of the future and of the figure he will cut in the world. Ambitions and regrets awake within him. Suddenly something happens; he stops under a tree and waits as for a voice calling his name. Ghosts of old things creep into his consciousness; the voices outside of himself whisper a message concerning the limitations of life. From being quite sure of himself and his future he becomes not at all sure. If he be an imaginative boy a door is torn open and for the first time he looks out upon the world, seeing, as though they marched in procession before him, the countless figures of men who before his time have come out of nothingness into the world, lived their lives and again disappeared into nothingness. The sadness of sophistication has come to the boy. With a little gasp he sees himself as merely a leaf blown by the wind through the streets of his village. He knows that in spite of all the stout talk of his fellows he must live and die in uncertainty, a thing blown by the winds, a thing destined like corn to wilt in the sun. He shivers and looks eagerly about. The eighteen years he has lived seem but a moment, a breathing space in the long march of humanity. Already he hears death calling.¹

This first sense of maturing is overwhelming and causes in George Willard a craving to be understood. He does not retreat into isolation like Enoch Robinson of the preceding generation. He seeks understanding in Helen White.

The two go out to the fair grounds. Recollections of the town mingle with the growing thoughts and out-

¹Ibid., pp. 172-173.

look of George Willard.

The feeling of loneliness and isolation that had come to the young man in the crowded streets of his town was both broken and intensified by the presence of Helen. What he felt was reflected in her....

There is something memorable in the experience to be had by going into a fair ground that stands at the edge of a Middle Western town on a night after the annual fair has been held. The sensation is one never to be forgotten. On all sides are ghosts, not of the dead, but of living people. Here, during the day just passed, have come the people pouring in from the town and the country around. Farmers with their wives and children and all the people from the hundreds of little frame houses have gathered within these board walls. Young girls have laughed and men with beards have talked of the affairs of their lives. The place has been filled to overflowing with life. It has itched and squirmed with life and now it is night and the life has all gone away. The silence is almost terrifying. One conceals oneself standing silently beside the trunk of a tree and what there is of a reflective tendency in his nature is intensified. One shudders at the thought of the meaninglessness of life while at the same instant, and if the people of the town are his people, one loves life so intensely that tears come into the eyes.¹

The picture of the bustling humanity that has welled in and out of the fair grounds becomes movingly vivid to George Willard. It gives him a profound look at life and creates a new attitude toward the people of

¹ Ibid., p. 178.

the town. He acquires an awe-inspiring insight into their significance and mystery.

Now that he had come out of town where the presence of the people stirring about, busy with a multitude of affairs, had been so irritating the irritation was all gone...He began to think of the people in the town where he had always lived with something like reverence... With all his strength he tried to hold and to understand the mood that had come upon him....¹

In this mood that he has evoked, Anderson bids one look again at the town. Its motions have not changed any. They have become infused with meaning and they instil wonder.

In Winesburg the crowded day had run itself out into the long night of the lated fall. Farm horses jogged away along lonely country roads pulling their portion of weary people. Clerks began to bring samples of goods in off the sidewalks and lock the doors of stores. In the Opera House a crowd had gathered to see a show and further down Main Street the fiddlers, their instruments tuned, sweated and worked to keep the feet of youth flying over a dance floor.²

The reactions are presented in George Willard and Helen White: a wide sensitivity, a deep, affectionate understanding of humanity, and the poise of melancholy.

In the darkness in the grand-stand Helen White and George Willard remained silent. Now and then the spell that

¹Ibid., pp. 178-179.

²Ibid., p. 179.

held them was broken and they turned and tried in the dim light to see each others eyes. They kissed but that impulse did not last...For some reason they could not have explained they had both got from their silent evening together the thing needed. Man or boy, woman or girl, they had for a moment taken hold of the thing that makes the mature life of men and women in the modern world possible.¹

iii

In the tale called Mother, Anderson describes a village scene, quietly intimates that it is the essence of village life, and turns the picture into a symbol of the inescapable futility in the life of Elizabeth Willard, the heroine of the story.

Elizabeth Willard inherited the town hotel as a young woman. She has worked in it as a virtual drudge all her life.

Elizabeth Willard, the mother of George Willard, was tall and gaunt and her face was marked with smallpox scars. Although she was but forty-five, some obscure disease had taken the fire out of her figure. Listlessly she went about the disorderly old hotel looking at the faded wall-paper and the ragged carpets and, when she was able to be about, doing the work of a chambermaid among beds soiled by the slumbers of fat traveling men.²

Her movements about the hotel incense her husband, Tom

¹Ibid., pp. 179-180.

²Ibid., p. 14.

Willard, by their blighting futility. He tries to forget her and becomes a composite of defeat, self-deception, and aimless protest.

Tom Willard, a slender, graceful man with square shoulders, a quick military step, and a black mustache, trained to turn sharply up at the ends, tried to put the wife out of his mind. The presence of the tall ghostly figure, moving slowly through the halls, he took as a reproach to himself. When he thought of her he grew angry and swore ...As he went spruce and businesslike through the streets of Winesburg, he sometimes stopped and turned quickly about as though fearing that the spirit of the hotel and of the woman would follow him even into the streets. "Damn such a life, damn it!" he sputtered aimlessly.¹

The relationship between Elizabeth Willard and her son George is characterized by an awkward difficulty of communion. In one another's presence their thought, emotions, and faculty for expression become constricted. A nerveless paralysis fastens itself upon them.

In the evening when the son sat in the room with his mother, the silence made them both feel awkward. Darkness came on and the evening train came in at the station. In the street below feet tramped up and down upon a board sidewalk. In the station yard, after the evening train had gone, there was a heavy silence. Perhaps Skinner Leason, the express agent, moved a truck the length of the station platform. Over on Main Street sounded a man's voice,

¹Loc. cit.

laughing. The door of the express office banged. George Willard arose and crossing the room fumbled for the door-knob. Sometimes he knocked against a chair, making it scrape along the floor. By the window sat the sick woman, perfectly still, listless. Her long hands, white and bloodless, could be seen drooping over the ends of the arms of the chair. "I think you had better be out among the boys. You are too much indoors," she said, striving to relieve the embarrassment of the departure. "I thought I would take a walk," replied George Willard, who felt awkward and confused.¹

Elizabeth Willard's view of her own life as an irretrievable ruin determines her to save George from a similar fate.

In the room by the desk she went through a ceremony that was half a prayer, half a demand, addressed to the skies. In the boyish figure she yearned to see something half forgotten that had once been a part of herself recreated. The prayer concerned that. "Even though I die, I will in some way keep defeat from you," she cried, and so deep was her determination that her whole body shook. Her eyes glowed and she clenched her fists.²

The total impression is built up of Elizabeth Willard as a defeated person, striving bitterly to give vent to her motherly instincts of protection and preservation. One of the most effective strokes in the production of this impression is in the description of

¹Ibid., p. 16.

²Ibid., p. 15.

the scene where Elizabeth and her son meet in her room, look out over the town, and observe a feud between the town baker and a cat in the alleyway behind Main Street.

They gaze out over the town in the effort to overcome the embarrassment of their failure at communication. The scene which strikes them is the uninspiringly familiar aspect of the town's drab buildings, which Elizabeth Willard has seen all her life under conditions of unrelieved defeat. The repetition of all-absorbing, petty futilities gives her a devastating sense of defeat and disintegration. She senses that the battle between the alley-cat and the baker is not a battle of wits; it is a splenetic, enervating, aimless wastage of effort. The futility of the scene, emphasized by the most cast-off of rubbish flying about—the "sticks, bits of broken glass...tom paper...broken bottles...black swarm of flies"—strikes Elizabeth Willard mercilessly. The picture of this corner of village life hideously presents the ingredients of her life.

The communion between George Willard and his mother was outwardly a formal thing without meaning. When she was ill and sat by the window in her room he sometimes went in the evening to make her a visit. They sat by a window that looked over the roof of a small frame building into Main Street. By turning their heads they could see, through another window, along an alleyway that ran behind the Main Street stores and into the back door of Abner Groff's

bakery. Sometimes as they sat thus a picture of village life presented itself to them. At the back door of his shop appeared Abner Groff with a stick or an empty milk bottle in his hand. For a long time there was a feud between the baker and a grey cat that belonged to Sylvester West, the druggist. The boy and his mother saw the cat creep into the door of the bakery and presently emerge followed by the baker who swore and waved his arms about. The baker's eyes were small and red and his black hair and beard were filled with flour dust. Sometimes he was so angry that, although the cat had disappeared, he hurled sticks, bits of broken glass, and even some of the tools of his trade about. Once he broke a window at the back of Sinning's Hardware Store. In the alley the grey cat crouched behind barrels filled with torn paper and broken bottles above which flew a black swarm of flies. Once when she was alone, and after watching a prolonged and ineffectual outburst on the part of the baker, Elizabeth Willard put her head down on her long white hands and wept. After that she did not look along the alleyway any more, but tried to forget the contest between the bearded man and the cat. It seemed like a rehearsal of her own life, terrible in its vividness.¹

The village here, becomes something awesome in its power to frustrate life.

¹Ibid., pp. 15-16.

2. Poor White

In Poor White Anderson describes what happens to a small Ohio town during the process of industrialization in the 1890's. The terms in which he chronicles the changes that occur are suggested in his preface to the story. The town in Poor White is a framework within which the people live. It expresses their patterns of behavior and reflects their ideals. Anderson examines and reflects upon the changes which the Industrial Revolution causes in the framework, the patterns, and the ideals.

There was a town in the state of Ohio. The town was really the hero of the book. After "Poor White" was published none of the critics spoke of that. What happened to the town was, I thought, more important than what happened to the people of the town.

Why—well, because I presume I realized all the time that after Joe, Jim, Clara and the others had been forgotten new people would be living in the town.¹

Anderson looks back upon a period of life in American towns that is quieter and more stable than that of 1920 when he was writing Poor White. In the towns of the 1880's he finds desirable features and values:

In even the smallest of the towns, inhabited only by farm laborers, a

¹ Anderson, Sherwood, Poor White, New York, Modern Library, 1925, pp. vi-vii.

quaint interesting civilization was being developed. Men worked hard but were much in the open air and had time to think. Their minds reached out toward the solution of the mystery of existence. The schoolmaster and the country lawyer read Tom Paine's "Age of Reason" and Bellamy's "Looking Backward." They discussed these books with their fellows. There was a feeling, ill expressed, that America had something real and spiritual to offer to the rest of the world. Workmen talked to each other of the new tricks of their trades, and after hours of discussion of some new way to cultivate corn, shape a horseshoe or build a barn, spoke of God and his intent concerning man. Long drawn out discussions of religious beliefs and the political destiny of America were carried on.¹

Society in Bidwell, Ohio was free from disruptive influences: the Indians were driven far away to the vague West; the Civil War was over; there were no great national problems that closely touched the lives of the inhabitants. In such circumstances people had time for thought; they wondered about their purpose in life; "the minds of men turned in upon themselves."²

Anderson wistfully notes that the standardization of manners, speech, and thought which was to come with the high degree of industrialization was absent from the towns. Every town along the Mississippi had its idiosyncrasies. Each was a big family with a kind of invisible roof over it.

¹ Ibid., p. 36.

² Ibid., p. 46.

Beneath the roof boys and girls were born, grew up, quarreled, fought, and formed friendships with their fellows, were introduced into the mysteries of love, married, and became the fathers and mothers of children, grew old, sickened, and died.

Within the invisible circle and under the great roof every one knew his neighbor and was known to him. Strangers did not come and go swiftly and mysteriously and there was no constant and confusing roar of machinery and of new projects afoot. For the moment mankind seemed about to take time to try to understand itself.¹

The coming of industrialism was to disrupt the pattern. It was going to imprison men in factories, where they lost pride in their work. They lost the stability and self-possession of which Joe Wainsworth the harness-maker spoke:

"Learn your trade. Don't listen to talk...The man who knows his trade is a man. He can tell every one to go to the devil."²

Anderson saw that the large scale marketing of the industrial age would extend the invisible roof of the towns over all the world. Men would cut and crush their way through other men to fill the demands of the market.

The transition between the old, stable order and the dawning industrialism

...was a time...when thought and learning paused. Without music, without poetry, without beauty in their lives or impulses, a whole people, full of the

¹Ibid., p. 47.

²Ibid., p. 55.

native energy and strength of lives
lived in a new land, rushed pell-mell
into a new age.¹

Before the industrial revolution, the towns of the
Middle West were sleepy, contented communities.

A sense of quiet growth awoke in sleep-
ing minds. It was the time for art and
beauty to awake in the land.

Instead, the giant, Industry, awoke.²

There was no maturity in the minds of the towns-
people to combat the notion that men who suddenly became
wealthy were great.

Clara Butterworth rebelled against the horrible
attitude of business men who

...like her uncle...spent their lives
in adding up rows of figures or doing
over and over some tremendously trivial
thing, had no conception of any outlook
for their women beyond living in a
house, serving them physically, wearing
perhaps good enough clothes to help
them make a show of prosperity and suc-
cess, and drifting finally into a stupid
acceptance of dullness....³

Clara sees with bitter regret the change that has
occurred in her father. As the town has clamored to
set up factories to produce the new machines, he has
become a feverish business promoter, preoccupied con-
tinually with the multiplication of money. While she

¹Ibid., p. 130.

²Ibid., pp. 132-133.

³Ibid., p. 166.

rides with him in his fast car and notices how he

...stopped at a town...and got out to fill his pockets with cigars and incidentally to enjoy the wonder and admiration of the citizens...¹

and while she listens to the

...shrill voice of her father, [who] now talked only of the making of machines and money...²

she recalls the things that used to interest him and of which he spoke to her long ago:

[He] had talked of many...things... of the spelling-downs at the school-house in town, of huskings and dances held in the barns and of the evening when he went skating on the river and first met his wife. "We took to each other at once," he said softly. "There was a fire built on the bank of the river and after I had skated with her we went and sat down to warm ourselves. "We wanted to get married to each other right away," he told Clara. "I walked home with her after we got tired of skating, and after that I thought of nothing but how to get my own farm and have a home of my own."³

Two sets of questions arise.

Is Anderson's backward glance nostalgic and does it oversimplify the stable order and lapse into a sentimental yearning for the good old days? With his tracing of the change in the values of the town do his

¹ Ibid., p. 347.

² Ibid., p. 349.

³ Ibid., pp. 348-349.

assumptions and perspective fail to recognize change as a reality?

Or, has he a set of ideals and touchstones which he has dispassionately applied to both eras? In the process of applying his ideals has he been sympathetically concerned with the lot of human life in each era and merely lingered over the quieter one to point out that it was humaner?

The following is a clue, inclining one to the interpretation suggested in the latter questions. Anderson does not frustratedly condemn industrialism as an unmitigated evil. He does not turn his back on it and escape to the simpler period. He perceives the shattering influences that industrialism has upon human relationships which he saw were in a healthier and richer state in the sleepy towns that existed before the booms of the '90's. Nevertheless he is quick in noticing beauty in the new order. These things can be seen briefly but vividly, in such an observation as the following:

Not yet had the motor cars come to tear along the roads, their flashing lights --beautiful too, when seen by one afoot on the roads on a summer night--had not yet made the roads an extension of the cities.¹

¹Ibid., p. 330.

VI

BOOTH TARKINGTON:

The Magnificent Ambersons

The small town is a dynamic subject which has been treated from a variety of viewpoints. The small town, as it were, defies writers to interpret it, and, in accepting the challenge, each author comes away with his own emphasis.

Tarkington extracts his story from the small town and is prompted into an attitude which has not been found in any of the works thus far examined. He looks back upon the same period that Anderson writes about—namely the 1880's and 1890's prior to and during the industrialization of the towns. Like Anderson he looks back with affection upon a happier, humaner era:

In the days before deathly contrivances hustled them through their lives, and when they had no telephones—another ancient vacancy profoundly responsible for leisure—they had time for everything: time to think, to talk, time to

read, time to wait for a lady!¹

Here, however, the similarity ceases. The world of Tarkington is utterly different, although both Anderson and Tarkington deal with the same types of characters in the same period. The setting for The Magnificent Ambersons is in the opening paragraph:

Major Amberson had "made a fortune" in 1873, when other people were losing fortunes, and the magnificence of the Ambersons began then. Magnificence, like the size of a fortune, is always comparative, as even Magnificent Lorenzo may now perceive, if he has happened to haunt New York in 1916; and the Ambersons were magnificent in their day and place. Their splendour lasted throughout all the years that saw their Midland town spread and darken into a city, but reached its topmost during the period when every prosperous family with children kept a Newfoundland dog.²

Anderson's characters in Winesburg, Ohio are unsocial, inarticulate, and ingrown. By contrast Tarkington's are, like Lewis', sociable, gossipy, know all about each other. Unlike Lewis, however, who is repelled by the dulness and scandal-mongering in his characters, Tarkington is charmed by the foibles and the intense neighborliness of his.

In that town, in those days, all the women who wore silk or velvet knew all

¹Tarkington, Booth, The Magnificent Ambersons, New York, Grosset & Dunlap, 1916, pp. 11-12.

²Ibid., p. 3.

the other women who wore silk or velvet, and when there was a new purchase of sealskin, sick people were got to windows to see it go by. Trotters were out, in the winter afternoons, racing light sleighs on National Avenue and Tennessee Street; everybody recognized both the trotters and the drivers; and again knew them as well on summer evenings, when slim buggies whizzed by in renewals of the snow-time rivalry. For that matter, everybody knew everybody else's family horse-and-carriage, could identify such a silhouette half a mile down the street, and thereby was sure who was going to market, or to a reception, or coming home from office or store to noon dinner or evening supper.¹

Also like Lewis he is aware of the exploitative manipulations of a mercantile class. Again, however, Tarkington's treatment of this group differs from Lewis'.

Tarkington sees a sort of universal shrewdness in the members rather than a mischievous anti-social conspiracy of economic interests; he smiles over the submission of most people to the dictation of custom, but is exquisitely delighted by their liveliness.

Shifting fashions of shape replaced aristocracy of texture: dressmakers, shoemakers, hatmakers, and tailors, increasing in cunning and power, found means to make new clothes old. The long contagion of the "Derby" hat arrived: one season the crown of this hat would be a bucket; the next it would be a spoon. Every house still kept its bootjack, but high-topped

¹Ibid., pp. 3-4.

boots gave way to shoes and "congress gaiters"; and these were played through fashions that shaped them now with toes like box-ends and now with toes like the prows of racing shells.¹

In contrast to Lewis' deadly contempt for the obsession of his Main Streeters to wear Klassy Kollege Klothes is Tarkington's affectionate appraisal of his characters' preoccupation with dress.

Trousers with a crease were considered plebeian; the crease proved that the garment had lain upon a shelf, and hence was "ready-made"; these betraying trousers were called "hand-me-downs," in allusion to the shelf. In the early 'eighties, while bangs and bustles were having their way with women, that variation of dandy known as the "dude" was invented: he wore trousers as tight as stockings, dagger-pointed shoes, a spoon "Derby," a single-breasted coat called a "Chesterfield," with short flaring skirts, a torturing cylindrical collar, laundered to a polish and three inches high, while his other neckgear might be a heavy, puffed cravat or a tiny bow fit for a doll's braids. With evening dress he wore a tan overcoat so short that his black coat-tails hung visible, five inches below the overcoat; but after a season or two he lengthened his overcoat till it touched his heels, and he passed out of his tight trousers into trousers like great bags. Then, presently, he was seen no more, though the word that had been coined for him remained in the vocabularies of the impertinent.²

¹Ibid., p. 5.

²Ibid., pp. 5-6.

Tarkington captures the fleeting charm of a period that passed swiftly and quietly. Its ways, however, contrast poignantly with those of the superseding era.

There were the little bunty street-cars on the long, single track that went its troubled way among the cobblestones. At the rear door of the car there was no platform, but a step where passengers clung in wet clumps when the weather was bad and the car crowded. The patrons—if not too absent-minded—put their fares into a slot; and no conductor paced the heaving floor, but the driver would rap remindingly with his elbow upon the glass of the door to his little open platform if the nickels and the passengers did not appear to coincide in number. A lone mule drew the car, and sometimes drew it off the track, when the passengers would get out and push it on again. They really owed it courtesies like this, for the car was genially accomodating: a lady could whistle to it from an upstairs window, and the car would halt at once and wait for her while she shut the window, put on her hat and cloak, went downstairs, found an umbrella, told the "girl" what to have for dinner, and came forth from the house.

The previous passengers made little objection to such gallantry on the part of the car: they were wont to expect as much for themselves on like occasion. In good weather the mule pulled the car a mile in a little less than twenty minutes, unless the stops were too long; but when the trolley-car came, doing its mile in five minutes and better, it could wait for nobody. Nor could its passengers have endured such a thing, because the faster they were carried the less time they had to spare!¹

¹Ibid., pp. 10-11.

While Lewis' characters in another age can not divert themselves and succumb to boredom, Tarkington's are merry and tireless.

They even had time to dance "square dances," quadrilles, and "lancers"; they also danced the "racquette," and schottisches and polkas, and such whims as the "Portland Fancy." They pushed back the sliding doors between the "parlour" and the "sitting room," tacked down crash over the carpets, hired a few palms in green tubs, stationed three or four Italian musicians under the stairway in the "front hall"—and had great nights!¹

Tarkington's recognition that this society is living in an interim and that its gaiety and magnificence are doomed, causes the deep poignance of his treatment. He has Anderson's understanding of the economic and social changes which are taking place. While he is attracted to his characters he describes the transformation of the town with almost ruthless clarity. There is no sentimentality in his record of the disintegration of the town and its pattern of life. Almost forgetting his child-like people, he sees that

New faces appeared at the dances of the winter; new faces had been appearing everywhere, for that matter, and familiar ones were disappearing, merged in the increasing crowd, or gone forever and missed a little and not long; for the town was growing and changing as it

¹Ibid., p. 12.

never had grown and changed before.

It was heaving up in the middle incredibly; and as it heaved and spread, it befouled itself and darkened its sky. Its boundary was mere shapelessness on the run; a raw, new house would appear on a country road; four or five others would presently be built at intervals between it and the outskirts of the town; the country road would turn into an asphalt street with a brick-faced drugstore and a frame grocery at a corner; then bungalows and six-room cottages would swiftly speckle the open green spaces—and a farm had become a suburb, which would immediately shoot out other suburbs into the country, on one side, and, on the other, join itself solidly to the city....¹

Like Anderson he observes the men of business promotion requisitioning the town for their purposes, and, also like Anderson he anticipates Lewis' devastating portrayal of the type. Business men's ideals are in the ascendant. The young men down town are hustlers who run the city and its government.

A new spirit of citizenship had already sharply defined itself. It was idealistic, and its ideals were expressed in the new kind of young men in business downtown. They were optimists—optimists to the point of belligerence—their motto being "Boost! Don't Knock!" ...The idealists planned and strove and shouted that their city should become a better, better, and better city—and what they meant, when they used the word "better," was "more prosperous," and the core of their idealism was

¹Ibid., pp. 386-387.

this: "The more prosperous my beloved city, the more prosperous beloved I!"...

What they meant by Prosperity was credit at the bank; but in exchange for this credit they got nothing that was not dirty, and, therefore, to a sane mind, valueless; since whatever was cleaned was dirty again before the cleaning was half done. For, as the town grew, it grew dirty with an incredible completeness. The idealists put up magnificent business buildings and boasted of them, but the buildings were begrimed before they were finished... They drew patriotic, optimistic breaths of the flying powdered filth of the street, and took the foul and heavy smoke with gusto into the profundities of their lungs. "Boost! Don't knock!" they said. And every year or so they boomed a great Clean-Up Week, when everybody was supposed to get rid of the tin cans in his backyard... A god they had indeed made in their own image, as all peoples make the god they truly serve; though of course certain of the idealists went to church on Sunday, and there knelt to Another, considered to be impractical in business. But while the Growing went on, this god of their market-place was their true god, their familiar and spirit-control. They did not know that they were helplessly obedient slaves, nor could they ever hope to realize their serfdom (as the first step toward becoming free men) until they should make the strange and hard discovery that matter should serve man's spirit.¹

It is scarcely satisfactory to discuss the two preceding excerpts in isolation since they are part of the prelude to the most overwhelming section of the novel. Tarkington's utilization of the background mate-

¹ Ibid., pp. 388-391.

rial on the town differs from Anderson's in Poor White. In his book, Anderson is specifically dealing with the transformation of a town and the change in values which occurs, and the plot becomes a secondary consideration. Tarkington's use of background material on the town similarly differs from Lewis'. Lewis vents his spleen at the town at every opportunity which he creates for himself. Again, there is a difference between Tarkington's and Cather's use of background material on the town. In My Antonia Cather directs her attention to the small town in reflective digressions juxtaposed with other elements in the story.

Here however, the commentary upon the town is deliberately woven into the story for powerfully technical reasons. It serves as a crushing contrast to the familiarity and merriment of the town in which the magnificent Ambersons held the social stage, as a cold appraisal of the underlying forces which were uprooting the Ambersons, and as a prologue to the recognition by George Amberson Minafer, the most defiantly proud of the Ambersons, of the fall into oblivion of his name and family.

Social intercourse and warm friendliness vanished:

The city was so big, new, that people disappeared into it unnoticed... People no longer knew their neighbours as a matter of course; one lived for years next door to strangers—that

sharpest of all the changes since the old days—and a friend would lose sight of a friend for a year, and not know it.¹

The job that George Amberson Minafer takes after the disintegration of his family and also the accident that befalls him, metaphorically depict the fate of the Ambersons in the transformation of the town.

George becomes an expert on nitro-glycerin. He rides about, perched upon loads of it, the way the family had reigned socially while economic disaster was impending. Fred Kinney, whose son had suffered blows to his pride from the young, overbearing Georgie, speaks of the life expectancy of George to Eugene Morgan, a successful representative of the ascending industrialists.

"...Young Akers says George rides around over the bumpy roads, sitting on as much as three hundred quarts of nitro-glycerin! My Lord! Talk about romantic tumbles! If he gets blown sky-high some day he won't have a bigger drop, when he comes down, than he's already had! Don't it beat the devil! Young Akers said he's got all the nerve there is in the world...Well, we'll probably see his name in the papers some day if he stays with that job!"²

George survives the dangers of his job, but is run over by one of the new, cheap cars. Their increasing number in the country and his being struck down by one

¹Ibid., p. 478.

²Ibid., pp. 486-489.

of them, symbolize the new economic forces that were shuffling economic power from one class to another, and were riding rough-shod and heedless over his ineffectual contempt and protests.

Fate had reserved for him the final insult of riding him down under the wheels of one of those juggernauts at which he had once shouted "Git a hoss!" Nevertheless, Fate's ironic choice for Georgie's undoing was not a big and swift and momentous car, such as Eugene manufactured; it was a specimen of the hustling little type that was flooding the country, the cheapest, commonest, hardiest little car ever made.¹

Tarkington does not look back sentimentally at the vanished period. He makes George Amberson Minafer see that it is gone without leaving a trace. In the hospital where he is brought on being flattened by the new car, his mind goes back over the period.

His reverie went back to the palatial days of the Mansion, in his boyhood, when he would gallop his pony up the driveway and order the darkey stablemen about, while they whooped and obeyed, and his grandfather, observing from a window, would laugh and call out to him, "That's right, Georgie. Make those lazy rascals jump!" He remembered his gay young uncles, and how the town was eager concerning everything about them, and about himself. What a clean, pretty town it had been! And in his reverie he saw like a pageant before him the magnificence of the Ambersons--its passing, and the passing of the Ambersons themselves. They had been slowly engulfed without knowing how to prevent it, and almost without knowing what was happening to them. The family lot, in

¹ Ibid., p. 489.

the shabby older quarter, out at the cemetery, held most of them now; and the name was swept altogether from the new city. But the new great people who had taken their places—the Morgans and Akerses and Sheridans—they would go, too. George saw that. They would pass, as the Ambersons had passed, and though some of them might do better than the Major and leave the letters that spelled a name of a hospital or a street, it would be only a word and it would not stay forever. Nothing stays or holds or keeps where there is growth, he somehow perceived vaguely but truly....¹

¹Ibid., pp. 497-498.

VII

DOROTHY CANFIELD (FISHER):

The Brimming Cup

Two young Americans, the hero and heroine of The Brimming Cup, meet in Italy, fall in love, become engaged, and plan to go back to live in an American town. As they contemplate their return to the town, Ashley, Vermont, the following interchange takes place between them.

"...It seems an awful jump to go away from such beautiful historic things, [Italian countryside, cathedrals, fountains, love] back to a narrow little mountain town."

"I'd like to know what right you have to call it narrow, when you've never even seen it," she returned.

"Well, anybody could make a pretty fair guess that a small Vermont town isn't going to be so very wide," he advanced reasonably.

"It may not be wide, but it's deep," she replied.

He laughed at her certainty. "You were about eleven years old when you saw it last, weren't you?"¹

¹Canfield, Dorothy, The Brimming Cup, New York, Grosset & Dunlap, 1919, p. 10.

This segment of conversation is a sort of prologue to the whole novel, which is a defense of the small town. Canfield's defense is based upon the assertion that it depends upon one's point of view and outlook what character a small town assumes. She maintains that a tolerant, understanding point of view can contain the small town, come to terms with it, and work out a wholesome (Canfield's probable word) life within it.

The excerpt just cited embodies Canfield's assertion while it illustrates limitations in her attitude. Glibly, uncritically juxtaposing the culture of Europe with that of the small town, the hero, Neale Crittenden, implies the superiority of the former, but no real substance for his choice is inherent in his remarks. The retorts of the heroine, Marise, say nothing as they are too rhetorical. They suggest, however, the will to see something good in the town, the refusal to see the black side of things. The conversation consists more of lovers teasing one another into a thin controversy than a serious choice between Europe or Vermont. They both know in advance the outcome of their argument; they are returning to America.

The words "narrow", "wide", and "deep", as applied to the Vermont town, have only apparent significance. They are glibly clever and rhetorical rather than inci-

sive. What specifically is meant by them must be construed from the context of the mood which dominates the whole novel and which pervades this excerpt.

The mood is one of determined optimism suffused with brimming emotions of love and with good feelings toward everyone. The consequence of the combination is a confused outlook on life in which there is no sound, sustained thought upon the issues which it professes to deal with. One of the prime issues is, of course, the small town, and this chapter deals with that issue as sentimentalized and neatly solved. The temperamental drive.

The core of Marise's argument for the small town is in this statement:

"Where is the big world?" she challenged him laughing. "When you're young you want to go all round the globe to look for it. And when you've gone, don't you find that your world everywhere is about as big as you are?"¹

She shrewdly diverts attack upon the small town to the potential attacker. If he sees limitations in the town they are his own: his incapacity to accept and cope with life as he finds it and bring to bear the breadth of outlook and opportunity for living which he professes to find in other milieus. She thereby invites a

¹Ibid., p. 55.

consideration of her outlook, and the town as she translates it ~~from~~ this outlook.

While still in Europe, preparing to depart for America, Marise voices her recognition of an immaturity and self-delusion in the Americans she is returning to.

"...I've seen a great deal more than most girls have. And then, half brought up in France with people who are clever and have their eyes wide open, people who really count, I've seen how they don't believe in humans, or goodness, or anything that's not base. They know life is mostly bad and cruel and dull and low, and above all that it's bound to fool you if you trust to it, or get off your guard a single minute...Of course back in America you find lots of nice people who don't believe that. But they're so sweet you know they'd swallow anything that made things look pleasant. So you don't dare take their word for anything. They won't even look at what's bad in everybody's life, they just pretend it's not there, not in their husbands, or wives or children, and so you know they're fooled."¹

There is more rhetoric in the allusion to the French spirit and outlook. In this case the rhetoric seems to betoken an immaturity on her part. She is easily influenced to accept what appears to her to be the unerring wisdom of Continental sophistication. Similarly her rhetoric carries over into her application of

¹Ibid., pp. 13-14.

her European experience to Americans. She becomes a potential snob and self-appointed little mentor of the innocent and bumbling Americans. In the exercise of this office she is akin to Carol Kennicott.

Settled in Ashley, Vermont, Marise cultivates—it seems almost studiously—a certain front with which to engage the world. This displays itself on the arrival of Mr. Welles, a retired businessman, and his young, irrepressibly irreverent and questioning friend, Vincent Marsh. She meets them with a kindly, though somewhat airy, reference to town gossip through which she has been apprised of their impending arrival. With a mixture of cynicism, good humor, and urbanity, she calls this village chat the "local wireless information-bureau". There is also a certain condescension toward the town exhibited before her friends. It is not predominant, but it is there in a too affectedly charming manner. She carries on in the endeavor to create the impression that the town is a great big family—not necessarily a happy one.

"...We all know all about everybody and everything, you know. If you live in the country you're really married to humanity, for better or worse, not just on speaking terms with it, as you are in the city. Why, I know about your garden because I have stood a thousand, thousand times leaning on my hoe in my

garden discussing those peonies with old Mrs. Belham who lived there before you."¹

There is something too fluttery and sugary about the attitude, though it strives to make an effective distinction between the country town and the city. This distinction is made in terms of social relationships. As metaphorical expressions, "married to humanity, for better or worse" and "speaking terms" have critical, expository possibilities which, however, are vitiated by the excessive good feeling which hovers about.

Vincent Marsh is employed as the critic of Marise Crittenden's outlook and convictions. His tactics, perspicacity, and effect, as well as further exposition of Marise's personality, are to be seen in this passage:

Vincent now asked irrelevantly, "Do you go to church yourself?"

"Oh yes," she answered, "I go, I like to go. And I take the children." She turned her head so that she looked down at her long hands in her lap, as she added, "I think going to church is a refining influence in children's lives, don't you?"

To Mr. Welles' horror this provoked from Vincent one of his great laughs...

She looked at him hard, with a certain wonder in her eyes.

"Oh, there's no necromancy about it," he told her. "I've been reading the titles of your books and glancing over

¹Ibid., p. 37.

your music before you came in. And I can put two and two together. Who are you making fun of to yourself? Who first got off that lovely speech about the refining influence of church?"

She laughed a little, half-uneasily, a brighter color mounting to her smooth oval cheeks. "That's one of Mrs. Bayweather's [Ashley, Vermont minister's wife's] favorite maxims," she admitted. She added, "But I really do like to go to church."¹

Vincent Marsh represents the questioning outsider. He takes in the total situation and proceeds to test it quietly at critical points for revelations of strength or weakness in Marise's professed love of town life. His approach is implicit in the application to him by the author of the phrases "asked irrelevantly" and "To Mr. Welles' horror this provoked from Vincent one of his great laughs". He possesses a certain sophisticated craft which designs to expose Marise to herself, and he safely assumes that she will become perfectly aware of his intent. He believes she is leading a restricted life, is cajoling herself into thinking otherwise, but he does not deny her the insight and capacity to take the measure of her state, or to indulge in private scoffings, at the expense of the town's mentors, as little compensatory outlets.

¹Ibid., p. 45.

For her part, she appreciates his understanding, swiftly accomodates herself to his astuteness, and adheres to her original assertion, but now with her position openly challenged, she maintains it with positiveness. It appears that her attitude is an answer or rebuke to a cosmopolitan's contempt for a small town. She rebels at the readiness with which this contempt is shown. She feels that this contempt betrays a narrowness in the very personages who would lay claim to being enlightened and possessive of a breadth of outlook, namely the worldly-wise cosmopolites, such as Vincent Marsh. Her views are not initially sharp and clear. Provoked, however, by Vincent Marsh they assume definite direction. Her prime assertion would appear to be that life in a small town must be seen without disparaging preconceptions in order to be honestly viewed and appreciated.

The novel becomes, therefore, a double-barrelled business: as well as being a defense of the small town, it is a revolt against what Canfield considers to be the uncritical militancy and headlong acceptance of the "revolt from the village",¹ to use the phrase employed by Carl Van Doren in characterizing the literary attacks upon the small town during the 1910's and 1920's. Can-

¹Van Doren, Carl, The American Novel, 1789-1939, New York, Macmillan, 1940, p. 294.

field thereby contributes to the vitality and significance of the small town as subject matter. Various writers have wrestled with the subject. It will be seen whether truth emerges out of the sum total, the parts, or whether any of them has successfully penetrated to the core of the subject.

VIII

THOMAS WOLFE:

1. Look Homeward, Angel

In Look Homeward, Angel and in The Native's Return, Book I of You Can't Go Home Again, the small town is treated from two different angles. In both it is omnipresent; in the former, however, it is background to the portrayal of a central figure, while in the latter it becomes the object of scrutiny and reflection by the central figure on a visit to his home town.

In both cases the central figure is Wolfe. The two works are autobiographical in the sense that he weaves the facts of his life and spiritual development into the novels. He writes about the small town because in it, parts of his life that struck him as significant were spent.

In Look Homeward, Angel there are various references to the town of Altamont, West Virginia.

The first to which attention is here drawn is an

indirect one. It is in a description of the self-contained, spirited Gant family. Wolfe strives to bring out the essential nature of the Gants by showing the town's reactions to them. The result is an almost unconscious sidelight on the town.

The family was at the very core and ripeness of its life together. Gant lavished upon it his abuse, his affection, and his prodigal provisioning. They came to look forward eagerly to his entrance, for he brought with him the great gusto of living, of ritual...

His turbulent and indisciplined rhetoric had acquired, by the regular convention of its usage, something of the movement and directness of classical epithet: his similes were preposterous, created really in a spirit of vulgar mirth, and the great comic intelligence that was in the family—down to the youngest—was shaken daily by it. The children grew to await his return in the evening with a kind of exhilaration... They were a life unto themselves—how lonely they were they did not know, but they were known to every one and friended by almost no one. Their status was singular—if they could have been distinguished by caste, they would probably have been called middle-class, but the Duncans, the Tarkintons, all their neighbors, and all their acquaintances throughout the town, never drew in to them, never came into the strange rich color of their lives, because they had twisted the design of all orderly life, because there was in them a mad, original, disturbing quality which they did not suspect. And companionship with the elect—those like the Millards—was equally impossible, even if they had had the gift, or the desire for it. But they hadn't.¹

¹Wolfe, Thomas, Look Homeward, Angel. New York, Grosset & Dunlap, 1929, pp. 63-64.

Wolfe's admiration for the Gants is based upon their liveliness and artless non-conformity to the manners of the middle class. The comparison which he makes between the Gants and their class, however, is not one designed as a criticism of the middle class. The middle class is regarded as a group with a philosophy and traditions which did not lead its members to be dubious about or hostile to the Gants' way of life but which did not let them naturally enter into it. There is not the suggestion of stagnation or repression which arises in the similar comparison between Antonia and the country girls and the dominant townspeople in My Antonia, for example. The town view on the Gants is here introduced to enhance the attractiveness of the Gants by virtue of its being the view of curious, reflecting outsiders. The impression is not created that the middle class families are held in contempt for not mixing with the Gants. Nor does the middle class show any inclination to quarantine the Gants. Here, therefore, Wolfe's attitude toward the town is devoid of the bitter intentions and rancor to be seen in Lewis or Masters and contains no deliberate defense of the town akin to Canfield's. His consideration of the town is almost unpremeditated and passive. His view is conditioned by the massive grief he feels over the vast lack of under-

standing and communication between human beings, as this is expressed in his prologue.

Which of us has known his brother?
Which of us has looked into his father's
heart? Which of us has not remained
forever prisonpent? Which of us is not
forever a stranger and alone?¹

Something of his attitude toward the town can be gathered from his description of the way Eliza Gant, the mother of the central figure, looks at the town. To her it exists as opportunities for making money in the purchase and sale of property.

Eliza saw Altamont not as so many hills, buildings, people; she saw it in the pattern of a gigantic blueprint. She knew the history of every piece of valuable property—who bought it, who sold it, who owned it in 1893, and what it was now worth. She watched the tides of traffic cannily; she knew by what corners the largest number of people passed in a day or an hour; she was sensitive to every growing-pain of the young town, gauging from year to year its growth in any direction, and deducing the probable direction of its future expansion. She judged distances critically, saw at once where the beaten route to an important centre was stupidly circuitous, and looking in a straight line through houses and lots, she said:

"There'll be a street through here some day."

Her vision of land and population was clear, crude, focal—there was nothing

¹Ibid., p. 2.

technical about it; it was extraordinary for its direct intensity. Her instinct was to buy cheaply where people would come; to keep out of pockets and culs de sac, to buy on a street that moved toward a centre, and that could be given extension.¹

While describing her restricted or specialized view, Wolfe does not condemn her for the things she misses or shuts out. She sees the town undergoing growth and is taken up with speculation; her instincts are keyed to the economic and business anatomy of the town; she invests "hills, buildings" of Altamont with past, present, and future dollar values; she observes the "people" of Altamont for the direction and numbers in which they move. Rather than decry the ascendancy of Eliza's acquisitive nature, Wolfe regards it with sympathy and precision.

Wolfe's references to the small town in Look Homeward, Angel are casual and brief, but convey the sense of firsthand experience that causes them to appear unbidden. This can be seen in the following excerpt concerning the central figure's sister, Helen Gant. Teaming with her friend, Pearl Hines, she had toured the vaudeville circuit in small towns until her friend married. Then

¹Ibid., 127.

...the partnership of the Dixie Melody Twins was dissolved. Helen, left alone, turned away from the drear monotony of the small towns to the gaiety, the variety, and the slaking fulfilment of her desires, which she hoped somehow to find in the cities.¹

Similarly in another reference to Helen this intimate acquaintance with the pattern of life in a town is indicated.

She was skilled in gossip, and greedily attentive to it, but of the complex nastiness of village life she had little actual knowledge.²

It is not Wolfe's intention to make a special plea for or against the American small town. Something of the scope and purpose of his book has been pointed out. He is confronted by the whole of life; he pictures his bout with it in epic terms. At college he sees that the greatest in literature has drawn together the vital strands, the significant simplicities of life, put them into forms of enduring expression and that only these loom up as intelligible and durable. His tumultuous spirit ranges over all life and experience upon earth. In the company of thoughts and emotions aroused by the reading of mighty literature he contemplates the whole of America, spreading outward from the village in which

¹Ibid., p. 252.

²Ibid., p. 251.

he finds himself.

Around him lay the village; beyond, the ugly rolling land, sparse with cheap farmhouses; beyond all this, America—more land, more wooden houses, more towns, hard and raw and ugly. He was reading Euripides, and all around him a world of white and black was eating fried food. He was reading of ancient serceries and old ghosts, but did an old ghost ever come to haunt this land? The ghost of Hamlet's Father, in Connecticut,

".....I am thy father's spirit,

Doomed for a certain term to walk the night
Between Bloomington and Portland, Maine."

He felt suddenly the devastating impermanence of the nation. Only the earth endured—the gigantic American earth, bearing upon its awful breast a world of flimsy rickets. Only the earth endured—this broad terrific earth that had no ghosts to haunt it. Stogged in the desert, half-broken and overthrown, among the columns of lost temples strewn, there was no ruined image of Menkaura, there was no alabaster head of Akhnaten. Nothing had been done in stone. Only this earth endured, upon whose lonely breast he read Euripides. Within its hills he had been held a prisoner; upon its plain he walked, alone, a stranger.¹

Within an arena of touchstones that he has set up—Aeschylus, Sophocles, Euripides, Aristophanes, Voltaire, Swift, Shakespeare, Coleridge—he looks at the village, at all of America, and discovers "devastating imperma-

¹ Ibid., p. 423.

nence". The small town he just mentions, but does he not take its measure more surely and with less fuss than the others? Here at any rate, is ~~the~~ another view of the small town, one that is embracing and incisive, perhaps because it does not deal directly with the town. Its passing references place the town in a perspective.

This impersonal, detached passing reference to the town together with a realistic picture of the structure and movement of the town, and the setting in which he places the town, are epitomized in the following passage.

They climbed sharply up, along a rocky trail, avoiding the last long corkscrew of the road, and stood in the gap, at the road's summit. They were only a few hundred feet above the town: it lay before them with the sharp nearness of a Sienese picture, at once close and far. On the highest ground, he saw the solid masonry of the Square, blocked cleanly out in light and shadow, and a crawling toy that was a car, and men no bigger than sparrows. And about the Square was the treeless brick jungle of business—cheap, ragged, and ugly, and beyond all this, in indefinite patches, the houses where all the people lived, with little bright raw ulcers of suburbia further off, and the healing and concealing grace of fair massed trees. And below him, weltering up from the hollow along the flanks and shoulders of the hill, was Niggertown. There seemed to be a kind of centre at the Square, where all the cars crawled in and waited, yet there was no purpose anywhere.

But the hills were lordly, with a plan. Westward, they widened into the sun, soaring up from buttressing shoulders. The town was thrown up on the plateau like an encampment: there was nothing below him that could resist time. There was no idea. Below him, in a cup, he felt that all life was held: he saw it as might one of the old schoolmen writing in monkish Latin a Theatre of Human Life; or like Peter Breughel, in one of his swarming pictures. It seemed to him suddenly that he had not come up on the hill from the town, but that he had come out of the wilderness like a beast, and was staring now with steady beast-eye at this little huddle of wood and mortar which the wilderness must one day repossess, devour, cover over.¹

¹ Ibid., p. 450.

2. The Native's Return

The Native's Return, Book I of the volume You Can't Go Home Again, is about an author, George Webber, (Wolfe) who has written a novel (Look Homeward, Angel) depicting his home town, Libya Hill, West Virginia, eight hundred miles from New York City. In his work

...he had packed everything he knew about his home town in Old Catawba and the people there. He had distilled every line of it out of his own experience of life.¹

These sentences may also be regarded as epitomizing the achievement and intent in The Native's Return. The town again is presented from various angles and through the minds of different characters in the attempt to depict it.

The circumstance which lands George Webber in Libya Hill is the death of his Aunt Maw Joyner who had taken charge of his upbringing at the age of eight when his mother died. His reflections upon his aunt not only present the town through her eyes, but display his basic attitude toward the town.

The news shook him profoundly. But it was not grief he felt so much as a deep sense of loss, almost impersonal in its quality—a sense of loss and unbelief such as one might feel to discover suddenly that some great force in nature had ceased to operate. He

¹Wolfe, Thomas, You Can't Go Home Again, New York, Sun Dial Press, Garden City, 1942, p. 19.

couldn't take it in. Ever since his mother had died when he was only eight years old, Aunt Maw had been the most solid and permanent fixture in his boy's universe. She was a spinster, the older sister of his mother and of his Uncle Mark, and she had taken charge of him and brought him up with all the inflexible zeal of her puritanical nature. She had done her best to make a Joyner of him and a credit to the narrow, provincial, mountain clan to which she belonged. In this she had failed, and his defection from the ways of Joyner righteousness had caused her deep pain. He had known this for a long time; but now he realized, too, more clearly than he had ever done before, that she had never faltered in her duty to him as she saw it. As he thought about her life he felt an inexpressible pity for her, and a surge of tenderness and affection almost choked him.¹

He recognizes the limitations of the town within which he could not live, but at the same time he is bound to the town by powerful ties. The townspeople he had known as a youth, in this case his aunt, are not solely distasteful or deplorable examples of bigotry or inhibition, as, say in Lewis. They are people with whom he lived, laughed, played, and grew up. He received their reproofs, approvals, and well-wishing. He was one of them, part of the daily reciprocities of life. He sees the town as an outsider and as an insider. As an outsider he sees it as a hopelessly restricted community with which he can not come to terms. As an insider he is involved by his sympathy toward it, by the unus-

¹ Ibid., pp. 45-46.

pecting hospitality and comradeship that is taken for granted, that the townspeople accord him. Consequently he sees the limitations of the town sensitively and sadly. He sees that what may appear as limitations to him are the manners and attitudes by which the people live. By his contravention of their codes he is unavoidably betraying their trust in him and ridiculing their assumption that he should live by their beliefs. Moreover he is confronted with the spectacle of narrowness in the townspeople. His attitude, therefore, is never one of militant castigation of the town, nor one of unreserved defense, nor one of nostalgia.

Certain of the town's remarkable characteristics are trenchantly brought out in the reflections upon the pullman car numbered K 19. It is the coach which regularly accomodates the passengers traveling from New York City to Libya Hill.

George had a berth in car K 19. It was not really different in any respect from any other pullman car, yet for George it had a very special quality and meaning. For every day K 19 bound together two points upon the continent—the great city and the small town of Libya Hill where he had been born, eight hundred miles away. It left New York at one thirty-five each afternoon, and it arrived in Libya Hill at eleven twenty the next morning.

The moment he entered the pullman he was transported instantly from the vast allness of general humanity in the station into the familiar geography of his

home town. One might have been away for years and never have seen an old familiar face; one might have wandered to the far ends of the earth; one might have got with child a mandrake root, or heard mermaids singing, or known the words and music of what songs the Sirens sang; one might have lived and worked alone for ages in the canyons of Manhattan until the very memory of home was lost and far as in a dream; yet the moment that he entered K 19 it all came back again, his feet touched earth, and he was home.

It was uncanny...most wonderful and mysterious....¹

The town has an indestructible individuality which it has implanted deep in the personalities of its inhabitants. It has taken such an elemental hold on the prime instincts and imagination of its children that the mere suggestion of it will instantaneously bring its spirit and flavor into dominance. It is as if the town provided the only round of experience which has taken a rooted hold in the life of its people; everything vanishes before it. It seems to have the first claim upon its people. It creates a kinship which it would be almost unforgivable ingratitude to reject or ridicule. The town has created the first impressions of life in George Webber and has struck these deeply into him. He has received his first and most lasting perceptions of life in the town. The town had the

¹ Ibid., pp. 51-52.

initial influence on him; it was his first contact with life. It is this original, spontaneous relationship with the town and its people which has power over him, that, with a sharpness of vision and realistic appraisal of the town's manners and attitudes, causes him to view the town sensitively with mixed feelings. He recognizes this power:

But why had he always felt so strongly the magnetic pull of home, why had he thought so much about it and remembered it with such blazing accuracy, if it did not matter, and if this little town, and the immortal hills around it, was not the only home he had on earth? He did not know. All that he knew was that the years flow by like water,¹ and that one day men come home again.

In the pullman that carries Webber home Wolfe collects a group of the town's citizens. Through them one derives an insight into the town. These personages are a foil to the most fascinating and powerful creation among them. He is Judge Rumford Bland. In the characterization of him, in his attitude toward the town, Wolfe seeks to depict the capacity of the town to ruin tragically.

Blind Rumford Bland, former judge of Libya Hill, terrorizes the inhabitants of the town, especially the ruling caste, because he has all their secrets and sees

through all their talk and devices.

He had pursued his life among them with insolent shamelessness. Though he still masked in all the outward aspects of respectability, he was in total disrepute, and yet he met the opinion of the town with such cold and poisonous contempt that everyone held him in a kind of terrified respect....¹

At midnight in the washroom of the pullman, recalling unsavory stories about Judge Bland, are three of the town's leading figures. These are Jarvis Riggs, the banker, Baxter Kennedy, the Mayor, and Parson Flack, the political boss.

[There] was the tall, spare, brittle, sandy-complexioned figure of the banker, Jarvis Riggs, and on the seat opposite, engaged in conversation with him, were two other local dignitaries. He recognized the round-featured, weak amiability of the Mayor, Baxter Kennedy; and, sprawled beside him, his long, heavy shanks thrust out into the aisle, the bald crown of his head with its tonsured fringe of black hair thrown back against the top of the seat, his loose-jowled face hanging heavy as he talked, was the large, well-oiled beefiness of Parson Flack, who manipulated the politics of Libya Hill and was called "Parson" because he never missed a prayer² meeting at the Campbellite Church....

They have been trying to better each other's stories, and Parson Flack is about to begin another.

¹Ibid., p. 84.

²Ibid., p. 53.

When the laughter and the slapping of thighs subsided, Parson Flack leaned forward again, eager to tell another. In a voice that was subdued, confidential, almost conspiratorial, he began:

"And do you remember the time that he——?"

Swiftly the curtain was drawn aside, all heads jerked up, and Judge Bland entered.

"Now, Parson——" said he in a chiding voice—"remember what?"

Before the blind, cold stare of that emaciated face the seated men were silent. Something stronger than fear was in their eyes.

"Remember what?" he said again, a trifle harshly. He stood before them erect and fragile, both hands balanced on the head of the cane which he held anchored to the floor in front of him. He turned to Jarvis Riggs: "Remember when you established what you boasted was 'the fastest-growing bank in all the state'—and weren't too particular what it grew on?" He turned back to Parson Flack: "Remember when one of 'the boys,' as you like to call them—you always look out for 'the boys,' don't you, Parson?—remember when one of 'the boys' borrowed money from 'the fastest-growing bank' to buy two hundred acres on that hill across the river?"—he turned to the Mayor—"and sold the land to the town for a new cemetery?...Though why," he turned his face to Parson Flack again, "The dead should have to go so far to bury their dead I do not know!"

"...I remember many things, but I see now I have spent my substance, wasted all my talents in riotous living—while pious Puritans have virtuously betrayed their town and given their whole-souled services to the ruin of their fellow men."...

They sat in utter silence, their frightened, guilty eyes all riveted upon his face, and each man felt as if

these cold, unseeing eyes had looked straight through him. For a moment more Judge Bland just stood there, and, slowly, without a change of muscle in the blankness of his face, the ghostly smile began to hover like a shadow at the corners of his sunken mouth.

"Good evening, gentlemen," he said. He turned, and with his walking stick he caught and held the curtain to one side. "I'll be seeing you."¹

There is a concentration of evil in Rumford Bland that evokes grandeur, and also a sense of pity over what has been lost or subverted in the character of this man who was once a fair judge swift to decide.

Everyone knew that he was evil—genuinely, unfathomably evil—and evil of this sort has a grandeur about it not unlike the grandeur of supreme goodness. And indeed, there was goodness in him that had never altogether died. In his single term upon the bench as a police court magistrate, it was universally agreed that Judge Bland had been fair and wise in his disposal of swift justice. Whatever it was that had made this fact possible—and no one pretended to understand it—the aura of it still clung to him. And it was for just this reason that people who met him were instantly, even if they fought against it, captivated, drawn close to him, somehow made to like him. At the very moment that they met him and felt that force of death and evil working in him, they also felt—oh, call it the phantom, the radiance, the lost soul, of an enormous virtue. And with the recognition of that quality came the sudden stab of overwhelming regret, the

¹Ibid., pp. 86-88.

feeling of "What a loss! What a shame!"
And yet no one could say why.¹

Rumford Bland is, in George Webber's estimate, the quintessential product of the small town. He is an explanation of the town. Here Wolfe reaches his profoundest conclusions about the town:

Perhaps Rumford Bland had sought his life in darkness not because of something evil in him--though certainly there was evil there--but because of something good that had not died. Something in the man had always fought against the dullness of provincial life, against its prejudice, its caution, its smugness, its sterility, and its lack of joy. He had looked for something better in the night, for a place of warmth and fellowship, a moment of dark mystery, the thrill of imminent and unknown adventure, the excitement of the hunt, pursuit, perhaps the capture, and then the fulfillment of desire. Was it possible that in the blind man whose whole life had become such a miracle of open shamelessness, there had once been a warmth and an energy that had sought for an enhancement of the town's cold values, and for a joy and a beauty that were not there, but that lived in himself alone? Could that be what had wrecked him? Was he one of the lost men--lost, really, only because the town itself was lost, because his gifts had been rejected, his energies unused, the shoulder of his strength finding no work to bend to--because what he had had to give of hope, intelligence, curiosity, and warmth had found no place there, and so were lost?²

¹Ibid., p. 78.

²Ibid., pp. 144-145.

"Dullness...prejudice...caution...smugness...sterility...lack of joy" are properties of the small town that we have seen in the works of Anderson, Masters, Lewis, and Cather. Similarly the town's effort to repulse "hope, intelligence, curiosity, and warmth" has been seen in Lewis', Masters', and Cather's work. The wreckage of character is one of the main themes in Masters. The materialism of the ruling caste runs all through Main Street. There is nothing new in Wolfe in regard to the concept of the small town's character and pattern of life. What is new here is the use of subject matter in the characterization of a powerful and moving figure. Each of the authors has sought to convey his feelings about the small town and make use of it as subject matter in his own fashion. Wolfe is the first to utilize the small town subject matter—which was acquiring tradition in usage and concept by the time Wolfe came to it—in an extended characterization which seeks to depict vividly the final effect upon a noble character of the combined forces, attitudes, and spirit of the town.

Wolfe, moreover, is original and forward looking in the portrayal of one of the aspects of the town. This aspect is the town's development into a functional

adjunct of the large city. The town's businesses and their employees are a part of a regimented organization controlled from the city.

Wolfe depicts the organization of American business, its rewards and penalties to employees, its aggressiveness, and its impatience with and rejection of the slackers in the outlying districts.

The Federal Weight, Scales, and Computing Company was a far-flung empire which had a superficial aspect of great complexity, but in its essence it was really beautifully simple. Its heart and soul—indeed, its very life—was its sales organization.

The entire country was divided into districts, and over each district an agent was appointed. This agent, in turn, employed salesmen to cover the various portions of his district. Each district also had an "office man" to attend to any business that might come up while the agent and his salesmen were away, and a "repair man" whose duty it was to overhaul damaged or broken-down machines. Together, these comprised the agency, and the country was so divided that there was, on the average, an agency for every unit of half a million people in the total population. Thus there were two hundred and sixty or seventy agencies through the nation, and the agents with their salesmen made up a working force of,¹ from twelve to fifteen hundred men.

In this company the employees almost never referred to it by name,

¹Ibid., pp. 130-131.

...as who should speak of the deity with coarse directness, but always with a just perceptible lowering and huskiness of voice as "the Company".¹

Wolfe describes in ironic terms how the company's higher purposes were summed up annually by its Great Man himself, Mr. Paul S. Appleton, III, in the peroration to his address before the assembled organization. Indicating with sweeping "gesture of magnificent command toward an enormous map of the United States of America" he would say, "'There's your market! Go out and sell them!'"²

The company replaced the objective of its founder to place a machine in every store that needed one and could afford to pay for one, with that of placing one everywhere by "creating" the need.

For those salesmen and agents who averaged one hundred per cent of their sales-quota as established by the company, there were financial and social rewards deriving from membership in the company's Hundred Club. Those who did not attain their quota were not only barred from the Club, but were swiftly dismissed from the employ of the company.

While it was quite true that membership in the Hundred Club was not compulsory,

¹Ibid., p. 131.

²Loc. cit.

it was also true that Mr. Paul S. Appleton, III was a theologian who, like Calvin, knew how to combine free will and predestination. If one did not belong to the Hundred Club, the time was not far distant when one would not belong to Mr. Appleton.¹

Webber finds that this company, for which his old friend Randy Shepperton is working, is a hierarchy in which each overseer cracks a vicious whip across the back of the one below him.

It was a picture he had seen in a gallery somewhere, portraying a long line of men stretching from the Great Pyramid to the very portals of great Pharaoh's house, and great Pharaoh stood with a thonged whip in his hand and applied it unmercifully to the bare back and shoulders of the man in front of him, who was great Pharaoh's chief overseer, and in the hand of the overseer was a whip of many tails which he unstintedly applied to the quivering back of the wretch before him, who was the chief overseer's chief lieutenant, and in the lieutenant's hand a whip of rawhide which he laid vigorously on the quailing body of the head sergeant, and in the sergeant's hand a wicked flail with which he belabored a whole company of greening corporals, and in the hands of every corporal a knotted lash with which to whack a whole regiment of slaves, who pulled and hauled and bore burdens and toiled and sweated and built the towering structure of the pyramid.

Wolfe is moved to a feeling of dull rage toward the

¹Ibid., p. 135.

²Ibid., pp. 139-140.

motives, practice, and structure of American business empires. He implies or suggests, however, no specific program of reform. He presents vividly the motivations and assumptions of all the members of the business hierarchy, and is overwhelmed by the spectacle. He ponders the effect upon American life of the continuation of ways and ideals of businessmen: reflecting upon "The Week of Play", the annual outing for the faithful employees, George Webber sees

...an image of twelve or fifteen hundred men--for on these pilgrimages, by general consent, women (or, at any rate, wives) were debarred--twelve or fifteen hundred men, Americans, most of them in their middle years, exhausted, overwrought, their nerves frayed down and stretched to the breaking point, met from all quarters of the continent "at the Company's expense" for one brief, wild, gaudy week of riot. And George thought grimly what this tragic spectacle of business men at play meant in terms of the entire scheme of things and the plan of life that had produced it....¹

Depicting the regimentation of business in the small towns by the giant corporations centered in the large cities, Wolfe forgot his grievances against the narrowness of village life in the face of a menace to the friendliness and humanity that he had seen in his fellow townsmen. He now stood ready to defend the

¹Ibid., pp. 136-137.

town. Underlying his change of position was the fact that the objects of social protest in America were shifting. With a recognition in his The Native's Return of a social transformation—namely the urbanization of America—Wolfe signalled the close of the species of small town literature that has been considered in this treatise.

IX

CONCLUSION

Basic to the dissent from American small town civilization expressed to a greater or lesser degree in the works considered in the foregoing chapters were certain features of the post-war American scene. These were the "nationalism, materialism, and orthodoxy"¹ of the economically and politically dominant middle class which, until the 1910's and early 1920's, was preponderantly located in towns.

Participation in the Great War, of whose battle horrors and underlying international power politics most Americans knew very little, produced a patriotism, unreasoning in its vanity, provincial in its manner and outlook, and immature in its intolerance of criticism. This nationalism, rigid, arrant, naïve, to be sure, was essentially the bluster of self-consciousness and diplomatic ineptitude of a people isolated by and large from the rest of the world for a century, and suddenly

¹Morison, Samuel Eliot, and Commager, Henry Steele, The Growth of the American Republic, New York, Oxford University Press, 1942, vol. 2, p. 565.

thrust into a company of war-torn and tired but calculating powers.

The devotion to material interests on the part of most Americans resulted from a half century spent by the nation in exploiting fabulous material resources and in supplying a prodigious, expanding domestic market. Practically all the skill and energy of the nation were directed to material pursuits: the monumental achievements which engrossed the middle class were the perfecting of highly productive techniques, business administration, the organization of large scale enterprise, and the refinement of credit and banking facilities. As the Great War precipitated a blatant form of nationalism, so too, by virtue of the demands upon America for war materiel, it enhanced the acquisition of lush wealth and augmented the material prosperity of the nation as a whole.

Most Americans of the immediate post-war world were orthodox in their political, religious and other beliefs. Aggressively engaged as they had been in exploiting the apparently limitless opportunities for becoming wealthy, they found that their heritage of elective governments and political freedom, and of Christian doctrines, largely Calvinist in interpretation and emphasis, could be adapted to further and

sanction the expansion of business enterprise. With their growing material prosperity and their gradual social entrenchment, the ascendant middle class impressed its orthodoxy more and more upon the affairs of the nation. A practical people, undisciplined intellectually, they had tended to become rigidly uncritical in thought and unable to bear or absorb what was not familiar or habitual, with a consequence that they strenuously ruled out interrogation of their beliefs and became increasingly intolerant of heterodox opinion.

The nationalism, materialism, and orthodoxy of the nationally dominant middle class of the immediate post-war period aroused heated protest from the authors of the works treated in the foregoing chapters. The noisy, provincial arrogance of an awakening nationalism, the worship of material achievement, and the lack of intellectual curiosity and excitement—characteristic, as has been observed, of a people whose history of isolation, frontier hardships, and dazzling opportunities for quick riches during the industrial revolution, absorbed it, as a whole, in practical considerations—provoked an excited concern over the lack of American culture on the part of a group of writers at last awakened to the provinciality of America and made very

self-conscious by it. With these manifestations of constricted intelligence in the nationalism, materialism, and orthodoxy of the ruling middle class these writers were explosively impatient and irate. While several ostentatiously withdrew themselves from their countrymen, all of them, each in his or her own way, denounced the cast and character which American society had assumed. Lured by the opportunities of quick material gain, Americans had made the nation over into a vast business community whose ruling middle class traders, manufacturers, promoters, and professional men imbued the nation with the incentives of business enterprise. These writers saw that, as a result, the country's politics, religion, art, education had been converted into commercial ventures, and that these forces in national life had been adulterated from nurturing grounds for speculative thought and sagacity into facile instruments, comfortable sanctions, and rapid preparation for success in a world of business. To this group of intellectuals, interested primarily in cultural and artistic products, such a state of affairs was an intolerable instance of outright Philistinism with which they were automatically at loggerheads. Tending to be impatiently haughty and iconoclastic, they took their stand against the middle class order:

Masters and Lewis damned the national scene gleefully but inconclusively; Cather sternly reproved the middle class; Anderson and Tarkington sought to point out the deleterious wickedness of the times by describing a selection of the distant charms of a previous era; Canfield painted sentimental pictures of triumphant goodness in men and women (especially in women); and Wolfe tried to illustrate the debasing capacity of provincial America by letting himself be sensationally and romantically martyred by it.

More specifically, the criticism of American society worked out by this group of writers was concentrated upon the American small town, which was the most prevalent cultural and social milieu in which Americans congregated and lived out their lives. The thinking of Americans, such as it was, on politics, religion, morals, was formulated in the towns, and dominated national life and policy. Suddenly, the band of writers we have been considering, jolted by the experiences of the Great War into a recognition of America's provincial isolation, had been awakened to cultural and social values in a land that, by and large, had been occupied with material pursuits. Conscious of their own small town origins, they set out to conduct an inquiry into the nature and assumptions of life in the American village. Hence, the flurry of small town

literature that occurred around 1920.

The interest in American small towns as subject matter came to an end in the early 1930's. Wolfe, producing his works on the town about that time, while clearly related to the rest of the group treated in these chapters, brought the literary event to a close. The reason for the disappearance of this species of small town literature was implicit in his The Native's Return, where he indicated that the small town was becoming an adjunct of the large city. This new concept of the American small town was a reflection of the change that was occurring in the social fabric of the nation: during the post-war decades the city had been growing rapidly and the whole of American society was becoming urbanized. This social transformation altered the towns which the authors had known as their homes: "Urban characteristics invaded the small towns and villages and urban psychology penetrated to the countryside. Big towns copied the cities and little towns copied the big towns, while no cross-roads village was so isolated as to be without neon lights, juke boxes, and its row of boys and girls sipping cokes and solemnly discussing the respective merits of Duke Ellington's or Guy Lombardo's orchestras. Nearly half the population of the country lived within easy access of cities of

100,000 or more: these cities became the shopping, entertainment, educational, cultural, and political centers of the country. The whole nation became urbanized—in its psychology as well as its economy. To this process the automobile, the radio, the moving picture, and the newspaper all lent themselves. Automobiles made access to near-by cities a matter of minutes instead of hours; moving pictures busied themselves, for the most part, with displaying life—usually among the idle rich—in the great cities or their suburbs, while even small town newspapers depended upon canned news, features, and editorials, coming usually from a few great cities.¹

So much for the contemporary issues which preoccupied the group of writers considered in these chapters and for an explanation of the outburst of literature dealing with the American small town.

The reactions of these writers to certain disconcerting aspects of American society were variously embodied in their interpretations of American town life. They had all been drawn to a common subject: the

¹Morison, Samuel Eliot, and Commager, Henry Steele, The Growth of the American Republic, New York, Oxford University Press, 1942, vol. 2, p. 552.

small town in America. Their initial grievances against American society led to the absorption of their interest and powers of observation by a fascinating subject which each tried to interpret. An ancient, ubiquitous feature of America and the world, the small town was a subject that challenged writers to a lasting portrayal of it. To discover what the small town really signified to this group of writers I shall briefly recall those features which each author found most arresting.

More than anything else in the small town Masters found frustration, deterioration, and terrible defeat of human personality; the presence of a spiritually degraded ruling class, led by the banking, commercial, and religious professions; and an environment which depraved the weak and clipped the wings of the strong—though Masters made no effective distinction between weak and strong characters, or between weakness and strength in character.

Lewis saw the town as a hive of malicious gossip, as the private domain of an unimaginative business class whose members strove with dull naivete^e to appear respectable to one another, and as the obstructive upholder of a pseudo-culture.

Cather surveyed the small town and presented what

to her were its conspicuous characteristics: a dominant merchant class viewed largely as the bane of the town; a vivacious neighborliness which brashly spited the strait-laced business and religious leaders of the community; and a thinness of native culture which encouraged in Cather a dogmatic negative attitude toward the cultural potential of America in the immediate future, and at best, a non-committal attitude toward the appearance of an American culture in the long run.

Anderson, whose central subject for study was humanity, found the inhabitants the most fascinating feature of the small town. A bold prejudice for Freudian psychological analysis combined with a generous and sympathetic outlook upon human nature led him to portray objectively and affectionately the characters of his town. Making no deliberate distinctions as to class and no dogmatic criticism of American society, he brought to light in his portraits awesome spiritual anarchy and crippling of emotions, and at the same time he dealt gently with human foibles and oddity.

Tarkington seized chiefly upon the vast, buzzing gossipiness, the social aspirations, and the gay social pastimes of the townspeople. Appealing in his readers to a longing for stability, he made these aspects of town life poignantly charming by depicting his town's

characters as innocent children, whose lives and relationships were wrenched by economic forces which they did not understand.

With a beneficent optimism Canfield discussed the compact inter-relationship of lives in her town, the swift spread of news among the citizens about one another, and the explosions of brooding love, hatred, and disappointment. In her mood of brimming affection, however, Canfield made pleasant closet-dramas out of these aspects of the town rather than terrifying stories arousing pity and sympathy.

Wolfe, though plaintively absorbed in cataloguing the irritations of American life and manners in epic terms in order to make his personal struggle with them all the more impressive, fought with pain and regret against the "dullness...prejudice...caution...smugness...sterility...lack of joy"¹ in the small town. In unconscious, and calmer moments, he spoke unaffectedly of the "drear monotony of the small towns".²

These were the characteristics ascribed to the American small town and the manners in which it was presented by a number of writers deliberately dealing

¹Wolfe, Thomas, You Can't Go Home Again, New York, Sun Dial Press, Garden City, 1942, p. 144.

²Wolfe, Thomas, Look Homeward, Angel, New York, Grosset & Dunlap, 1929, p. 252.

with it. While there was a core of common findings in their analysis of the town's features, there was a variation in emphasis in each treatment resulting from the differences in attitude adopted toward the town. On the whole, Masters abhorred the town. Lewis, at the same time that he was sprightly satirizing the speech and manners of the American town, was baffled by the pig-headedness and lack of subtlety which he ascribed over-emphatically to the townspeople. Gather saw both pleasant and provoking features in the town, her attitude being governed by what she happened to be observing, and ended by being curious and non-committal.

Anderson's attitude toward the town was open to three conjectures, so far as I can make out: it was obscured; it never developed; the more Anderson considered life in a small town the less inclined he was to adopt a fixed attitude toward it. Tarkington was wistful, buoyant, and paternal in his attitude toward the town. Canfield's attitude was one of a determined friendliness that was not wholly grating on good sense.

Wolfe's attitude toward the town ranged from an Olympian disregard to bursting rage, from militant affection to quiet pity.

None of these attitudes by itself succeeded in producing a classical representation of the small town.

The authors, however, had strong points in their attitudes which could have contributed to a masterpiece. Masters had the potential force and passion of an inverted idealist like Swift; Lewis had sharp ears and eyes which overlooked nothing in the precise speech and manners of his contemporaries in the towns; Cather had a sense of balancing issues and forces; Anderson in his portrayal of cramped personality demonstrated himself as an apt selector of details; Tarkington was a masterful plot handler; Canfield showed a strong tendency to debate and question her favorite contentions; Wolfe had a background of classical literature which helped sharpen a sense of value and proportion in the choice and treatment of literary material.

The reason no work of genius appeared among the writings treated in the preceding chapters, was that none of the authors was big enough to produce one. Each author took petty partisan issue with his material; he was not above and outside of it; none of them, with the possible exception of Booth Tarkington, (—whom Parrington ruefully calls "the great failure in contemporary [1920's] fiction"¹—) calmly and disinterestedly

¹Parrington, Vernon Louis, Main Currents in American Thought, New York, Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1927, vol. 3, p. 375.

managed material into composed, adjusted form. Instead, their works became reflections of their own provinciality, the irascibility in their temperament, and their peevish rebellion against both, rather than classical representations of provinciality or other outlooks and characteristics variously displayed by humanity in America and elsewhere. Had they not viewed America as an especial preserve of bigotry and idiocy they might have taken such features in their stride, gone on to a dispassionate consideration of the small town and emerged with a lasting portrayal of it, for, collectively at any rate, they possessed capacities admirably suited to transmute the small town into great literature.

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