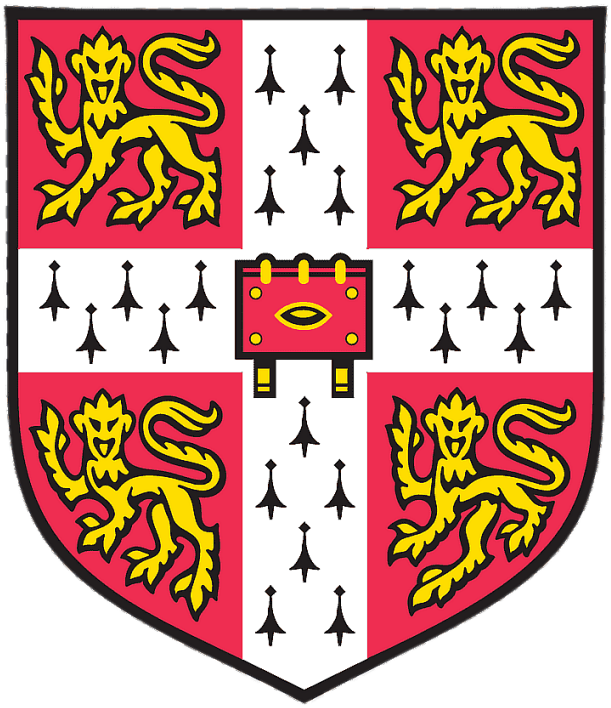
Midwestern Americanism:

Fiction of the 'Middle Border,'

1900-1930



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Declaration

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Abstract

Midwestern Americanism: Fiction of the 'Middle Border,' 1900-1930
Molly Becker

This PhD dissertation examines a neglected strand of Midwestern rural writing from the early twentieth century to ask how it responded to and, in many ways, contributed to key contemporary debates in American literature. In 1921, Carl Van Doren's 'Revolt from the Village' essay substantially reframed the way small-town Midwestern writing was critically received; in 1930, Midwestern author Sinclair Lewis became the first American author to win the Nobel Prize in Literature. This thesis considers this period to ask how popular Midwestern authors thought about and portrayed their region at a time when Midwestern writing was popular nationally, but falling out of critical favor. The primary focus is therefore not on the familiar names of the 'revolt'—Edgar Lee Masters, Sherwood Anderson, and Sinclair Lewis—but on writers whose novels are now largely forgotten. That said, the aim of the dissertation is not simply to resurrect a neglected group of writers, but to make the case for paying attention to what has come to be known as the middlebrow when mapping out US literary history.

Chapter 1 offers a reading of Booth Tarkington's Indiana novels and, though a comparison with a fellow Hoosier, Theodore Dreiser, considers the role of the Midwest in the romance versus realism debate. By tracing how Tarkington's representation of his home state evolved—he won the Pulitzer prize in 1919 and 1922—the chapter demonstrates how he attempted to present the Midwest in an increasingly national context. Chapter 2 focuses on another neglected writer, Ruth Suckow, and considers her fiction alongside H.L. Mencken's *The American Language* to explore questions of region and nation from a different perspective. In particular, it argues that Suckow's regionally specific language both reinforced a sense of the Midwest as the most 'American' region and enabled her to question national attitudes towards American English, immigration, and Americanization. Finally, Chapter 3 broadens the thesis's scope of inquiry by dissecting the remarkable success of Midwestern authors in the Pulitzer Prize during the 1920s. Focusing on prize-winning novels by Margaret Wilson, Edna Ferber, and, finally, Sinclair Lewis, the thesis concludes by considering what the success of Midwestern writers says about the state of US fiction in this period.

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Courtney Becker put up with listening to Taylor Swift on repeat while we worked at the kitchen table together (one of my favorite PhD memories), and Jack Becker always came through with the perfect reading recommendations, for me and for my students. I'm so grateful to have two cheerleaders and best friends for life in you.

My dad, Kevin Becker, suggested I read *The Magnificent Ambersons* when I was in college, and that novel started me off on an academic journey neither of us could have predicted would take me all the way to 2022 in Cambridge. I'm never more excited about my work than when I'm discussing it with you.

My mom, Mary Becker, has read every single word of this dissertation and most of the words I've written over the course of my PhD (including these acknowledgements!). You gave me my love for long sentences and em dashes and you've also made sure my sentences aren't too long and my em dash use isn't too excessive. Thank you for being there for me every step of the way.

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Introduction

In 1921, Carl Van Doren's essay 'Revolt from the Village' substantially reframed the way small-town writing was critically received in the United States; in 1930, Sinclair Lewis became the first American author to win the Nobel Prize in Literature. What both of these events have in common is their 'Middlewestishness,' a term coined by Ford Madox Ford during his time as editor of *The Transatlantic Review*.[1] Although Ford was using the term to describe what he saw as the globalization of the Midwestern outlook—roughly half of the contributors he chose for his magazine were from the Midwest or the West—by this point in the mid-1920s, Midwestern literature was already falling out of critical favor.[2] Jon K. Lauck, for example, takes 1920 as the starting point for his study of the decline of Midwestern literary and historical importance, attributing waning interest in the region to the decade that followed, when he argues that literary criticism had moved past its interest in Midwestern rural writing and that the region went from the nation's 'warm center' to its 'ragged edge' in American minds.[3] Lauck suggests, as I will,

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[1] Ronald Weber, *The Midwestern Ascendancy in American Writing* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992), pp. 196-197. *The Transatlantic Review* published only twelve issues, one in each month of 1924, but was highly influential. See Bernard J. Poli, *Ford Madox Ford and the Transatlantic Review* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1967).

[2] 'We are all now Middle Westerners,' Weber quotes Ford as saying, because we are now aware of an 'enormous disillusionment.' Samuel Putnam recalls that it was 'American hard-boiledness of the Hemingway variety' that attracted Ford, and 'this he found in the Midwest rather than in the East,' making it unsurprising that the *Transatlantic Review* 'had a decided mid-American tinge.' Weber, *The Midwestern Ascendancy in American Writing,* p. 197; Samuel Putnam, *Paris Was Our Mistress: Memoirs of a Lost & Found Generation* (New York: The Viking Press, 1947), pp. 118-119.

[3] Jon Lauck, *From Warm Center to Ragged Edge: The Erosion of Midwestern Literary and Historical Regionalism, 1920-1965* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2017), p. 11.

that Van Doren's 'revolt' framework is a partial and misleading one, but in using it as the organizing structure of his study, he reinforces its importance in understanding Midwestern literary production during the 1920s. In doing so, he agrees with Ronald Weber, who gives even more credence to the 'revolt' movement and identifies 1920 as the 'high-water mark' for Midwestern literary production, and with James. R. Shortridge, who argues that 'the initiation of a change from ebullient self-assurance to doubt and defensiveness can be dated rather precisely at 1920,' which he marks as the 'clear apogee' of the region.[4]

The critical shift away from the Midwest taking place in the 1920s was something Midwestern authors could not help but recognize. 'The world broke in two in 1922 or thereabouts,' Willa Cather prefaces her 1936 collection of essays, *Not Under Forty*.[5] Cather had won the Pulitzer Prize for her novel *One of Ours* (1922), but over a decade later she picked the year of her winning novel's publication as the one that marked her as one of 'the backward' who had 'slid back into yesterday's seven thousand years.'[6] In focusing on 1922 as the moment of literary change, Cather was thinking specifically of the publication of James Joyce's *Ulysses* and T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* in February and October of that year, both of which signaled a significant shift in literary style and taste and which would have a lasting effect on the critical

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[4] Weber, *The Midwestern Ascendancy in American Writing*, p. 81; James R. Shortridge, *The Middle West: Its Meaning in American Culture* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1989), pp. 38, 39.

[5] William Carlos Williams similarly marked the publication of *The Waste Land* as a turning point: 'There was heat in us, […] that was gathering headway upon the theme of a rediscovery of a primary impetus, the elementary principle of all art, in the local conditions. Our work staggered to a halt for a moment under the blast of Eliot's genius […]. We did not know how to answer him.' Willa Cather, 'Prefatory Note,' in *Not Under Forty* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1988), p. v (p. v); William Carlos Williams, *The Autobiography of William Carlos Williams* (New York: New Directions Books, 1967), p. 146. 1922 was also the year Cather published 'The Novel Démeublé,' an essay that is widely cited as a statement of her literary doctrine. Willa Cather, 'The Novel Démeublé,' *The New Republic,* 30 (1922), 5-6.

[6] I will take up further discussion of Cather's relationship to Midwestern literature in Chapter 2.

framework through which literature was judged and valued.[7] During the 1920s, however, there were many literary changes—in which genres of fiction were valued, in how books were published and distributed, and in which novels were deemed critically worthy of praise and recognition—that marked the decade as significant for American literature.

This dissertation focuses on predominantly rural Midwestern fiction to consider how it responded to and, in many ways, contributed to these key contemporary debates in American literature. I will focus on the thirty years between the turn of the twentieth century and Lewis's Nobel Prize win in 1930 to ask how Midwestern authors thought about and portrayed their region in their rural, small-town fiction at a time when Midwestern writing was popular nationally, but falling out of critical favor. While still acknowledging the significant impact the 'revolt' movement had on the region and on the national view of literature produced there, I will look beyond the familiar names associated with 'revolt'—Edgar Lee Masters, Sherwood Anderson, and Sinclair Lewis—to consider how once well-known and now critically neglected authors were representing the Midwest in their fiction.

In doing so, this thesis supplements the accepted history of early twentieth century American fiction. At the same time that F. Scott Fitzgerald and Ernest Hemingway were writing what could be characterized as American fiction informed by a Midwestern perspective from outside of the United States, authors such as Booth Tarkington, Zona Gale, Ruth Suckow, Margaret Wilson, and Edna Ferber addressed the region directly, often from within the Midwest itself. In including these authors, whose work was nationally popular with middle class readers,

[7] Bill Goldstein took this quote as the title of his book *The World Broke in Two* (London: Bloomsbury, 2017), which focuses on the literary history of 1922 and its importance to the modernist movement; Michael North also takes 1922 as his focus for his study of early modernism and the world it emerged into in *Reading 1922: A Return to the Scene of the Modern* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999).

this dissertation also makes the case for paying attention to what has come to be known as the middlebrow when mapping out US literary history. Gordon Hutner did this generally in *What America Read*, an overview of popular novels from the middle decades of the twentieth century. Hutner argues that middle-class realistic novels 'occupied the very center of the literary landscape' during the early twentieth century and so are important both as 'social objects' that explain how middle-class Americans were thinking about their society and also as the novels which served as the standard against which critics and 'tastemakers' distinguished the best fiction.[8] But while Hutner looks at these books as a collection and chooses not to distinguish them by factors such as region, I single out a few key Midwestern novels for analysis, doing the historicized close reading that Hutner's study does not in order to argue for a more sophisticated understanding of these works.

Alongside this close reading, I will draw on newspaper reviews, letters to the editor, and fan letters sent to the authors in order to get a sense of how these novels were being read and understood in the Midwest itself, by Margaret Widdemer's 'majority reader' and Janice Radway's 'general reader.'[9] Criticism of regional writing, as June Howard argues, often takes the view that 'regionalism simply *is* literary tourism, an elegy, a commodified outsider account.'[10] Howard is thinking of Amy Kaplan's contention in her famous essay 'Nation, Region, Empire' that regionalism 'performs a kind of literary tourism'; indeed, she compares regionalist writers

[8] Gordon Hutner, *What America Read: Taste, Class, and the Novel 1920-1960* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2009), pp. 1, 4.
[9] Margaret Widdemer, 'Message and Middlebrow,' *The Saturday Review of Literature*, 9 (1933), 433-444 (p. 434); Janice A. Radway, *A Feeling for Books: The Book-of-the-Month Club, Literary Taste, and Middle Class Desire* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1997), p. 10.
[10] June Howard, *The Center of the World: Regional Writing and the Puzzles of Place-Time* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), p. 21.

and readers to 'tourists and anthropologists' who all share 'the perspective of the modern urban outsider who projects onto the native a pristine authentic space immune to the historical changes shaping their own lives.'[11] Richard Brodhead takes the idea of literary tourism a step further when he argues that 'nineteenth-century American regional writing' in particular 'was *not* produced for the cultures it was written about,' something Kaplan echoes when she notes that regionalist novels were often 'published by a highly centralized industry located in Boston and New York that appealed to an urban middle-class readership' who used the rural communities depicted in the novels 'as both a nostalgic point of origin and a measure of cosmopolitan development.'[12] Kaplan and Brodhead are both writing primarily about the nineteenth century, but this characterization of regionalist writing as 'literary tourism' persisted into the early twentieth century, when regionalist fiction was still often written from the perspective of an outsider to the region. Willa Cather's *My Ántonia* (1918), for example, is framed through the perspective of Jim Burden, who writes about Antonia after returning to Nebraska following years away in the city; Theodore Dreiser's *A Hoosier Holiday* (1916) combines the ideas of the returning native and the urban tourist with a regionalist view of his home state of Indiana.[13]

More recent critics have argued against the reduction of regionalist writing to literary tourism written for a non-native audience. June Howard, in her 2018 book *The Center of the*

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[11] Amy Kaplan, 'Region, Nation, Empire,' in *The Columbia History of the American Novel,* ed. by Emory Elliott (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), pp. 240-266 (p. 252).
[12] Richard Brodhead, *Cultures of Letters: Scenes of Reading and Writing in Nineteenth-Century America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), p. 122; Kaplan, 'Region, Nation, Empire,' p. 251.
[13] Cather allegedly rewrote the novel from Burden's point of view on the advice of Viola Roseboro', an editor at *McClure's Magazine*, where Cather worked from 1906 until 1912. Stephanie Gorton, 'The Strange, Forgotten Life of Viola Roseboro',' *The Paris Review* (2020) https://www.theparisreview.org/blog/2020/02/24/the-strange-forgotten-life-of-viola-roseboro/ [accessed 3 September 2021].

World, demonstrates that regionalist writing was published in many different types of publications and read around the country by multiple audiences, arguing that regionalist writing likely was read by its subjects.[14] Judith Fetterley and Marjorie Pryse take a slightly different approach by creating a distinction between local color writing and regionalist writing (terms which Howard, for example, uses largely interchangeably) to distinguish writing that 'looks "at"' the region from writing that 'looks "with"' the region—in other words, local color is written from the perspective of an outsider, while regionalist writing is a product of the region and its inhabitants.[15] Tom Lutz argues that the presence of the 'alternating cultural visions' of both the local and the outsider is what defines 'all the great regionalist writing' and produces 'a complex symphony of cultural voices and positions.'[16] By drawing extensively on reviews in local newspapers as well as letters to the editors of those newspapers, I will consider what the subjects of regional fiction thought about their own depiction.

THE MIDWEST AS REGION

On the surface, 'region' is a term every American understands. As David Marion Holman argues, all Americans hold a common perception of region and regional identities that influences the way they view national history and mythology.[17] This sense of region translates to literature as well: June Howard notes that region 'is not only a vague and powerful word in everyday

[14] Howard, *The Center of the World*, p. 29.
[15] Judith Fetterley and Marjorie Pryse, *Writing Out of Place: Regionalism, Women, and American Literary Culture* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2003), p. 36.
[16] Tom Lutz, *Cosmopolitan Vistas: American Regionalism and Literary Value* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2004), p. 31.
[17] David Marion Holman, *A Certain Slant of Light: Regionalism and the Form of Southern and Midwestern Fiction* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1995), p. 9.

speech, but also a technical term in an astonishing variety of disciplines.' But as a term that is so reliant on 'everyday understandings,' she argues that it 'is not a very precise tool' and 'requires further thought.'[18] In trying to find a more precise meaning, Howard acknowledges two elements of regional definitions: a 'substantive' aspect, which encompasses the specific cities and states present in a region, and a 'relational' element, in which 'every region is defined by its location in a larger system.'[19] Ronald Weber explains why this second element complicates matters when he says that the 'Midwest—every region—turns fuzzy on its borders, merging along with its writers into the claims of other regions, other traditions.'[20]

But although Howard and Weber make it clear that this regional 'fuzziness' is not unique to any one region, the Midwest has proven itself a particularly difficult region to define. If, as linguist Beth Simon argues, the 'sense' that the United States has 'an identifiable sociocultural and linguistic *middle* region' has been a 'formative and continuously influential aspect of the American popular imagination,' where precisely the linguistic and geographic borders of this middle region lie, and if it is even a distinct region at all, has been a contested point throughout the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries.[21] 'With the admission to statehood of California in 1850, there was at last a West beyond the west, though not yet a Midwest,' writes James M. Cox in a description of regional changes that took place in the United States during the nineteenth century. The Midwest 'as we know it today, came after the Civil War' when the establishment of Far Western states created a Midwest 'that seemed more Eastern than it ever had before,' he

[18] Howard, *The Center of the World*, pp. 2, 1.
[19] Ibid., p. 2.
[20] Weber, *The Midwestern Ascendancy in American Writing*, p. 5.
[21] Beth Simon, 'Introducing the Midland: What is it, where is it, how do we know?' in *Language Variation and Change in the American Midland: A New Look at 'Heartland' English,* ed. by Thomas Edward Murray and Beth Lee Simon (Amsterdam: John Benjamins Publishing Company, 2006), pp. ix-xii (p. ix).

argues in a summation of the region's emergence that emphasizes its dependence on other regions—the West and the East—for definition.[22] The most famous statement on this is historian Frederick Jackson Turner's announcement of the Midwest's change in status from the frontier to a settled region in his 1901 essay 'The Middle West,' where he wrote, 'American sectional nomenclature is still confused. Once "the West" described the whole region beyond the Alleghenies; but the term has hopelessly lost its definiteness. The rapidity of the spread of settlement has broken down old usage, and as yet no substitute has been generally accepted.'[23]

Today, the United States Census Bureau, which breaks the country into four sections—the Northeast, the South, the West, and the Midwest—identifies Illinois, Indiana, Michigan, Ohio, Wisconsin, Iowa, Kansas, Minnesota, Missouri, Nebraska, North Dakota, and South Dakota as Midwestern, with a subdivision falling along the Western borders of Wisconsin and Illinois.[24] When the average American is asked to identify the Midwest, however, the exact borders are rarely consistent.[25] This 'fuzziness' is translated from the popular to the academic realm—much like Howard's definition of 'region'—when it is noted that in comparison to many of the other regions of the United States, the Midwest is relatively understudied. *All Over the*

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[22] James M. Cox, 'Regionalism: A Diminished Thing,' in *The Columbia Literary History of the United States,* ed. by Emory Elliott (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), pp. 761-784 (p. 762).

[23] Frederick Jackson Turner, 'The Middle West,' in *The Frontier in American History* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1920), pp. 126-156 (p. 126).

[24] While the Northeast, the South, and the West have all remained consistent as the official names of those regions, the Midwest Region was designated as the North Central Region until 1984. '2010 Census Regions and Divisions of the United States,' U. S. Census Bureau (2021) <https://www.census.gov/geographies/reference-maps/2010/geo/2010-census-regions-and-divisions-of-the-united-states.html> [accessed 14 January 2022].

[25] The states officially recognized as part of the Midwest are often also subcategorized into the Midwest and the Great Plains, separated roughly along the 100th meridian. That border is debated as well. See, for example, *The Interior Borderlands: Regional Identity in the Midwest and Great Plains,* ed. by Jon K. Lauck (Sioux Falls, SD: Center for Western Studies, 2019).

Map: Rethinking American Regions (1996), a book which aims to understand how Americans think about regional culture and identity, recognizes only three regions, the South, the East, and the West, denying the Midwest the regional label altogether. Carl Ubbelohde's 1994 review of nineteenth-century studies of the Midwest points out some important texts, such as James Shortridge's *The Middle West: Its Meaning in American Culture* (1989) and Andrew R. L. Clayton and Peter S. Onuf's *The Midwest and the Nation: Rethinking the History of An American Region* (1990), but in general, he identifies 'a near dearth of Midwest historical studies.'[26] Ubbelohde focuses on studies of Midwestern history, so his account excludes the strides that had already been made to formalize and promote the study of Midwestern literature, including the founding of the Society for the Study of Midwestern Literature and the incorporation of the Midwest Modern Language Association, both in 1971.[27] Ubbelohde also misses Weber's 1992 book, which considered the Midwest from a literary perspective and was a milestone text in Midwestern regional studies. But even Weber's own tone in the introduction of his book seems unconvinced by the equal importance of his topic in comparison to the study of other regions' literary output. 'As a regional movement it seems to exist [...] in a middle range between the lofty peaks of New England and Southern literary achievement,' he writes of Midwestern regional literature, noting its usual relegation to a literary 'flyover country.'[28]

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[26] Carl Ubbelohde, 'History and the Midwest as a Region,' *The Wisconsin Magazine of History*, 78.1 (1994), 35-47 (p. 44). There has been a resurgence in the attention given to the Midwest by historians, but it is recent: the Midwest History Association, for example, was formally established fewer than ten years ago, in 2014.

[27] The Midwest Modern Language Association was founded in 1959.

[28] Weber, *The Midwestern Ascendancy in American Writing*, p. 4. See also: Cary W. de Wit, 'Flyover Country,' in *The American Midwest: An Interpretive Encyclopedia*, ed. by Andrew Cayton, Richard Sisson, and Christian Zacher (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2007), pp. 66-68; and Thomas Fox Averill, 'Flyover Country: An Introduction,' *The North American Review*, 284.1 (1999), 4-9.

MIDWESTERN REGIONALISM

Midwestern regional fiction had begun to gain a prominent place in American literature as the nation's literary tastes were changing alongside its regional makeup. Fiction that depicted local communities had existed before the Civil War, but took on new life in the decades after, when, as Stephanie Foote notes, 'Regional fiction had a privileged position in monthly magazines from about 1870-1900.'[29] As Eric Sundquist explains, the completion of the transcontinental railway and the increasing ease of travel and communication between different regions of the country made Americans 'newly aware of differences in speech and customs.'[30] Regional fiction provided a forum in which to explore those regional differences as well as to navigate the relationship between region and nation. 'The history of American regional identities cannot be extricated from the development of American nationalism,' argue Edward L. Ayers and Peter S. Onuf, contending that the 'common context' of national identity is necessary for the development of regional identities distinct from one another.[31] 'Because it is a form that works to preserve local customs, local accents, and local communities, regional writing is a form *about* the representation of difference,' argues Foote. 'As such, it offers critics a way to analyze one of the nineteenth century's most effective literary strategies for managing the conflict between local and national identities.'[32]

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[29] Stephanie Foote, *Regional Fictions: Culture and Identity in Nineteenth-Century American Literature* (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 2001), p. 4.
[30] Eric J. Sundquist, 'Realism and Regionalism,' in *The Columbia Literary History of the United States,* ed. by Emory Elliott (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), pp. 501-524 (p. 502).
[31] Edward L. Ayers and Peter S. Onuf, 'Introduction,' in *All Over the Map: Rethinking American Regions,* ed. by Edward L. Ayers, Patricia Nelson Limerick, Stephen Nissenbaum, and Peter S. Onuf (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996), pp. 1-12 (p. 10).
[32] Foote, *Regional Fictions,* p. 4. Emphasis her own.

Much of this new development took place in the Midwest. The rise of regionalist writing provided an opportunity for local authors to depict their developing region in any fashion they chose, and to represent it to readers around the United States. Edward Eggleston's 1871 novel *The Hoosier School-Master*, set in his home state of Indiana, was, as Anthony Channell Hilfer argues, one of the first realist novels set in the Midwest, making it the starting point of many histories of Midwestern fiction.[33] Eggleston began writing *The Hoosier School-Master,* his first novel, in an attempt to revitalize *Hearth and Home* magazine, a struggling weekly publication he had recently taken over as editor.[34] The serial was an unexpected success, and upon its subsequent publication in book form, Eggleston inserted a preface attributing grander regional motivations to his novel than it seems he might have originally intended.[35] He declared that his novel was born of a desire to 'do something towards describing life in the back-country districts of the Western States,' which seemed to have 'no place in literature,' despite being 'not less interesting, not less romantic, and certainly not less filled with humorous and grotesque material' than life in New England.[36] Whether or not regional representation was his initial intention, Eggleston's own claim that he had written the novel primarily out of a desire to demonstrate the Midwest's suitability as a background for fiction reflects the burden of representation that many Midwestern writers felt as early as the 1870s, when the region was still seen as less culturally

[33] Anthony Channell Hilfer, *The Revolt from the Village: 1915-1930* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1969), p. 35.
[34] Weber, *The Midwestern Ascendancy in American Writing*, p. 28.
[35] '"It was written to fill space in the magazine,"' Hamlin Garland recalls Eggleston having told him. '"I had no idea of its appeal to my readers."' Hamlin Garland, *Roadside Meetings* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1930), p. 360.
[36] Edward Eggleston, *The Hoosier School-Master* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1883), p. 5.

developed than the East.[37] Regional writing, with its early emphasis on realism and local color, gave writers the opportunity to go beyond the commonly accepted stereotypes of the region.

Alongside this project, Eggleston's novel also demonstrates the way regional novels could be used to convey the sense of a unified American identity. One aspect of Eggleston's novel that marks it as an early example of Midwestern realism is representation of local dialect. Eggleston was keenly interested in the language of his home state. He kept lists of local Indiana phrases that he heard in his day-to-day life and deployed them freely in his novel. Implying that his representation of the Indiana dialect is accurate enough to form the basis of a linguistic study, Eggleston explained in the original 1871 preface to the novel that he had been 'careful to preserve the true *usus loquendi* of each locution' and that he trusted his 'little story may afford material for some one better qualified than I to criticise the dialect.'[38]

Although Hilfer argues that 'Eggleston's interest in Hoosier dialect and manners is little more than mere antiquarianism,' the fact that local language could be used to linguistically and culturally represent the nation as a whole is something Eggleston seems to have begun to recognize as early as 1892, when he attached a new Preface to *The Hoosier School-Master*.[39] Once again seeing an opportunity to attach even greater significance to his novel, Eggleston used the new preface to draw special attention to the many international translations of the book, emphasizing the difficulty he imagines translators would have had in coming up with foreign

[37] Garland recalled the novel's effect on his own ideas of literary material as a young boy growing up in the Midwest. 'Up to this time, I had believed that literature was concerned with something afar off, and romantic. […] "The Hoosier Schoolmaster" was my first realization that stories could be written of people very like my father's friends and neighbors.' Garland, *Roadside Meetings,* p. 358.
[38] Weber, *The Midwestern Ascendancy in American Writing,* p. 29; Eggleston, *The Hoosier School-Master* (1883), p. 6.
[39] Hilfer, *The Revolt from the Village,* p. 36.

equivalents of the novel's regional speech. 'It may be imagined that the translator found it no easy task to get equivalents in French for expressions in a dialect new and strange,' he says of one translation, adding later, 'What are the equivalents in High German for "right smart" and "dog-on" I cannot imagine.'[40] In the novel, unfamiliarity with phrases such as these are what one Indiana woman uses to demonstrate another character's outsider status. Using an example of the Hoosier dialect that Eggleston also drew attention to in his preface, the woman says, 'Twenty year ago, when he come to these 'ere diggings, that air Squire Hawkins was a poar Yankee school-master, that said 'pail' instead of bucket […] and that couldn't tell to save his gizzard what we meant by *'low* and by *right smart.*'[41] In this context, failing to understand the meaning of 'right smart' serves to set the Eastern transplant apart from the native Hoosiers; in including 'right smart' in his discussion of the international translations of the text, Eggleston repositions the dichotomy between native and outsider from Indianan versus Easterner to American versus non-English-speaker.

By making this comparison and contrasting the novel's dialect with other languages besides English, Eggleston makes the form of English found in his novel seem representatively American rather than specifically Indianan.[42] In one of the early footnotes added for this revised edition, he makes this point explicitly, telling his readers, '"Nough said" is more than enough said for the French translator, who takes it apparently for a sort of barbarous negative and

[40] Edward Eggleston, *The Hoosier School-Master* (New York: Grosset & Dunlap, 1892), pp. 15, 16.
[41] Eggleston, *The Hoosier School-Master* (1892), pp. 70-71. The italics are the author's.
[42] In 1903, Mark Twain made a similar, though humorous, assertion about the challenges facing translators when he claimed that the French translation of his story 'is no more like the Jumping Frog when [the translator] gets through with it than I am like a meridian of longitude.' Mark Twain, *The Jumping Frog: In English, Then in French, Then Clawed Back Into a Civilized Language Once More by Patient, Unremunerated Toil* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1903), p. 3.

renders it, "I don't like to speak to him." I need hardly explain to any American reader that *enough said* implies the ending of all discussion by the acceptance of the proposition or challenge.'[43] By 1892, instead of highlighting the regional aspect of his language, as he had twenty years earlier, Eggleston was emphasizing the fact that *all* Americans can understand the nuances of the novel's dialect, especially in comparison to non-native readers.

Questions of insider versus outsider, which Eggleston taps into with his novel and its updated preface, as well as questions of authenticity and belonging are built into the genre of regionalism itself. On the one hand, regional realism opened up the possibility of writing fiction to authors from many different types of backgrounds. As Amy Kaplan argues, realism extended 'literary representation to ordinary people whom artists have either neglected or idealized,' allowing fiction 'to represent contemporary life' and expand 'the range of culture beyond the traditionally "cultured classes."'[44] With this expansion of the types of people who were appearing in fictions also came an expansion of the types of authors who were able to write it. Books which claimed to record rural Midwestern life as it was, journalistically and without embellishment, opened up avenues to authorship to writers who did not come from highly educated or literary backgrounds. As Richard Brodhead explains, the 'entry requirement' for producing regional fiction was set 'unusually low' since the form was 'heavily conventionalized,' meaning it 'did not require the more highly elaborated writerly skills that other forms asked for their successful performance.'[45] Hamlin Garland was one such author who benefited from this type of literary inclusivity. Having been largely self-educated while growing

[43] Eggleston, *The Hoosier School-Master* (1892), p. 41.
[44] Amy Kaplan, *The Social Construction of American Realism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), p. 16.
[45] Brodhead, *Cultures of Letters*, p. 116.

up on farms in Wisconsin, Iowa, and South Dakota, Garland carved a place for himself in the literary world by writing intensely and compellingly about the challenges of Midwestern rural life in *Main-Travelled Roads,* a collection of short stories published in 1891.[46] Garland wrote frequently about his evolution from farm boy to published author, including in his 1917 memoir *A Son of the Middle Border.* Recounting the many rejections he received as he tried to get his stories of Midwestern farm life published, Garland emphasizes his own experience as 'a working farmer' as what lends his stories their urgency and value. 'For me,' Garland wrote, 'the grime and the mud and the sweat and the dust […] still form a large part of life on the farm, and I intend that they shall go into my stories in their proper proportions.'[47]

But regionalist writing—much of which Thomas P. Riggio describes as 'self-consciously and militantly nativist'—also had the capacity to encourage the exclusionary instincts developing in American culture during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, as increasing numbers of immigrants, especially non-English-speaking immigrants, began to make their way to American shores.[48] As Brodhead notes, 'American literary writing in all its branches was a monopoly of the native-born throughout the nineteenth century.'[49] Although this would begin to change in the twentieth century—Brodhead mentions Abraham Cahan, who published his first novel, *Yekl: A Tale of the New York Ghetto,* in 1901, as an author who used regionalism as a way to write outside his ethnic group—commenting on the 'native' status of regional writers was

[46] For more on Garland's relationship to the Midwest and its impact on *Main-Travelled Roads,* see Weber, *The Midwestern Ascendancy in American Literature,* especially pp. 37-48. I will discuss *Main-Travelled Roads* further in Chapter 1.
[47] Hamlin Garland, *A Son of the Middle Border,* ed. by E. H. Kemper McComb (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1917), p. 377.
[48] Thomas P. Riggio, 'Theodore Dreiser: Hidden Ethnic,' *MELUS,* 11.1 (1984), 53-56 (p. 54).
[49] Brodhead, *Cultures of Letters,* p. 117.

common in criticism of regional fiction into the twentieth century.[50] Brander Matthews, for example, reflecting on the particular difficulty that faces those who try to represent the United States in writing, wrote in his review of Midwestern writer Meredith Nicholson's *The Valley of Democracy* (1918) that the 'novel and the short story are valuable only when written by a native, unconsciously intimate with the characters he is creating and with the social atmosphere he is invoking.'[51] Garland himself places great emphasis on the value of native local color in fiction in his collection of critical essays, *Crumbling Idols* (1894). Calling it 'demonstrably the life of fiction,' he credits local color with representing distinct national character, claiming that 'American critics can depend upon a characteristic American literature of fiction and the drama' from authors who incorporate local geography, speech, and customs into their writing.[52]

By highlighting the importance of an author's own experience of living in a place, Garland was anticipating the turmoil around Americanness and belonging that would become particularly heated as immigration increased during the early twentieth century. Garland was writing the essays later collected in *Crumbling Idols* in the late 1880s and early 1890s, when the American fear of immigration was in its early phases, but throughout his discussion of local color and its merits, Garland repeatedly emphasizes 'the native element' of local color fiction, which he equates to 'the free flowering of native plants.'[53] Garland takes this identification a step further by claiming that this type of writing must come from a native of the region. *'Local color in a novel means that it has such quality of texture and back-ground that it could not have been*

[50] Brodhead, *Cultures of Letters*, p. 117.
[51] Brander Matthews, 'Picturing the "Valley of Democracy,"' *The New York Times,* 15 September 1918, p. 385.
[52] Hamlin Garland, *Crumbling Idols: Twelve Essays on Art Dealing Chiefly With Literature Painting and the Drama*, ed. by Jane Johnson (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1960), p. 52.
[53] Ibid.

written in any other place or by any one else than a native,' Garland writes, reiterating in the next sentence that the local color is 'as indigenous as the plant-growth.'[54] As Wendy Katz and Timothy R. Mahoney argue, 'discussions of region are almost always implicitly also discussions of ethnicity, race, and the possibility of pluralism,' and Garland's attitude towards local color fiction in his essays demonstrates the manner in which regional fiction could be a force to determine who does or does not 'naturally' belong.[55]

'COMMON DENOMINATOR OF AMERICA': THE REPRESENTATIVE MIDWEST

As a region that was increasingly becoming associated with quintessential 'Americanness' during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the Midwest was central to these debates about belonging and the American identity. The Midwestern small town had begun to take on new resonance during the mid-nineteenth century as cities, particularly on the East Coast, began to grow.[56] If large, industrialized cities were becoming the defining reality of life for many Americans, small towns, according to Hilfer, 'represented what Americans thought they were, what they sometimes pretended (to themselves as well as others) they wanted to be.'[57] As a result, many authors mythologized rural villages and small towns as antidotes to large and growing cities. Sarah Orne Jewett's *The Country of the Pointed Firs* (1896), for example,

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[54] Garland, *Crumbling Idols*, pp. 53-54. His emphasis.
[55] Wendy Katz and Timothy R. Mahoney, 'Introduction,' in *Regionalism and the Humanities*, ed. by Timothy R. Mahoney and Wendy J. Katz (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2008), pp. x-xxix (p. xvii).
[56] In 1772, for example, Philip Freneau published 'The American Village,' a poem that reinforced distinctions between the city and the countryside inherited from British authors such as Oliver Goldsmith, whose *The Deserted Village* (1770) celebrated English village life. Ima Honaker Herron's *The Small Town in American Literature* (New York: Haskell House, 1971) gives a comprehensive summary of small-town writing in the United States.
[57] Hilfer, *The Revolt from the Village*, p. 4.

perhaps one of the best-known examples of Eastern small-town regionalism, takes place in Dunnet Landing, Maine, a small coastal town to which the narrator retreats over the summer while writing a book. Explaining the appeal of Dunnet Landing upon her arrival, the narrator says that she found in the town 'the same quaintness of the village with its elaborate conventionalities; all that mixture of remoteness, and childish certainty of being the centre of civilization which her affectionate dreams had told,' positioning Dunnet Landing as charming, conventional, and unchanging.[58] It is a place where the narrator can go to escape the 'hurry of life in a large town' and the 'constant putting aside of preference to yield to a most unsatisfactory activity,' and her arrival back in the town after a winter in the city makes her feel 'solid and definite again, instead of a poor incoherent being.'[59]

By the early twentieth century, many Americans were looking to the Midwest as the region most representative of a homogenous, unchanged small-town America that could provide an escape from new urban developments; as Hilfer declares, 'if the small town was typically American, the Midwestern small town was doubly typical.'[60] Midwestern writers, producing short stories and novels that valorized towns that were hardworking, honest, and havens from social unrest or unhappy endings, created their own version of mythologized small town culture that gained a prominent place in the American mind and on American bestseller lists in the early twentieth century. Sinclair Lewis would describe the 'two traditions of the American small town' found in popular books and plays in *Main Street* (1920), which he hoped to distinguish from both traditions. The first type of small-town story, 'repeated in scores of magazines every month, is

[58] Sarah Orne Jewett, 'The Return,' in *The Country of the Pointed Firs* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1910), pp. 1-2 (p. 2).
[59] Sarah Orne Jewett, 'William's Wedding,' in *The Country of the Pointed Firs* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1910), pp. 249-269 (p. 249).
[60] Hilfer, *The Revolt from the Village*, p. 4.

that the American village remains the one sure abode of friendship, honesty, and clean sweet marriageable girls,' Lewis wrote, perhaps making a reference to Zona Gale's *Friendship Village* stories, which were nationally popular in the 1900s and 1910s and represented an idyllic version of Midwestern small-town life.[61] 'The other tradition,' Lewis concludes, is the stereotypical view of the small town as the home of country hayseeds, where 'the significant feature of all villages are whiskers, iron dogs upon lawns, gold bricks, checkers, jars of gilded cat-tails, and shrewd old men who are known as "hicks" and who ejaculate "Waal I swan."'[62]

One author popularizing the first mode of Midwestern fiction was Meredith Nicholson, an Indiana native and an enthusiastic proponent of small-town life. Nicholson was the author of a number of bestselling novels during the 1900s and 1910s, but in his own view, his best works were the ones most squarely focused on his home state: *The Hoosiers* (1900), a collection of essays about Indiana's people and politics, and *A Hoosier Chronicle* (1912), a fictional treatment of the same themes that was fifth on the year's bestseller list. This love of his native region—which he himself labels his 'provincialism'—was on full display once again when he published *The Valley of Democracy* in 1918.[63] He opens the book by recounting a meeting he and a friend had with an Eastern banker who, Nicholson's friend says, 'asked in his large, patronizing way how things are going out West and he didn't wait for us to answer.'[64] Nicholson's book is an attempt to answer the banker's question, as well as a loving portrait of a region that saw itself, jokingly or not, as the center of American life in the early twentieth century. 'To a gentleman in

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[61] I will consider Gale's *Friendship Village* stories further in Chapter 2.
[62] Sinclair Lewis, *Main Street* (New York: Penguin, 1995), p. 239.
[63] Among Nicholson's bestsellers is *The House of a Thousand Candles* (1905), which I will discuss further in Chapter 1.
[64] Meredith Nicholson, *The Valley of Democracy* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1918), p. 1.

Colorado who insists that my definition and use of Folks and "folksiness" leave him in the dark as to my meaning, I can only suggest that a visit to certain communities which I shall be glad to choose for him, in the States of our central basin, will do much for his illumination,' Nicholson declares, situating the Midwest as the seat of the 'folksiness' that he argues underpins American culture and democracy.[65]

REVOLT FROM THE VILLAGE

But at the same time that Nicholson's view of the Midwest as the seat of 'folksy' Americanness was nationally popular, some were beginning to look to the Midwest for a more critical view of the small town. While fifty percent of Americans lived in rural areas in 1914—a statistic that already represented a decline in rural populations—1920 was the first year that the census recorded more Americans living in urban areas than rural ones. As Mark Whalen notes, this widespread migration from the country to the city led to an 'increasing tendency to view rural areas as sites of stagnation and backwardness' as writers reflected on the places they had left behind; it also generated many novels that looked back on the Midwest's more rural era fondly and nostalgically.[66]

The second view was popular with middlebrow readers, as I will discuss in Chapter 3, but it was the first view that gained particular prominence in cultural magazines like *The Nation*, where, in 1921, Carl Van Doren published an article in which he linked regional writers who seemed to be participating in a 'revolt from the village' by writing critically and derogatorily

[65] Nicholson, *The Valley of Democracy*, pp. 263-264.
[66] Mark Whalen, *American Culture in the 1910s* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2010), pp. 5, 96.

about small-town life.[67] The article, 'The Revolt from the Village: 1920,' cited a number of novels published that year, in order to demonstrate what Van Doren saw as the positive 'progress' being made in American literature. 'For nearly half a century native literature had been faithful to the cult of the village, celebrating its delicate merits with sentimental affection and with unwearied interest digging into odd corners of the country for persons and incidents illustrative of the essential goodness and heroism which, so the doctrine ran, lie beneath unexciting surfaces,' Van Doren began, establishing a view of the type of literature—celebratory, sentimental, and thematically repetitive—that was accepted in the United States in the decades prior to 1920.[68] His focus is fiction, but Van Doren's definition of American literature is also one of American culture in general, which valorized small towns and the 'heroism' of the unpretentious, 'natural' people who lived in them.

Van Doren's essay makes it clear not only that he is welcoming what he saw as the shift away from the 'cult of the village,' but also that the Midwest had been the fulcrum point of this change in literature and in culture. If the original village tales are often Midwestern, the authors Van Doren focuses on in his article as having written novels that push back against this depiction of small town life are also almost all Midwestern. Taking Edgar Lee Masters's *Spoon River Anthology* (1915), set in a fictionalized version of Masters's Illinois hometown, as the starting point, he goes on to list Sherwood Anderson's *Winesburg, Ohio* (1919), Sinclair Lewis's Minnesota-set *Main Street* (1920), Wisconsin native Zona Gale's novel *Miss Lulu Bett* (1920), Mary Borden's Chicago-influenced *The Romantic Woman* (1920), and Floyd Dell's semi-

[67] Carl Van Doren, 'Contemporary American Novelists: The Revolt from the Village: 1920,' *The Nation,* 113.2936 (1921), 407-412.
[68] Ibid., p. 407. Van Doren expanded on his article in *Contemporary American Novelists 1900-1920* (New York: Macmillan, 1922).

autobiographical story of a Midwesterner's coming-of-age, *Moon-Calf* (1920), as prime examples of novels written by authors who, as he says of Borden, have 'the hard outward manner of the worldling who has passed beyond village bounds.'[69] This description positions Borden and the rest of the 'revolt' authors as part of the new literary tradition he is describing, but it also acknowledges the 'village bounds' that encapsulated much of Midwestern writing for the previous decades.

Today, many critics disagree with the stark distinctions that the 'revolt' article established in literary history. Jon K. Lauck, for example, criticizes Van Doren's thesis as failing to recognize the multidimensional representations of Midwestern small towns that authors such as Masters, Fitzgerald, and Anderson were trying to create.[70] Even some of these 'revolt' authors themselves criticized Van Doren's reading of their work. Edgar Lee Masters, for example, pushed back against his characterization as part of the movement. Although in a 1939 interview he agreed that his book rejected the 'sentimentality and unreality' which he believed American readers were ready to discard by the time *Spoon River Anthology* was published, he firmly declared, 'I didn't revolt from my village. The best years of my life were spent back there in Illinois.'[71]

But despite the fact that many authors had more ambivalent feelings about their region and its small towns than Van Doren's essay acknowledges, the 'revolt from the village' quickly

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[69] Van Doren, 'The Revolt from the Village: 1920,' p. 407. Most of the authors cited in Van Doren's article are both canonical and widely-studied, but Mary Borden is an exception. However, *The Forbidden Zone* (1929), a collection of World War I sketches, has recently revived scholarly interest in her as a war writer. See: Jane Conway, *A Woman of Two Wars: The Life of Mary Borden* (London: Munday Books, 2010) and Christine Hallett, *Nurse Writers of the Great War* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2016).

[70] Lauck, *From Warm Center to Ragged Edge,* p. 9.

[71] August Derleth, *Three Literary Men: A Memoir of Sinclair Lewis, Sherwood Anderson, Edgar Lee Masters* (New York: Candlelight Press, 1963), p. 49.

become the dominant critical framework through which to evaluate Midwestern writers—becoming a premise, as Gordon Hutner describes, 'seemingly so true that it has never needed to be revisited.'[72] In line with this movement, most critics tended to praise authors they saw as exposing the stultifying, oppressive, and provincial nature of American small towns.[73] The shift in literary taste can perhaps be best seen through the critical reception of Sherwood Anderson's *Winesburg, Ohio* (1919). An Ohio native, Anderson wrote copy for advertisements in Chicago while beginning to publish short fiction in the city's literary magazines, including *The Little Review* and *Poetry*. His first two novels, *Windy McPherson's Son* (1916) and *Marching Men* (1917), were published with the support of Theodore Dreiser and Floyd Dell, two leaders in the Chicago literary scene, but both made only a minor impact critically. Anderson's breakthrough came in 1919 when he published *Winesburg, Ohio*, a series of short stories set in a small town loosely based on his own hometown of Clyde which, as Mark Whalen argues, marked a 'new direction in American prose.'[74] Indeed in 1921, a mere two years after its original publication, *Winesburg, Ohio*, which Van Doren named in his 'revolt' essay, was included as a 'classic' in the Modern Library. To justify this rapid canonization, Ernest Boyd wrote in the edition's introduction that 'Just as the growth and development of America are rapid, so literary history moves quickly in this country, and in the space of five years the writer who was an innovator, an isolated figure, is now counted as one of a school of what is called the new American fiction.'[75]

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[72] Gordon Hutner, 'The "Good Reader" and the Bourgeois Critic,' *The Kenyon Review*, 20.1 (1998), 17-32 (p. 24).
[73] Lauck, *From Warm Center to Ragged Edge*, p. 9.
[74] Whalen, *American Culture in the 1910s*, p. 106.
[75] Ernest Boyd, 'Introduction,' in Sherwood Anderson, *Winesburg, Ohio* (New York: The Modern Library, 1919), pp. ix- xv (p. x). For more on Sherwood Anderson's inclusion in the Modern Library and its impact on his career and reputation, both during his lifetime and after, see Lise Jaillant, *Modernism, Middlebrow and the Literary Canon: The Modern Library Series, 1917-1955* (London: Pickering & Chatto, 2014).

Literary taste continued to shift during the 1920s, however, moving away from even the 'new' Midwestern literature Anderson was writing. Two parodies of the type of fiction lauded by Van Doren and other literary critics appeared in New York's 'smart magazine' *Vanity Fair* in 1924 and 1929. The first, which mocked Anderson's style of 'Middle Western Novel,' demonstrated that literary opinion, which had hailed the Ohioan as one of the leading figures in American literature only a few years earlier, was already beginning to turn on the Midwestern, psychological realism that he promoted.[76] In 'Love in Lettuce, Ohio,' Aesop Leek, saddled with numerous 'complexes,' is a 'member in good standing of a now celebrated School of Fiction,' the 'realistic Middle Western story.' 'Have you noticed the familiar style yet, the nice air of realism about the whole business?' the narrator asks, after a lengthy description of Aesop 'in an attitude of despair' and surrounded by 'symbols of repression,' taking direct aim not just at Anderson, but at the style of Midwestern realism he had helped develop.[77] This satirical view of Midwestern writing was reinforced a few years later when *Vanity Fair* recognized the best 'Gloomy Mid-West Story' as the story of Minnie Timkins who, looking out across the 'dull, empty, futile prairie,' is too 'weary' to cross the room to get a revolver so instead 'broke her arm at the elbow, just to hear it snap.'[78]

These assessments of Midwestern fiction speak to the region's own rapidly changing position on the national stage during the 1920s. On the one hand, by the end of the decade, the Midwest was firmly embedded in the American consciousness as representatively American. In

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[76] See, for example, John W. Crowley, 'Introduction,' in *New Essays on Winesburg, Ohio,* ed. by John W. Crowley (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), pp. 1-26 (pp. 18-21).
[77] Samuel Hoffenstein, 'Love in Lettuce, Ohio: A Drama Recounted in the Manner of the Realistic Middle-Western Novelist,' *Vanity Fair* (1924), 52, 84 (p. 52).
[78] John Riddell, 'J. Riddell Memorial Award Short Best Stories,' *Vanity Fair* (1929), 95, 130-132 (p. 95). This also satirizes Edward J. O'Brien's *The Best American Short Stories* series by including an introduction by fictional series editor Edward J. O'Henry.

choosing a city for their study of the day-to-day life in a place 'as representative as possible of contemporary American life,' sociologists Robert and Helen Lynd decided on six desirable characteristics to look for, including a rapid rate of growth, a temperate climate, and industries using high-speed machine production.[79] They also, however, added a final qualification: that 'the city should, if possible, be in that common-denominator of America, the Middle West.'[80] The city they ultimately selected as the basis for their 1929 book *Middletown: A Study in Contemporary American Culture*—Muncie, Indiana—was actually fairly unusual demographically: it was more industrialized than most Southern cities, but it had a smaller immigrant population than most Northern cities.[81] It also had a large and swiftly growing black population, although the Lynds, believing it would be easier to study a homogenous population, represented 'Middletown' as being whiter than Muncie actually was.[82] Despite these disparities, sociologists would continue to turn to Middletown for decades as a barometer of American life, drawing a connection between Midwestern culture and American culture as a whole—as Mencken put it, Middletown was not 'typical' but 'American.'[83] Sinclair Lewis's 1930 Nobel

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[79] Robert S. Lynd and Helen Merrell Lynd, *Middletown: A Study in Contemporary American Culture* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, and Company, 1929), p. 7.
[80] Ibid., pp. 7-8.
[81] The Lynds did not confirm that Muncie was Middletown until much later and, in the meantime, many cities laid claim to being the model. For more on *Middletown*, see Sarah E. Igo, *The Averaged American: Surveys, Citizens, and the Making of a Mass Public* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007), particularly Chapter 2, 'Middletown Becomes Everytown.'
[82] James J. Connolly, 'The Legacies of *Middletown*,' *Indiana Magazine of History,* 101.3 (2005), 211-225 (p. 215).
[83] Mencken is alluding to the fact that the Lynds' Middletown had low Black and foreign populations, referencing a definition of 'American' as white and Anglo-Saxon that I will return to in Chapter 2. H. L. Mencken, 'A City in Moronia,' *The American Mercury,* 16 (1929), 379-381 (p. 379). As Sarah Igo points out, the Midwest was unusual in being able to make the 'leap from the local or specific to the national,' taking the example of John Dollard's 1937 case study of 'Southerntown' in *Caste and Class in a Southern Town,* which one reviewer called 'much less a "typical" American community than Middletown' because it was 'typical only of the average small southern town in a rural county.' Igo, *The Averaged American,* p. 84.

Prize in Literature reinforced this connection between the Midwest and the nation on an international stage and emphasized the role Midwestern fiction had played in establishing that link.[84] On the other hand, rapidly shifting critical opinion meant that Midwestern fiction, even of the type that Van Doren had elevated at the beginning of the century, was losing its appeal and its place in American literature.

This dissertation will look closely at the 1920s, and the two decades leading up to it, in order to understand how Midwestern writers in this period shaped both Midwestern identity and national identity, while adapting to the shifts taking place in popular and critical taste. Chapter 1 begins by considering the foundations of the 'revolt from the village' in a much earlier period, demonstrating how the debate of realism versus romanticism—which, in many cases, was also a debate between critically successful and popular novels—goes back to Midwestern writers such as William Dean Howells, Hamlin Garland, Theodore Dreiser, and Booth Tarkington. Looking at Indiana fiction as the site of a popular resurgence of romanticism, this first chapter will consider the Midwest's cultural development in the early twentieth century and how Indiana novels dealt with the clash between the rural Midwest and industrialization to engage with Midwestern stereotypes. To do so, I will focus primarily on Tarkington, tracing his interest in how to best represent his home state of Indiana from two of his earliest novels, *The Gentleman from Indiana* (1899) and *The Two Vanrevels* (1902) through to the first novel of his 'Growth' trilogy, *The*

[84] Lewis set most of his major novels in a fictional state, Winnemac, which he intended to be more Midwestern than any of the existing Midwestern states. To create Winnemac's capital, Zenith, Lewis visited many Midwestern cities, taking details from all. Lewis depicts the resulting city as not just representatively Midwestern, however, but representatively American: 'A stranger suddenly dropped into the business-center of Zenith could not have told whether he was in a city of Oregon or Georgia, Ohio or Maine, Oklahoma or Manitoba.' James M. Hutchisson, '"All of Us Americans at 46": The Making of Sinclair Lewis' "Babbitt,"' *Journal of Modern Literature*, 18.1 (Indiana University Press: Bloomington, 1992), 95-114 (p. 98); Sinclair Lewis, *Babbitt* (Oxford: World's Classics, 2010), p. 44.

Turmoil (1915), and his second Pulitzer Prize-winning novel, *Alice Adams* (1921). Tarkington was one of the most well-known authors of his day, combining commercial success with critical praise in ways few authors were able to do. But even though he reached the peak of his success in the late teens and early twenties, when he was awarded two Pulitzer Prizes—making him one of only four authors to have achieved this honor—critics were already beginning to lose interest in him as an author. In a 1923 article written for a series entitled 'American Authors of Today,' Percy H. Boynton warned that Tarkington's two Pulitzer Prizes were 'no proof of immortality,' as 'no judges' award can usurp the verdict of popular consent and the lapse of time,' a lukewarm evaluation of Tarkington's staying power only the year after his second win.[85]

By taking a long view of the first—and most critically and commercially successful—half of his career, I will first consider Tarkington in relation to the development of realism over the opening two decades of the twentieth century, and more specifically to the type of realism advocated by William Dean Howells, who, as Eric Sundquist notes, was 'the center and circumference of realism in America' during the first decades of the twentieth century.[86] Reading him in connection to Theodore Dreiser, another Indiana author writing during the same period, but one who took a much more diverse view of Midwestern life—and so is not often viewed as an overtly Midwestern author—I will go on to demonstrate how Tarkington's early exploration

[85] Percy H. Boynton, 'American Authors of Today: VI. Booth Tarkington,' *The English Journal*, 12.2 (1923), 117-125 (p. 118). Boynton continues by conceding that 'laurels twice offered by competent juries do at least carry with them the presumption that the recipient has in him some of the elements of excellence,' a lukewarm vote of confidence in a Pulitzer Prize that was still only a few years old and that had already become mired in conflict, something I will explore further in Chapter 3.

[86] Sundquist, 'Realism and Regionalism,' p. 503.

of style contributed to the way in which he addressed the more serious issues of industrialization and regional redefinition at the heart of his most critically-recognized novels.[87]

My second chapter considers how a turn towards the 'universal' in Midwestern fiction allowed for fullness of representation, which contributed to a redefinition of what 'Americanness' meant during the 1920s. This chapter begins by considering Zona Gale's stylistic shift from her sentimental *Friendship Village* stories towards the more realist *Miss Lulu Bett* not in terms of the 'revolt from the village,' but as a shift from regional particularity to a more national appeal. By tracing Gale's abandonment of regional dialect, I will demonstrate how Midwestern speech was becoming associated with the 'American language' in general, which was taking on new significance in this period. Drawing on H. L. Mencken and his popular book *The American Language* (1919) to further this discussion, I consider the ways in which language was becoming linked to national identity—and argue that for many, 'American' language stemmed from the Midwest.

The chapter then considers the cultural context in which this conflation between region and nation was taking place, reading Mencken alongside the novelist Ruth Suckow through the lenses of the national push towards immigrant 'Americanization' and their own German-American backgrounds. I will examine how Suckow uses regionally-specific language, especially speech, to establish a Midwestern linguistic standard that situates the region as 'the solid center, the genuine *interior,* of the United States.'[88] Through the way she represents

[87] Contemporary critics often similarly link Dreiser and Tarkington, but give much more consideration to Dreiser—Ronald Weber, for example, uses his brief discussion of Tarkington's *The Gentleman from Indiana* as a lead-in to a longer consideration of Dreiser's *Sister Carrie* (1900).

[88] Ruth Suckow, 'Middle Western Literature,' *The English Journal,* 41.3 (1932), 175-182 (p. 179).

immigrant characters and speech in her fiction, however, I will argue that Suckow was questioning whether or not an 'American' identity is indeed a desirable one for the region to aspire to. 'Popular understanding of the Midwest begins (and too often ends) with the notion that it is the most "American" part of the United States: less a distinct region than the nation's heartland, the essence of Americanism,' claims William Barillas. The drawback of this representation, as he argues, 'is that it concedes the region's strengths to the nation while ascribing its weaknesses only to the Midwest.'[89] This chapter will consider how Gale, Suckow, and other Midwestern writers navigated this conflict between regional and national identity by exposing the inconsistencies between how the region was viewed and its more multicultural reality.

My third and final chapter explores how Midwestern Americanness was rewarded critically and nationally by looking at the Midwestern Pulitzer Prize winners during the 1920s. This was a period in which the growing reach and affordability of national magazines, and the founding of syndicates that distributed fiction to American newspapers, made fiction reading increasingly accessible to a middle-class audience, contributing to the development of a 'middlebrow' consciousness and prompting the founding of new prizes and awards specifically for American authors. The most prestigious and recognizable of these during the first half of the twentieth century was the Pulitzer Prize for the Novel, founded in 1917. Midwestern writers, who produced dozens of nationally successful popular novels in the decades around the turn of the twentieth century, were particularly successful in the early days of the Pulitzer, which saw six Midwestern novels receive the Prize between 1919-1926.

[89] William Barillas, *The Midwestern Pastoral* (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 2006), p. 19.

But while the Pulitzer Prize informs a significant part of the history of literary prizes in the United States, as James English makes clear in his history of prize culture, and while Midwestern writing was at the center of contemporary debates about the direction American literary taste and criticism should take, little critical attention has been given to the Midwestern role in shaping the Pulitzer Prize for the Novel (later to become the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction).[90] By looking at the novels of Midwestern Prize winners—focusing particularly on Margaret Wilson, Edna Ferber, and Sinclair Lewis, who won Pulitzers in 1924, 1925, and 1926 respectively—I will finish my study by considering the novels that were deemed to best represent 'the wholesome atmosphere of American life' by Pulitzer Prize juries, showing how the success of Midwestern authors within the early twentieth century prize culture contributed to the institutionalization of a view of the Midwest that still exists in the American imagination today. In doing so, I will fill a gap left by Midwestern literary critics and historians: for example, neither Weber nor Lauck consider Midwestern Pulitzer Prize winners Margaret Wilson or Edna Ferber at all, despite the prestige of their wins. Finally, by discussing Lewis in the context of the Pulitzer Prize, I will reframe the critical conversation around him, which tends to focus more on his rejection of small-town America than on his interrogation of stereotypical regional themes, to consider how his prize-winning novel *Arrowsmith* fits into the story of the 1920s Midwestern, and American, novel. If, as Glenway Wescott claimed in 1928, Midwestern writers trying to describe a nebulous region tended to 'over-particularize' so that 'what seems local is national, what seems national is universal, what seems Middle-Western is in the commonest way human,'

[90] See, for example, James F. English, *The Economy of Prestige: Prizes, Awards, and the Circulation of Cultural Value* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005), p. 224.

this dissertation is an attempt to understand how Midwestern authors were representing their region and how the nation viewed them in return.[91]

[91] Glenway Wescott, 'Goodbye, Wisconsin,' in *Goodbye, Wisconsin* (Madison, WI: Borderland Books, 2008), pp. 1-22 (p. 19).

Chapter 1. An Indiana Battleground: Midwestern Romance and Realism in the Works of Hamlin Garland, Theodore Dreiser, and Booth Tarkington

Bob Ames might seem to be a minor character in Theodore Dreiser's debut novel *Sister Carrie* (1900), but despite his limited presence, the engineer from Indianapolis, Indiana has a significant impact on protagonist Carrie Meeber's life and mentality. Although not very fleshed out—Dreiser had developed Ames's plotline more fully in the manuscript of the novel, but he took the advice of one of his early readers to cut this down—Ames is one of the few characters whose opinions make more than a fleeting impression upon Carrie.[1] He is introduced as 'an exceedingly genial soul […] and wholly free of affectation,' and these remain his defining characteristics throughout the book.[2] Out of many conflicting influences acting upon the impressionable, malleable Carrie, Ames acts as a lasting ideal, making Carrie question the materialism and excess she lives amongst in New York and that she had aspired to attain and experience since she had left her Midwestern hometown of Columbia City for Chicago.[3] While speaking to Ames, Carrie feels 'the pain of not understanding' for the first time in her life, and this feeling drives her to wonder 'what else was right, according to him,' and to try to live her life in a way that

[1] For more on how the role of Ames's character was reduced throughout the editing process, see Thomas P. Riggio, 'Carrie's Blues,' in *New Essays on 'Sister Carrie,'* ed. by Donald Pizer (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991), pp. 23-42 (p. 37).
[2] Theodore Dreiser, *Sister Carrie* (New York: Doubleday, Page & Co., 1900), p. 349.
[3] Dreiser locates Columbia City in Wisconsin, but it is actually located in Indiana near Warsaw, where he lived while growing up. John C. Berkey and Alice M. Winters, 'Historical Notes,' in Theodore Dreiser, *Sister Carrie,* ed. by John C. Berkey and others (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1981), pp. 555-574 (p. 558).

'such men as he would approve' of her.[4] His opinion that the theatre is 'a great thing' and that to be a good actor is a respectable profession is one of the catalysts that convinces Carrie to try for roles on the stage, the decision that ultimately grants her the fame she craves and the independence from men that she needs.[5]

In comparison to the two leading male characters in the novel, Drouet and Hurstwood, Ames stands out as a pillar of morality and good sense. As Thomas P. Riggio describes, 'he is a sort of American scholar of the masses, a midwestern Thoreau' who 'has some of the air of idealization and wish-fulfillment about him.'[6] To Carrie, he seemed 'wiser than Hurstwood, saner and brighter than Drouet,' and even after he leaves to go back west, Carrie is left with 'an ideal to contrast men by.'[7] Ames's thoughts about marriage form a large part of his introduction to readers, for example, with Dreiser noting that while he finds Carrie 'pretty,' he has only a 'respectful interest' in her: 'There was nothing of the dashing lady's man about him. He had respect for the married state.'[8] These views put Ames into stark contrast to Drouet, who lives with Carrie without any intention of marrying her, and Hurstwood, who leaves his wife and children for her. Dreiser had not always intended for Ames to be a platonic ideal for Carrie, serving predominantly as a symbol for what her life lacks. In the original manuscript of the novel, the pair's final meeting suggests that Carrie and Ames's flirtation is on the cusp of developing into a romantic relationship. But following the advice of his friend Arthur Henry, Dreiser edited about 1500 words out of the pair's interaction, thus avoiding the 'melodramatic

[4] Dreiser, *Sister Carrie*, pp. 357, 358.
[5] Ibid., p. 358.
[6] Thomas P. Riggio, 'Hidden Ethnic,' *MELUS*, 11.1 (1984), 53-63 (p. 61).
[7] Dreiser, *Sister Carrie*, pp. 357, 360.
[8] Ibid., p. 222.

resolution' to Carrie's problems that a relationship with upstanding Ames would provide.[9] By eliminating that aspect of Ames's plot, Dreiser reinforces his role as the provider of critical, impartial commentary on Carrie and her life.[10]

Some critics see Ames as expressing Dreiser's own thoughts about New York consumerism, while others argue that he presents Ames's disapproval of metropolitan success as provincial and old-fashioned.[11] Most agree, however, that Ames is the closest figure to Dreiser in the novel, allowing him to express his opinions on art and fiction. These in turn provide inadvertent commentary on the literary debate that surrounded the publication and reception of *Sister Carrie.* Ames is first introduced halfway through the novel, in a chapter titled 'The Feast of Belshazzar: A Seer to Translate,' and he is cast in the role of 'seer,' as he is able to see through the veneer of opulence in the restaurant he attends with Carrie and the Vances. What really makes Carrie want to listen to Ames's views, though, is his opinion about a popular novel of the time, *Moulding a Maiden.* The Vances believe that the novel is 'pretty good,' but Ames says of the author, 'He doesn't amount to much. […] His stuff is nearly as bad as *Dora Thorne*.'"[12] We are told that Carrie had not yet read *Moulding a Maiden,* but she had read *Dora*

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[9] Lawrence E. Hussman, Jr., 'Thomas Edison and "Sister Carrie:" A Source for Character and Theme,' *American Literary Realism, 1870-1910,* 8.2 (1975), 155-158 (p. 158); Riggio, 'Carrie's Blues,' p. 37.

[10] Henry, along with Sara Osborne White, Dreiser's wife at the time, edited the manuscript to make it more palatable to publishers and the reading public, removing many of the more overt references to sex and naturalistic philosophy that appeared in the original draft. For more on the writing, editing, and publication of *Sister Carrie,* see Thomas P. Riggio, '*Sister Carrie:* Manuscript to Print,' in Theodore Dreiser, *Sister Carrie,* ed. by John C. Berkey and others (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1981), pp. 503-541.

[11] For further discussion of Ames' role in *Sister Carrie,* see Kevin R. McNamara, 'The Ames of The Good Society: "Sister Carrie" and Social Engineering,' *Criticism,* 34.2 (1992), 217-235; and Walter Benn Michaels, 'Sister Carrie's Popular Economy,' in *The Gold Standard and the Logic of Naturalism: American Literature at the Turn of the Century* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), pp. 31-58.

[12] Dreiser, *Sister Carrie,* p. 356.

Thorne and 'supposed that people thought it very fine,' so Ames's poor evaluation of it, given without any air of superiority, captures her attention.[13] Ames's well-spoken, educated air makes Carrie want to become better informed herself, and the last few pages of the novel find her taking up some of his reading suggestions.

With this literary advice, Ames establishes his position in the long-standing, but recently revived, literary debate between romance and realism. In having his spokesman for realism hail from Indiana, Dreiser is surely speaking to the budding realist literary tradition that had begun in the Midwest in the mid-nineteenth century and which was trying to find greater purchase in the American literary market when *Sister Carrie* was published in 1900. The two novels that Ames criticizes over dinner, *Moulding a Maiden* and *Dora Thorne*, were both examples of the kind of sentimental, romantic fiction that was dominating American literary taste at this time. The books Ames recommends to Carrie, by contrast, are classic examples of realism; at the end of the novel, for example, we find her reading Balzac's *Père Goriot*. But Ames also represents something else that Dreiser cared deeply about: the relocation of realism from the Midwestern periphery to the literary center of New York City. By the story's conclusion, Ames has moved to New York from Indiana to open his own laboratory, a move which mirrors Dreiser's own relocation in pursuit of a literary career. But if Dreiser's realism hailed from Indiana, so did romanticism, and in 1900, fiction from this particular state was often the focus of the debate between these two modes.

Taking Indiana—a state that had a particularly well-defined literary identity at the turn of the twentieth century—as my focal point, this chapter will consider the Midwest's position in the debate between realism and romanticism that was taking place in the United States around the

[13] Dreiser, *Sister Carrie,* p. 356.

turn of the century. I will explore works by a variety of Indiana authors, including Dreiser, George Ade, Maurice Thompson, and Meredith Nicholson, to consider the debates between these two literary modes, but my focus will be primarily on Booth Tarkington, an author whose career, in many ways, mirrored Dreiser's. Focusing on the first two decades of Tarkington's career, and comparing his work with that of Dreiser and others, I will argue for the reevaluation of Midwestern authors writing in states and towns beyond the regional center of Chicago and the usual narrow canon.

'A FLOOD OF THE OTHER': REALISM VERSUS ROMANCE IN THE MIDWEST

In the decades following the Civil War, many American authors began to see themselves as 'realists.' The post-war period in the United States was one of rapid industrialization and urbanization, and novelists endeavored to encapsulate this spirit of social progress in literature by rejecting 'the romantic material and formulas of earlier fiction' and depicting modern life in an objective, unvarnished light.[14] As 'the most prominent advocate of realism in late nineteenth-century America,' Ohio-born William Dean Howells both led the way, and provided a point of departure, for other late-nineteenth and early twentieth-century American authors hoping to evolve their fiction beyond the 'genteel tradition,' a term George Santayana coined in 1911 to describe an inherited, conservative form of American intellectualism that was still influential

[14] Donald Pizer, 'The Problem of Definition,' in *The Cambridge Companion to American Realism and Naturalism: Howells to London,* ed. by Donald Pizer (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), pp. 1-18 (p. 6).

well into the twentieth century despite, as Santayana argued, being at odds with 'the instincts, practice, and discoveries of the younger generations.'[15]

Fifteen years before Dreiser staged Ames and Carrie's literary discussion in *Sister Carrie,* Howells had also addressed the discrepancy between sentimental novels which he called 'romanticistic' and the type of realist fiction he was hoping would become more prevalent. *The Rise of Silas Lapham* (1885) includes a scene in which the guests at a dinner party discuss a popular novel called *Tears, Idle Tears.*[16] They are split over the value of the novel—while one found it 'perfectly heart-breaking,' a younger woman dismisses it as being more fittingly titled *Slop, Silly Slop.*[17] The guests then debate the current state of the novel in the United States more broadly. One guest wonders at 'how we do like the books that go for our heart strings,' observing that 'you can't put a more popular thing than self-sacrifice into a novel,' but another argues back, claiming that 'these novels with old-fashioned heroes and heroines in them […] are ruinous!'[18] He goes on to say, in Howellsian fashion, that 'novelists might be the greatest possible help to us

[15] Robert Birdwell, 'New Realities, New Realisms: Chicago Literature against the Genteel Tradition,' in *Chicago: A Literary History,* ed. by Frederik Byrn Kohlert (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021), pp. 70-80 (p. 73); George Santayana, *The Genteel Tradition: Nine Essays by George Santayana,* ed. by Douglas L. Wilson (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1967), p. 39. F. Brett Cox describes the genteel tradition succinctly as 'a mixture of aesthetic idealism and cultural conservatism.' Cox, '"What Need, Then, for Poetry?": The Genteel Tradition and the Continuity of American Literature,' *The New England Quarterly,* 67.2 (1994), 212-233 (p. 212).

[16] Howells invented *Tears, Idle Tears* for discussion in his own novel. He took the name from a lyric poem Alfred Tennyson published as part of *The Princess* (1847). The poem, which begins 'Tears, idle tears, I know not what they mean, / Tears from the depth of some divine despair / Rise in the heart, and gather to the eyes, / In looking on the happy Autumn-fields, / And thinking of the days that are no more,' is an ode to days gone by, and Howells' choice to use it as the title of his fictional romantic novel establishes the invented novel, and the romantic tradition, as belonging to the past. Alfred Tennyson, 'The Princess; A Medley,' in *The Complete Works of Alfred, Lord Tennyson,* Vol. I (New York: Frederick A. Stokes, 1891), pp. 29-88 (p. 53).

[17] William Dean Howells, *The Rise of Silas Lapham* (New York: Penguin Books, 1983), p. 197.

[18] Ibid.

if they painted life as it is, and human feelings in their true proportion and relation, but for the most part they have been altogether noxious,' using the exact word, 'proportion,' that Howells himself employs to describe his literary beliefs in *Criticism and Fiction* when he asks American authors to let their fiction 'show the different interests in their true proportions.'[19] The plot of *The Rise of Silas Lapham* itself bears out this negative estimation of the 'romanticistic' novel and its impact on young readers in the love triangle between three young people in the novel, which follows the plot of *Tears, Idle Tears* and demonstrates the silliness of fictional melodrama, which one character even admits is 'rather forced.'[20]

The intrusion of literature into the real lives of the characters in *Silas Lapham* also suggests the wide-ranging social and cultural implications Howells attached to his discussion of realism and romanticism. As Amy Kaplan argues, 'To Howells the romance represents more than the sum of its aesthetic failings; his critique of its enslavement to past conventions, its idealization of subject matter, and its aristocratic pretensions is part of a political debate about the nature of American culture.'[21] In this conception of American culture, romance represented a form of idleness, both for its readers and for its writers—a sentiment reflected in the title of *Tears, Idle Tears.* Realism, by contrast, is associated with work and productivity, which, in Howells's view, link novels to their readers' and writers' everyday lives. Howells summarized these views in a series of essays gathered together in 1891 as *Criticism and Fiction.* For Howells, there is a vital distinction between literature that exists 'apart from life' and literature that comes

[19] Howells, *The Rise of Silas Lapham,* p. 197; William Dean Howells, *Criticism and Fiction* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1891), p. 104.
[20] Howells, *The Rise of Silas Lapham,* p. 217.
[21] Amy Kaplan, *The Social Construction of American Realism* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1988), p. 16.

from 'wherever men are at work, from wherever they are truly living.'[22] He called on American authors to leave behind the idealized, intricately wrought style favored in the previous decades and 'let it leave off painting dolls and working them by springs and wires; […] let it not put on fine literary airs.'[23] Instead, realist novels should portray the country as its citizens actually experienced it, stripping away the literary flourishes to leave a portrait of everyday American life 'in the most exact terms possible with an absolute and clear sense of proportion.'[24]

At realism's best, then, evocative prose combines with a mission of social representation to draw attention to the unglamorous reality of working Americans. It was this that motivated Hamlin Garland to write *Main-Travelled Roads* (1891), a collection of short stories telling of Midwestern farmers struggling to make a living off the land which stands out as one of the early examples of effective American rural realism. In the short epigraph he attached to the collection, Garland writes that 'the main-travelled road in the West (as everywhere) […] is traversed by many classes of people, but the poor and weary predominate.'[25] It is this class of people who are the narrators and protagonists of his stories.

Garland, who grew up on his family's farm in Iowa, was inspired to write the stories by a return trip he took to his parents' new farm in South Dakota after a few years away living in Boston. On the East coast, Garland had been immersed in the literary world, lecturing and getting to know some of the most influential literary figures of the day, including Howells himself. The discordance between memory and reality that he experienced upon returning from rarified Boston to the rural Midwest, and his despair at being unable to liberate his parents from

[22] Howells, *Criticism and Fiction*, p. 102.
[23] Ibid., p. 104.
[24] Stephen Crane, 'Howells Fears the Realists Must Wait,' in *Stephen Crane: Prose and Poetry* (New York: Viking Press, 1984), pp. 615-618 (p. 616).
[25] Hamlin Garland, *Main-Travelled Roads* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1894), p. xi.

their difficult lives, is captured fictionally in 'Up the Coulee,' the second story in the collection. Much as Garland had, a son returns to his family home, and is surprised to find 'how poor and dull and sleepy it seemed' to him now after years away.[26] While most of Garland's other characters accept their lot, this story contains some of the harshest condemnations of farming life, with Grant, the son who remained behind and who resents his brother Howard for leaving, declaring, 'Anything under God's heavens is better'n farmin'.'[27] Watching his family and their neighbors go about their daily routines, Howard reflects on 'the infinite tragedy of these lives which the world loves to call "peaceful and pastoral,"' a perception Garland attempts to dispel with his representation of the more challenging side of rural life.[28]

But while the story presents Howard's acting as fairly frivolous in comparison to Grant's farming, Garland saw himself as doing important work of a different nature by representing the brutal reality of working to make a living from the land in the Midwest. In his 1917 memoir, Garland recounts a conversation with Indiana author Joseph Kirkland, whose 1887 novel *Zury* is considered an early example of Midwestern realism. After Garland explains that he could not write fiction because he could not 'manage the dialogue,' Kirkland responds, '"You're lazy, that's all. […] Buckle to it—you can write stories as well as I can—but you must sweat!"'[29] By framing writing as an act predicated on having the work ethic necessary to represent real life on the page, Kirkland and Garland reinforced Howells's idea that realism must be tied to the everyday through work and productivity, something that, as I discussed in the introduction, opened up writing as a profession to writers from any background.

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[26] Garland, *Main-Travelled Roads,* p. 70.
[27] Ibid. p. 84.
[28] Ibid., p. 116.
[29] Hamlin Garland, *A Son of the Middle Border,* ed. by E. H. Kemper McComb (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1917), p. 354.

The renewed focus on the Midwest that Garland demonstrated through *Main-Travelled Roads* was reflected by his move from Boston to Chicago in 1894, a few years after the collection's publication.[30] Garland's first visit to Chicago had come much earlier and, as he recounted in his later memoir, his first sight of the city from the train window, which appeared to him as 'a huge smoke-cloud which embraced the whole eastern horizon,' had filled him with 'dismay,' a feeling he would later give to Rose in his 1895 novel *Rose of Dutcher's Coolly.*[31] By 1893, however, Garland had begun to see Chicago as the potential center for the type of Midwestern realism he described during a speech he gave during the World's Columbian Exposition. Deliberating contrasting himself to fellow Midwestern author Mary Hartwell Catherwood, who had begun her career by writing realistic stories of small Midwestern towns before changing direction to write historical romances, Garland argued for a mode of local color fiction that employed 'veritisim' instead of what Robert Bray summarizes as 'the insipid romanticism of the bucolic school of local fiction.'[32] In moving to Chicago to continue pursuing

[30] Christine Holbo, '"This Broad, Free Inland America of Ours": Hamlin Garland, Chicago, and the Literary West,' in *Chicago: A Literary History*, ed. by Frederik Byrn Kohlert (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021), pp. 44-57 (p. 47).
[31] Garland, *A Son of the Middle Border*, p. 268.
[32] Robert Bray, 'Hamlin Garland's "Rose of Dutcher's Coolly,"' *The Great Lakes Review,* 3.1 (1976), 1-14 (p. 1). Mary Hartwell Catherwood was born in Ohio and lived in many small towns in Ohio, Illinois, and Indiana. She helped found the Western Association of Writers in 1886 alongside a group of predominantly Indianan authors including Maurice Thompson, who served as its first president and who, like Catherwood, turned against realism later in his career. The society met annually in Indiana from 1886 until the first decade in the twentieth century, when the rise of younger authors and the growing strength of the Chicago literary movement relegated the society to increasing obscurity before it eventually dissolved completely. Ironically, Garland's own career would follow a similar trajectory to Catherwood's, as he eventually transitioned from writing Midwestern realism to Western romances. George S. Cottman, 'The Western Association of Writers: A Literary Reminiscence,' *Indiana Magazine of History,* 29.3 (1933), 187-197. For more on Garland's shift to romanticism in the second half of his career, see, for example, Keith Newlin, 'Why Hamlin Garland Left the Main-Travelled Road,' *Studies in American Naturalism,* 1.5 (2006), 70-89.

this type of fiction, Garland 'predicted a publishing center and a literary market-place second only to New York,' which 'by reason of its geographical position' would be 'more progressive than Boston, and more American than Manhattan.'[33] Over the next decade, as Christine Holbo explains, 'Garland poured his energies into asserting that Chicago was […] the place at which the entirety of the West, as nature, should become culture'; he hoped to revolutionize both where American fiction was produced and published and the type of fiction that was nationally valued.[34]

Yet despite the lofty intentions of the realists and their enthusiasm about Chicago as its seat, realism struggled to coalesce as a movement. Although all took the portrayal of 'truth' as their aim, early realists did not always agree on how 'truth' should be represented. As Daniel Borus points out, during the 1890s, realism contained so many internal divisions that it 'barely qualified as a coherent literary movement.'[35] This becomes clear if we look at the criticism levelled at Midwesterner James Whitcomb Riley's poetry. Known as the 'Hoosier Poet,' Riley was a native Indianan and one of the more prominent authors during Indiana literature's 'Golden Age.' He used Hoosier dialect liberally in his poems, and because of this was often dismissed as not 'literary,' a charge which exposed a schism in the American realist movement.[36] Howells, when critiquing Riley's poetry, praised his use of the kind of language that Howells believed real

[33] Garland, *A Son of the Middle Border,* p. 457.
[34] Holbo, 'Hamlin Garland, Chicago, and the Literary West,' p. 51.
[35] Daniel H. Borus, *Writing Realism: Howells, James, and Norris in the Mass Market* (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 1989), p. 16.
[36] Riley's 'Little Orphant Annie' (1885), one of his most well-known poems and the inspiration for the Little Orphan Annie comic strip, plays, radio and television shows, and movies, begins: 'Little Orphant Annie's come to our house to / stay, / An' wash the cups an' saucers up, an' brush the / crumbs away, / An' shoo the chickens off the porch, an' dust the / hearth, an' sweep, / an' make the fire, an' bake the bread, an' earn / her board-an'-keep.' James Whitcomb Riley, *Little Orphant Annie and Other Poems* (New York: Dover Publications, 1994), p. 1.

Indiana residents would have used: 'The Hoosier parlance which he has subdued to rhyme has not the consecration which time has given the Scottish dialect in Ramsay and Burns, but it says things as tenderly and intimately, and on the lips of this master it is music.'[37] While many agreed with Howells—Garland, for example, recalled that he 'rejoiced in phrases such as "the husky, rusty russel of the tossels of the corn," and "the moon a-hangin' o'er us like a yaller-colored slice"' when he first read Riley's work—other critics were more dismissive.[38] H. W. Boynton wrote contemptuously of Riley's 'momentary lapses into English,' and cited his poetry as evidence that 'the men and women who speak dialect are not worth portraying in literature.'[39] Representation might have been the aim of realism, but there was no consensus amongst realists about how to convey real life through literature, or about where the limits of representation might lie.

These pressures were exacerbated by the conservative tastes of the established Boston and New York publishing houses, which, despite many attempts to establish a competing publishing presence in Chicago, retained national dominance. With this Eastern publishing monopoly often came pressure to adhere to the more traditional tastes and morals of established publishing houses, which Garland would later say 'warped' authors 'to the market.'[40] Howells himself, well-embedded in the East Coast literary scene by the 1890s, famously encouraged American novelists to 'concern themselves with the more smiling aspects of life,' and most realist writers still shied away from tackling subjects that would offend conventional nineteenth-

[37] William Dean Howells, 'The New Poetry,' *North American Review,* 168.510 (1899), 581-592 (p. 588).
[38] Hamlin Garland, *Roadside Meetings* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1930), p. 97.
[39] Dale B. J. Randall, 'Dialect in the Verse of the Hoosier Poet,' *American Speech,* 35.1 (1960), 36-50 (p. 36).
[40] Hamlin Garland, 'Current Fiction Heroes,' *New York Times Book Review,* 23 December 1923, pp. 2, 23 (p. 23).

century morality.[41] 'In 1908, […] the old tradition was still powerful, and the young man or woman who come to New York with a manuscript which violated in any way the pruderies and prejudices of the professors had a hard time getting it printed,' wrote magazine editor, literary reviewer, and cultural commentator H. L. Mencken in 1923, reflecting on the beginning of his reviewing career.[42] Between writers and publishers, and even between realists themselves, there was a disagreement about how 'truth' should be portrayed and what version of 'truth' would appeal to readers. Ronald Weber characterizes this period, during which the genteel tradition of sentimental writing continued despite writers such as Garland's early enthusiasm about the potential of Midwestern realism, as a 'period of stagnation'[43]; as Mencken summed up: 'It was a day of complacency and conformity.'[44]

By the end of the century, the realist movement seemed to be foundering under the pressure of these internal divisions and external expectations. In an 1894 interview Stephen Crane conducted with Howells, Crane (referred to in the article as 'the other man') asked Howells if he had 'observed a change in the literary pulse of the country within the last four months,' noting that in the previous year it had 'seemed that realism was about to capture things, but then recently I have thought that I saw coming a sort of counter wave, a flood of the other—a reaction in fact.'[45] The reaction came in the form of a resurgence of sentimental fiction, much of

[41] Howells, *Criticism and Fiction,* p. 128. Alfred Kazin suggests that Howells was so closely associated with the late nineteenth and early twentieth century literary scene that when he left Boston for New York in 1891 to take over editorship of *Cosmopolitan* magazine—a short-lived role—that he had 'taken the literary center of the country with him […] from Boston to New York.' Alfred Kazin, *On Native Grounds: An Interpretation of Modern American Prose Literature* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1956), p. 1.
[42] H. L. Mencken, 'Fifteen Years of Book Reviewing,' *Smart Set,* 72.4 (1923), 138-144 (p. 139).
[43] Ronald Weber, *The Midwestern Ascendancy in American Writing* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992), p. 177.
[44] Mencken, 'Fifteen Years of Book Reviewing,' p. 139.
[45] Crane, 'Howells Fears the Realists Must Wait,' pp. 617-618.

it also emanating from the Midwest, and in particular from Indiana. By this point, Indiana had developed a reputation for literary production. Arthur W. Shumaker recounts a story told by Indiana humorist George Ade about a lecture given by an Eastern writer in the state, who, knowing of Indiana's literary reputation, invited any authors in the audience to join him on stage—only to have everyone in the audience stand up.[46] 'Something in the level lands of Indiana appeared to foster a fanciful fiction,' Garland recalled decades later, and indeed, instead of continuing to develop the realist Midwestern literary tradition of Garland, Edward Eggleston, and Joseph Kirkland, the new Indiana novelists wrote novels perfectly suited to appeal to readers hungry for romances with a native flavor.[47] Some produced sentimental fiction removed from the Indiana background—George Barr McCutcheon, for example, wrote the popular *Graustark* series, which Shumaker describes as 'passionate love and adventure narratives' set in a mythical Balkan kingdom.[48] Others, such as Gene Stratton-Porter, Meredith Nicholson, and Maurice Thompson, gained popular success by churning out novels that romanticized Midwestern life and gilded the hard-scrabble reality depicted by Garland with flowery descriptions of wholesome neighborliness and idyllic homesteads. Thompson's bestselling 1900 novel *Alice of Old Vincennes,* for example, played into the popular appetite for historical romance while still emphasizing the story's Midwesternness. Described as 'a most unexpected effervescence of romance in the backwoods of Indiana' by Garland, the novel, based on true events, follows Alice during a battle for control of a fort in 1778 during the American revolution between the French,

[46] Arthur W. Shumaker, *A History of Indiana Literature* (Indianapolis: Indiana Historical Society, 1962), p. 3.
[47] Garland, *Roadside Meetings,* p. 282.
[48] McCutcheon published the first Graustark novel, *Graustark: The Story of a Love Behind a Throne* in 1901, and followed it up with novels set in the same country in 1904, 1909, 1914, 1924, and 1927. Shumaker, *A History of Indiana Literature,* pp. 400-401.

who have declared their loyalty to the colonies, and the British.[49] The novel's central romance between Alice and the gallant officer in command of the fort and its mythologizing of the American revolution played into common tropes of historical romance, while its centering of Indiana at the heart of this story of American independence emphasized the Midwest's role in a war more often associated with Eastern locations, a combination that the novel's publisher, Indiana-based Bowen-Merrill, predicted would appeal to readers who were 'quickly developing a taste for romantic stories set in their own backyard.'[50]

Novels such as Thompson's—which was on the bestseller list in 1900 and in 1901, when it topped the monthly list for six consecutive months—were so popular that a Purdue University librarian's study of state-by-state literary production shows that between 1900 and the start of World War II, Indiana ranked second after only New York in the production of bestsellers, with 213 points to New York's 218 (Pennsylvania was a distant third, with only 125 points).[51] Today, most of this group of Indiana writers have fallen out of critical favor, but the influence of their

[49] Garland, *Roadside Meetings*, p. 283.

[50] The novel had been commissioned by Bowen-Merrill, who, Jeanette Vanausdall suggests, were looking for a successor to Indiana author Charles Major's bestseller *When Knighthood Was in Flower* (1898). Jeanette Vanausdall, *Pride and Protest: The Novel in Indiana* (Indianapolis: Indiana Historical Society, 1999), p. 45.

[51] William E. Wilson, *Indiana: A History* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1966), p. 205. Maurice Thompson's success with the sentimental *Alice of Old Vincennes* is particularly notable given that earlier in his career he had considered himself a realist and had developed a friendly relationship with Howells. By the mid 1880s, however, Thompson had broken with Howells and with realism and frequently attacked the mode of writing in his criticism. In a lecture Thompson gave in 1893, for example, he asked his audience if they had 'observed how, as a man becomes a realist, he grows fond of being narrow and of playing with small specialties,' attributing the 'force' behind realism to 'unbelief in the ideal standards of human aspiration.' Thompson quoted in Weber, *The Midwestern Ascendancy in American Writing*, p. 50. For more on Thomson and Howells, see Edwin H. Cady, *The Realist at War: The Mature Years, 1885-1920, of William Dean Howells* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1958), pp. 32-34.

romantic Midwestern novels persists, as the Indiana novel established a view of the Midwest that was widely disseminated around the country.

READING 'ROMANCE OUT OF LIFE' IN INDIANAPOLIS: HOWELLS, TARKINGTON, AND DREISER

Howells ventured into Indiana, the bastion of literary romanticism, in November 1899, when he stopped on a literary tour to give a lecture in Indianapolis. Proud of their literary tradition of producing nationally-read authors, Indianapolis society received Howells eagerly, and tickets to his sold-out lecture in Plymouth Church were by invitation only.[52] Howells was partway through a tour that would take him across seven Midwestern states, and the press coverage of these lectures was largely positive, if not outright adulatory: The *Topeka State Journal,* for instance, reported that Howells spoke to a 'delighted audience' and that his lecture was 'both interesting and instructive.'[53] The reaction to his Indianapolis lecture, however, was more mixed. Many of the press reports on the lecture were positive, but amongst the admiring accounts were some intensely critical reactions to Howells's message. A contributor to the *Indianapolis Journal,* in an article titled 'Howells Pro and Con: A Club Woman Gives Her Impression of the Novelist,' stated that 'while the greater part of the audience which heard the novelist liked him, there were some who did not.' She goes on to repeat the opinions of some of those detractors, including a young man who claimed to have been inspired by Howells to abandon novels for the newspaper,

[52] Lew Wallace was an Indiana author most famous for his 1880 bestselling novel *Ben-Hur: A Tale of the Christ.* In his 1928 memoir, Booth Tarkington recalls a conversation with Wallace, who encouraged him to keep pursuing his writing career in spite of his many rejections. Booth Tarkington, *The World Does Move: An Autobiographical Narrative* (London: William Heinemann, 1929), pp. 41-45.
[53] 'Many Heard Mr. Howells,' *Topeka State Journal,* 9 November 1899, p. 5.

since if he was to 'accept Howells' theory' that the best novel is the novel that pictures life as it is, then 'why not confine ourselves to the newspaper,' and another woman who summarized Howells's lecture succinctly as 'tommy-rot.'[54] One particularly strongly-opinionated editorial writer for the *Indianapolis News* identified Howells's problem as wanting 'to identify truth with ugliness, if not with positive filth' and 'to read romance out of life.'[55]

A young and newly published Booth Tarkington, however, was struck by Howells's message. Although they had met briefly four years before—when Tarkington had become 'speechless' in Howells's presence—the first significant meeting between the two was on this tour, when Tarkington was assigned to be Howells's guide for the duration of his visit.[56] Tarkington acknowledges the significant impact of that meeting and of Howells's literary tenets on his work when he later wrote of Howells, 'We know […] what he did for us […] and in time we may be able to make it generally understood how he led the way out of a wilderness of raw and fantastic shapes where many of us dallied.'[57] Although his early work was undeniably influenced by the dominance of romanticism in his home state, it is clear that Tarkington had tried to inject some realism into his writing. Both Howells and Garland saw promise in his first novel, *The Gentleman from Indiana* (1899), and made a clear distinction between the 'local-color realism that attached to [Tarkington's] work and the full-blown romanticism of [his] Hoosier

[54] 'Howells Pro and Con: A Club Woman Gives Her Impression of the Novelist,' *Indianapolis Journal*, 20 November 1899, p. 8.
[55] Robert Rowlette, '"The Silken Arms of the Aristocracy': William Dean Howells' Lecture in Indianapolis, 1899,' *Indiana Magazine of History*, 69.4 (1973), 299-319 (p. 316).
[56] Tarkington would remember both of these meetings in his 1920 eulogy for Howells, when he wrote that 'no privilege could have been thought greater' than the opportunity to serve as Howells' guide in Indianapolis. Booth Tarkington, 'Mr. Howells: A Tribute,' *Harper's Monthly Magazine*, 141 (1920), 346-350 (p. 346).
[57] Ibid.

colleagues.'[58] But the novel still had a traditionally romantic happy ending. As William E. Wilson says, 'while the novel seems to paint small-town life in Indiana realistically and the Whitecaps, forerunners of Indiana's Ku Klux Klan, are depicted as an evil force,' the elements of melodrama prevail: 'virtue triumphs completely in the end and the crusading country editor wins, as his reward, a beautiful wife.'[59] In short, the novel tried to have it both ways: containing enough realist attention to detail to please Howells and Garland while also providing the satisfyingly romantic ending that would appeal to the broader reading public. Theodore Dreiser, whose own first novel would be published the year after Howells's visit to Indianapolis, made no such concession to romance in that novel, *Sister Carrie,* and the grittier form of realism he embraced—which, following Zola, would come to be known as naturalism—diverged even from Howells's more smiling form. Like Tarkington, however, Dreiser admired Howells and respected the work he had done to pave the way for the realist movement. What's more, Dreiser recognized Howells's power, as one of the leading literary and cultural figures of his time, to establish a young writer's reputation, and he hoped a positive review of *Sister Carrie* by Howells would bolster the sales of his failing first novel. No such review appeared, though, and when Dreiser met Howells by chance, Howells explained bluntly that he had not positively reviewed the novel because '"I didn't like *Sister Carrie.*"'[60] Howells, by contrast, had kind things to say about *The Gentleman from Indiana*, encouraging Tarkington to continue writing. Howells's

[58] Weber, *The Midwestern Ascendancy in American Writing*, p. 40.
[59] Wilson, *Indiana: A History*, p. 225. H. L. Mencken, who championed Dreiser and considered Dreiser's second novel, *Jenny Gerhardt* (1911) 'the best American novel [he had] ever read,' repeatedly cited the botched publishing of *Sister Carrie* as indicative of the weak state of American letters in the early nineteenth century, writing that it had been 'suppressed by a snuffling publisher.' H. L Mencken, 'Eight Years of Reviewing,' in *H. L. Mencken on American Literature,* ed. by S. T. Joshi (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 2002), pp. 1-7 (p. 4).
[60] Cynthia Ozick, 'Miracle on Grub Street,' *The New York Times,* 9 November 1986, p. 3.

preference was reflected in that of the general reading public: the national tastes that appreciated Tarkington's novel could not accept Dreiser's more daring and risqué prose, and for a long time Tarkington was the more prominent author, winning two Pulitzer Prizes for his novels to Dreiser's none and ranking first in the 1921 booksellers' poll of the most 'significant' contemporary American writers to Dreiser's fourteenth.[61] In the ensuing years, however, it is Dreiser who has gained a place in the canon of American fiction, while Tarkington's more conservative novels have all but been forgotten.

Together, Tarkington's and Dreiser's career trajectories reveal the shifting tastes and trends that dominated the United States and their impact on the authors writing from the Midwest in the early twentieth century. Although their childhoods and circumstances were vastly different—Tarkington had a privileged background and was educated at Exeter and Princeton on the East Coast, while Dreiser grew up poor as the child of a German immigrant father and went to a public high school—their literary careers bear marked resemblances.[62] Both men wrote their first novels in their late twenties, and both of those first novels were accepted for publication when the authors were twenty-nine. Their first publishing experiences were vastly different, however: while Tarkington's novel was highly praised and promoted by his New York publishers, Doubleday & McClure, Dreiser's publishers, the newly formed Doubleday & Page, were shocked at what they considered the graphic content of *Sister Carrie,* and barely made any

[61] Robert Gottlieb, 'The Gentleman from Indiana: The Rise and Fall of a Literary Reputation,' *The New Yorker* (2019), 69-75 (p. 70).
[62] Before going to Princeton, Tarkington had spent two years at Purdue University in Indiana, where he became lasting friends with George Ade. Shumaker, *A History of Indiana Literature*, p. 354.

attempt to sell the small number of copies they did actually print.[63] Yet while it has been Dreiser's career that has been the focus of academic interest in the past century, it was Tarkington's Midwest, not Dreiser's, that came to be seen as typically American—if Dreiser is even considered a Midwestern writer at all. Jeanette Vanausdall notes that Dreiser has 'traditionally been ignored as an Indiana author,' and Shumaker does not consider him in his history of Indiana literature 'because of insufficient residence and Indiana influence' in his work.[64] Weber does view Dreiser as a Midwesterner, but points out that 'what is remarkable about Dreiser, seen in a regionalist light, is indeed the absence from his fiction of much of the familiar Midwestern literary landscape,' so much so that when he is placed 'in the company of Garland and Anderson and Cather, to say nothing of the company of Riley and Tarkington and the popular Indiana romancers' he 'hardly seems a Midwestern writer at all.'[65] As William E. Wilson argues, this exclusion, as well as the local dislike for Dreiser in his home state, could be attributed to the fact that Dreiser did not live up to the expectation that Hoosier authors 'write uplifting stories about just plain folks or romantic tales of never-never land.'[66] The type of writing he did favor made Dreiser, in Vanausdall's terms, the 'step-son' to Tarkington's 'favorite son,' but more broadly, it also demonstrates the stereotypes and expectations that were already present at the turn of the twentieth century about what constitutes 'Indianan' and 'Midwestern' fiction.[67]

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[63] Wilson, *Indiana: A History*, p. 222. Dreiser's novel did receive positive reviews, however, and it was reissued successfully in England two years after its initial publication in the United States. Kaplan, *The Social Construction of American Realism*, p. 132.
[64] Vanausdall, *Pride and Protest,* p. 72; Shumaker, *A History of Indiana*, p. 18.
[65] Weber, *The Midwestern Ascendancy in American Writing,* p. 67.
[66] Wilson, *Indiana: A History*, p. 223.
[67] Vanausdall, *Pride and Protest,* p. 72.

In the rest of this chapter, I will interrogate those expectations by exploring the work of Tarkington, who has always been considered a quintessentially Midwestern author. I will focus on his Indiana-based novels from the first two decades of his career to examine how Tarkington was thinking about, and contending with, his Indianan identity. Beginning with two of his earliest published novels, *The Gentleman from Indiana* and *The Two Vanrevels* (1902), I will consider how Tarkington represented Indiana with an eye to both romance and realism, and to both Eastern and Indiana readers' expectations about which mode should be used in novels set in the state. I will focus specifically on how he explored what it meant to be a writer in this particular Midwestern environment, and demonstrate how the regional setting, and Tarkington's connection to and sense of responsibility towards it, came into conflict with his other ambitions. I will then move on to the second decade of Tarkington's career, particularly his presentation of the Midwest as a region caught between nostalgia (figured through romanticism) and progress (figured through realism). My focus will be *The Turmoil* (1915), the first of what would become his 'Growth' trilogy. Finally, through a reading of Tarkington's second Pulitzer Prize-winning novel, *Alice Adams* (1921), I will consider how this small-town Midwestern story might be read as a response to Dreiser's earlier, city-hopping novel.

ON THE FENCE: TARKINGTON'S ROMANTIC REALISM

Booth Tarkington's big break as an author came as a result of his close relationship with his home state, where he had returned to pursue a writing career after being educated on the East Coast. On a trip to New York, his sister delivered a copy of a short novel Tarkington had just

finished, *Monsieur Baucaire*, to S. S. McClure, the editor of *McClure's Magazine*.[68] McClure was not willing to commit to publishing *Monsieur Baucaire,* a historical romance set in England during the eighteenth century, but he was intrigued when he heard that Tarkington was working on a novel set in Indiana and asked to see that manuscript as well. A few weeks later, Hamlin Garland—himself a frequent contributor to *McClure's*—wrote to tell Tarkington the good news: he was going to be a published author.[69]

The fact that McClure was interested in Tarkington's Indiana novel and not his European romance says a lot about the type of story magazines were interested in publishing during this period. As Maurice Thompson's publishers predicted, local color novels set in the United States appealed to a national reading audience that was expanding rapidly thanks in large part to the rise of cheap national magazines such as *McClure's.*[70] For young, aspiring writers, these magazines,

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[68] Tarkington's sister Hauté was one of his most persistent early advocates. It was also through her that Tarkington met James Whitcomb Riley, who would become one of his mentors. James Woodress, *Booth Tarkington: Gentleman from Indiana* (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott Company, 1954), pp. 44-45, 67-68, 73-74.

[69] Gottlieb, 'The Gentleman from Indiana,' p. 71. Garland recalled reading the manuscript of Tarkington's serial for *McClure's* in his 1930 memoir *Roadside Meetings.* 'Last night I finished reading the manuscript novel of an unknown Indiana novelist, the glorification of a small town, very sweet and fine, the best of its kind,' he recalls having written in his diary. When Garland returned the manuscript to the magazine suggesting its publication, he added, '"Why not print an American serial? It may be that your people are getting a little tired of your English romances,"' to which the editor responded, '"We regard this story as a good one on which to base a change of policy."' Garland, *Roadside Meetings,* pp. 392-393.

[70] National magazines were nonexistent in the first half of the nineteenth century. By 1890, a few national magazines—*Harper's, Scribner's,* and the *Atlantic,* among a few others—were in circulation, but they were directed towards an educated, upper-class readership, and their reach was limited. This all changed in 1893, when McClure began selling his new monthly magazine, *McClure's Magazine,* for a mere fifteen cents, undercutting these existing magazines, which typically sold for a quarter or 35 cents. With many of his competitors following suit, magazine circulation swiftly exploded. The circulation of *McClure's Magazine* alone at the end of 1895 was 250,000 and rapidly rising; *Munsey's Magazine* editor Frank A. Munsey estimated that the magazine-buying public had grown from 250,000 in 1893 to 750,000 in 1899. Richard Ohmann, *Selling Culture: Magazines, Markets, and Class at the Turn of the Century* (New York: Verso, 1996), p. 25; S. S. McClure, *My Autobiography* (New York: Frederick A. Stokes Company,

which promised to disseminate the writing contained within them to thousands of eager readers, were prime opportunities to quickly make a name for themselves. McClure, an editor who was known for his high level of personal engagement with his magazine's content, knew that he 'could give a new writer such an instrument of publicity as had probably never been built up before.'[71] 'The test of a writer's market value is, how many people will read him?' McClure later reflected. 'I could give a new writer that test at once.'[72]

Tarkington quickly proved his worth. Word spread about *The Gentleman from Indiana* before its serialization in *McClure's* began in May 1899, and when it was finally published, the serial was well-received.[73] The *Charleston News and Courier* wrote that 'for a first work, [it] is very distinguished'; the *Philadelphia Inquirer* called it 'one of the best books of the year' and 'unquestionably […] well worth the reading'; and the *Riverside Daily Press* announced that if Tarkington 'can write other stories as good as that, his fame is assured.'[74] Much as McClure had when he first heard about the novel, the promotion and reviews of *The Gentleman from Indiana* latched on to the Midwestern setting and the matching background of its author. Predicting

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1914), p. 221; Philip Soundy Unwin, 'History of Publishing,' *Encyclopedia Britannica* (2020) <https://www.britannica.com/topic/publishing> [accessed 27 November 2020].

[71] McClure's autobiography was ghostwritten by a young *McClure's* editor: Willa Cather. For more on Cather's involvement with the autobiography and its impact on her own writing, see, for instance, Robert Thacker, '"It's Through Myself That I Knew and Felt Her": S. S. McClure's "My Autobiography" and the Development of Willa Cather's Autobiographical Realism,' *American Literary Realism*, 33.2 (2001), 123-142.

[72] McClure, *My Autobiography*, pp. 234-235. McClure does not name any of the young writers he refers to in this passage, but Tarkington's portrait is included on one of two illustration pages between pages 234 and 235, framing him as one of McClure's success stories.

[73] Viola Roseboro', one of the magazine's primary manuscript readers, informed McClure upon reading the novel's (much longer) draft that she had a 'serial sent by the Lord God Almighty to *McClure's Magazine.*' Harold S. Wilson, *McClure's Magazine and the Muckrakers* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1970), p. 78.

[74] 'Among the Magazines,' *Charleston News and Courier*, 7 May 1899, p. 11; 'The Gentleman from Indiana,' *Philadelphia Inquirer*, 17 December 1899, p. 4; Rev. of *The Gentleman from Indiana*, *Riverside Daily Press*, 14 February 1900, p. 2.

success for the novel, an *Indianapolis News* critic noted that it is 'racy of the soil to which Mr. Tarkington is native'; the *Riverside Daily Press* pointed out that Tarkington 'is a Western man and personally familiar with the scenes where his story was laid'; and a later article in the same paper connected Tarkington to the Indiana literary tradition, calling him 'an Indianan born and bred' and 'the last addition to the list of distinguished writers whom the state has produced in somewhat rapid succession.'[75] 'In this city and throughout this State, especially, unusual interest attaches to the novel,' the *Indianapolis News* book critic wrote in October 1899, before the final installment of the serial was published. 'It is natural that we of Indiana should be curious to know what one of our own number says about us, and how he has pictured us for the benefit of the world.'[76]

As this article suggests, emphasizing his Indiana roots was useful in advertising and selling his debut novel, but Tarkington's connection to his home state was genuine.[77] In discussing his writing process, he often placed particular emphasis on the relationship between authors and their 'settings.' In his 1920 memoir, Tarkington's friend and future biographer, Robert Cortes Holliday, recalled the author's answer when he was asked '"can *you* make a fictional character do this or that […] to lead the story to some kind of an ending you fancy?"' Tarkington responded, '"Not now. […] I can only work from the inside out. The whole thing turns on character. And in that kind of writing about the only thing you can choose is your

[75] E. C. Martin, 'The Literary Outlook,' *Indianapolis News,* 25 February 1899, p. 8; Rev. of *The Gentleman from Indiana, Riverside Daily Press,* 14 February 1900, p. 2; 'Booth Tarkington,' *Riverside Daily Press,* 24 August 1900, p. 6.
[76] 'Books,' *Indianapolis News,* 28 October 1899, p. 10.
[77] Indiana is one of the few places where Tarkington is still remembered today. The state capitol, Indianapolis, is dotted with buildings and parks bearing his name, and a dormitory at Purdue University, which Tarkington attended for one year, also commemorates the author.

setting, the place where you are going to lay your story.'"[78] But choosing to lay his stories in his native Indiana was not straightforward: Tarkington found himself caught between the austere view of Midwestern living characteristic of realists such as Garland and Kirkland and the sentimental portrayals of small-town life that pleased his fellow Midwesterners as much as readers from farther afield.

This tension is apparent in the way the state is portrayed in *The Gentleman from Indiana*. Perhaps surprisingly given the serial's advertising, the Indiana setting is introduced not from the perspective of a native, but through the eyes of a disillusioned Eastern transplant, the editor of the local newspaper. The first installment begins with the editor of the 'Carlow County Herald' leaving his office and walking through the Indiana countryside, eventually coming to sit on a fence post to look back at the town he has just left. The editor views Plattville, Indiana 'solemnly,' and is soon thrown back into memories of when he had arrived in town as a 'young man from the east' to take stock of the failing county newspaper he had purchased.[79] Now, five years later, the editor had turned his newspaper into a thriving business, but his relationship to his new hometown has still not improved. He 'was occupied with the realization that there had been a man in his class at college whose ambition needed no restraint, his promise was so great' and that 'this man was sitting on a fence-rail in Indiana.'[80] The editor—John Harkless, as we

[78] Robert Cortes Holliday, *Men and Books and Cities* (New York: George H. Doran Company, 1920), p. 72. Though she calls place 'one of the lesser angels that watch over the racing hand of fiction' in her essay 'Place in Fiction,' Eudora Welty considers the relationship between character and setting: 'the more narrowly we can examine a fictional character, the greater he is likely to loom up. We must see him set to scale in his proper world to know his size. Place, then, has the most delicate control over character too: by confining character, it defines it.' Eudora Welty, 'Place in Fiction,' in *On Writing* (New York: The Modern Library, 2002), pp. 39-59 (p. 45).
[79] Booth Tarkington, 'The Gentleman from Indiana,' *McClure's Magazine*, 13 (May 1899), 84-96 (pp. 84).
[80] Ibid., pp. 87-88.

soon find out—has accumulated great influence over the town, but he seems incapable of changing his own fate, destined to remain stuck in Indiana without any hope of escaping.[81]

The opening of the complete novel, which was published in October 1899 following its serialization, carried an even stronger sense of the remote bleakness of Midwestern life as passengers viewed the Midwestern landscape through their train windows. While opening rural stories with train journeys had become 'something of a cliché' in this period, Tarkington's opening, Mark Storey argues, is notable for 'the total absence of any pastoral romanticizing.'[82] The first sentence announces: 'There is a fertile stretch of flat lands in Indiana where unagrarian Eastern travellers, glancing from car-windows, shudder and return their eyes to interior upholstery, preferring even the swaying caparisons of a Pullman to the monotony without.'[83] The viewers' opinion of the landscape does not improve after that: over the course of the first paragraph alone, the Indiana landscape is described as 'interminably level,' 'bleak,' 'a desolate plain,' and 'a sad expanse.'[84] Throughout the ensuing description of Plattville, Tarkington maintains this critical distance, presenting the town through the eyes of strangers.

Both of these beginnings, and their frank portrayals of the drawbacks—physical, cultural, and emotional—of small-town life in the Midwest are strongly reminiscent of earlier realist writing from the region. Storey compares the novel's opening to that of Garland's 'Up the Coolley,' and in many ways the general plot outline of *The Gentleman from Indiana* mirrors that

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[81] Holliday suggests that this depiction of Harkless's disappointment might have been influenced by Tarkington's own sense of himself as a writer who, at the time of writing, had not yet been able to make a name for himself after five years of rejections. Robert Cortes Holliday, *Booth Tarkington* (New York: Doubleday, Page & Co., 1918), pp. 39-40.
[82] Mark Storey, *Rural Fictions, Urban Realities: A Geography of Gilded Age American Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), p. 49.
[83] Booth Tarkington, *The Gentleman from Indiana* (New York: Doubleday and McClure, 1900), p. 1.
[84] Ibid.

of another of Garland's short stories, 'God's Ravens.' In Garland's story, Robert, a newspaper editor who feels crushed by Chicago life, makes a decision, in order to regain his health and collect literary material, to move his family back to his rural hometown in Wisconsin, a place he has romanticized during his years living away. In Tarkington's novel, Harkless, for whom 'the thought of coming back to a life-work' in his 'native State' was appealing, buys Plattville's small-town newspaper, similarly hoping to reinvent his career.[85] But neither find that rural life matches their expectations. Robert and his wife struggle to build relationships with their neighbors, who 'seemed grotesque […] shy and distant' and 'not like his ideas of them.'[86] Harkless's discontent is less to do with the people than with the setting itself. His experience in the East has changed him irrevocably, and the restless unhappiness he exhibits in Plattville is that of someone who expected to make more of himself—lamenting his circumstances when compared to those of an old college friend, for example, he says that he has 'dropped out of the world while Tom is still in it.'[87] For both Robert and Harkless, it takes a protracted illness, when the town rallies around to support them, to finally appreciate their new (old) homes. In Robert's case, Garland suggests that despite the change of opinion brought about by the neighborly kindness he receives, a certain distance remains. When Robert tells one of the townspeople, William, 'I understand you now. I know you all now,' the narrator tells us that 'William did not understand him,' highlighting the persistent gap between the rural townspeople and the urban returnee.[88]

[85] Tarkington, *The Gentleman from Indiana*, p. 139.
[86] Hamlin Garland, 'God's Ravens,' in *Main-Travelled Roads*, pp. 301-326 (p. 313).
[87] Tarkington, *The Gentleman from Indiana*, p. 139.
[88] Garland, 'God's Ravens,' p. 323.

Tarkington, however, does not want to end his novel on this tone, and it is in Harkless's complete and unambiguous acceptance of his Indiana home that *The Gentleman from Indiana* begins to fall short as a contribution to the realist canon. Harkless enters the narrative as 'a young man from the East alight[ing] on the platform of the railway station,' and he is not named throughout the first chapters of the book.[89] Instead, Tarkington chooses to refer to him by this original description, the 'young man from the East,' and the repetition of the phrase, as well as the absence of any other descriptor, brands Harkless in readers' minds as a geographic and cultural outsider. In this, Tarkington's novel fits into a venerable tradition of rural fiction narrated by outsiders. Tom Lutz cites the frequent appearance in rural novels of 'an interloper from outside the community' who, at least initially, seems to present a more cosmopolitan, 'nonlocal, usually (but not always) urban perspective.'[90] Many of the short sketches in Indiana author George Ade's bestselling *Fables in Slang* (1899), for example, rely on what Lutz calls the clash between 'the interloper's more worldly perspective and the locals' more provincial one.'[91] Ade's 'The Fable of the New York Person Who Gave the Stage Fright to Fostoria, Ohio' finds its humor in the contrast between a 'cultured' New Yorker and his supposedly less civilized Midwestern cousin, playing up stereotypical assumptions about Midwestern life versus life on the East Coast. When the New York man first arrives in Fostoria, Ohio—which Ade calls the 'Far West'—he asks his cousin if there was '"a Manicure Parlor in this Beastly Hole."' He is shocked to find that the cousin does not know what he is referring to, and when he attends the 'Annual Dinner of the Bicycle Club,' we are told that he goes 'Home early because the Man

[89] Tarkington, *The Gentleman from Indiana*, p. 6.
[90] Tom Lutz, *Cosmopolitan Vistas: American Regionalism and Literary Value* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2004), p. 80.
[91] Ibid.

sitting next to him put Ice in his Claret.' The humor of the story rests in the cousin's realization, when he visits Manhattan a few weeks later, that the New Yorker's pretentions are all for show.[92] In another fable, when a young man returns to his rural Illinois town from business school in Chicago all the local townspeople are intimidated, but after ten years the educated young man was only worth 'the sum of Nineteen Dollars' while a local farmer 'had 240 acres of crackin' Corn Land (all tiled), a big red Barn, four Span of good Horses, sixteen Head of Cattle, a likely bunch of Shoats and a Covered Buggy.'[93] In depicting the conflict between Midwestern life and the outsider's perspective of it in a way that was always humorous, and in reinforcing local expectations of who would come out on top, Ade portrayed a Midwest that was on equal footing with the East.[94]

But instead of oscillating between the insider's and the outsider's view, as Ade does in these stories and as Lutz argues all regionalist novels should, Tarkington's novel can be read in terms of a progression—or regression, depending on the reader's perspective—from realism to romanticism. Though Harkless had begun the novel pointing out the challenges and the shortcomings of a rural lifestyle from a detached critical perspective, by the end of the story he has become the town's biggest advocate, a status that is formalized when he becomes Carlow

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[92] George Ade, *Fables in Slang,* (Chicago: Herbert S. Stone and Company, 1899), pp. 5, 6.
[93] Ibid., p. 15.
[94] Ade's fables, filled with lighthearted representation of rural life, were so popular that he went on to write a weekly, syndicated column along the same lines, earning him the nickname the 'Aesop of Indiana.' Although these sketches are what Ade is best known for today, he lived in Chicago as a contemporary of Hamlin Garland when realism was flourishing and later declared that he would have preferred to be known 'as a realist with a compact style and a clean Anglo-Saxon vocabulary and the courage to observe human virtues and frailties as they showed on the lens.' George Ade, 'They Simply Wouldn't Let Me Be a High-Brow,' *American Magazine* (1920), 50-51, 197-199 (p. 51). For more on Ade and his relationship to realism, see Jack Brenner, 'Howells and Ade,' *American Literature,* 38.2 (1966), 198-207, and Fred C. Kelly, *George Ade: Warmhearted Satirist* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merill, 1947).

County's representative in Congress. Wholeheartedly embracing his county and its people, he is thus transformed from 'the young man from the East' into 'the gentleman from Indiana,' his Eastern, urban identity having been completely overwritten by his new status as a small-town champion. This is reflected in his perception of the landscape outside his window as he takes the train back to Plattville in the novel's final chapter. While the train passengers at the beginning of the novel did not even want to look at the 'monotonous' view outside the train, in this final train scene the window is open next to Harkless and his companion, letting the breeze 'fresh from the wide fields' into the carriage and demonstrating Harkless's newfound openness to the Midwestern landscape.[95] 'It takes a long time for the full beauty of the flat lands to reach a man's soul,' Tarkington concludes, but 'once there, nor hills, nor sea, nor growing fan leaves of palm shall suffice him.'[96]

Harkless's transformation establishes a tendency in Tarkington's work towards sentimental, romantic endings and for many critics, this was one of his greatest weaknesses, and a significant part of why he fell out of literary favor. Even contemporary critics, many of whom were largely complimentary of Tarkington's work, recognized that his endings compromised the success of his novels. In an otherwise positive review, Percy Boynton, for example, points out that while those endings were clearly designed to be pleasantly appealing to his readers, 'To anyone who is interested in stories not as narrative formulas […] but as chronicles of natural

[95] Tarkington, *The Gentleman from Indiana*, p. 347.
[96] Ibid., p. 348. Ruth Suckow would echo this sentiment in her notes for an unpublished essay about her own home state of Iowa, where she wrote that it 'takes a while to care for rural country,' where the 'beauty sinks in—instead of striking or stunning.' Ruth Suckow, 'Few Words About Iowa,' Ruth Suckow Papers, MsC0706, Box 28, University of Iowa Special Collections, Iowa City, Iowa.

people, the popular endings of the Tarkington novels are usually anything but pleasant.'[97] In a much more baldly critical review, Carl Van Doren was even more forthright on this subject. 'According to all the codes of the more serious kinds of fiction, the unwillingness—or the inability—to conduct a plot to its legitimate ending implies some weakness in the artistic character,' Van Doren wrote in 1922, 'and this weakness has been Mr. Tarkington's primary defect.' For Van Doren, this sentimental bent was in large part due to Tarkington's Indiana background. He argued that despite the potential any village held to serve as a 'universe' for an author, Tarkington's dedication to his home state was a liability. 'Mr. Tarkington has toward his native state the conscious attitude of the booster,' Van Doren declared, 'trying to be the Hoosier of Hoosiers, [Tarkington] has given himself up to the romantic and sentimental elements of the Indiana literary tradition.'[98]

But Tarkington was not the only Indiana author who struggled to reconcile ideas of literary progress with regional loyalty. Meredith Nicholson also worried about the local instinct towards romanticism in his work. Nicholson's *The House of a Thousand Candles* (1905), for example, is a prototypical example of the type of Indiana novel which regularly made the bestseller lists in the early twentieth century. The novel is a haunted house story clearly inspired by Gothic romances, but written, Nicholson argued in a note he wrote in a copy of the book in 1932, 'to show if possible that a romantic tale could be written, without an "imaginary kingdom," with the scene in our own Indiana.'[99] It chronicles the story of Jack, an Eastern young

[97] Percy Boynton, 'American Authors of Today: VI. Booth Tarkington,' *The English Journal*, 12.2 (1923), 117-125 (p. 120).
[98] Carl Van Doren, *Contemporary American Novelists 1900-1920* (New York: Macmillan, 1922), p. 90.
[99] Nicholson quoted in Shumaker, *A History of Indiana Literature*, p. 331. To set the Gothic scene, Nicholson set the story in December, a departure from many Indiana novels of the time (including *The Gentleman from Indiana*) which were overwhelmingly set in June.

man who has squandered his family money traveling, and who returns to his home state to live in an unfinished, mysterious house that he inherits upon his grandfather's death under the stipulation that he live there continuously for a year. When the grandfather (large as life) eventually reappears, he explains that he tricked his grandson to return home because: 'This is a beautiful country, this Indiana! And what I want to do is to found an estate, […] and I want you to have it with me, Jack, to link our name to these woods and that pretty lake. I'd rather have that for my neighbor than any lake in Scotland.'[100] In other words, Indiana's appeal lies in its potential (unlike the past Gothicism of Scotland), and the opportunity it affords its residents to make a name for themselves from nothing but hard work and determination, both of which he had forced Jack to demonstrate during his time occupying the house. And like Tarkington's Harkless, Jack has a change of heart about Indiana over the course of the novel—while at the beginning he had described his stay there as 'exile,' he ends the novel with a loving description of 'April in Indiana! […] April in the heart!'[101]

The House of a Thousand Candles was a popular success, but Nicholson had doubts about continuing in this mode of commercially successful, sentimental writing. Six years later, he acknowledged his predilection for penning romances in a letter to fellow author Winston Churchill, writing that he 'never intended going in for the sort of fluffy romance I dallied with for half a dozen years' and adding that he was going to 'boil the melodrama out of my system.'[102] Nicholson's *A Hoosier Chronicle,* which combines the story of a young woman trying to uncover the mysteries surrounding her birth after the death of her mother with a story of

[100] Meredith Nicholson, *The House of a Thousand Candles* (Indianapolis: The Bobbs-Merrill Company, 1905), p. 361.
[101] Ibid., pp. 23, 379.
[102] Warren I. Titus, 'Three Letters of Meredith Nicholson to Novelist Winston Churchill,' *Indiana Magazine of History,* 57.3 (1961), 249-252 (p. 251).

contemporary Indiana politics, was published a year later in 1912. In a story bearing many similarities to Tarkington's first novel, an unscrupulous local politician is ousted by the efforts of an upright, moral young man with the help of his love interest, a precocious and educated girl who comes from a mysterious background. This novel had elements of realism: the middle includes a fairly detailed account of state politics including many examples of 'authorial intrusion of an expository nature.'[103] But finally, inevitably perhaps, the novel veers back towards what Nicholson called 'fluffy romance,' when the political plot is tied together with the novel's main romance through the revelation that the politician at the center of the story is actually the female protagonist's unknown father. The novel's final line, which Vanausdall compares to a 'fairy tale,' ties this neat plot conclusion to the story's Indiana setting.[104] Reflecting on the modernizing changes she's seeing in her state, a longtime Indianapolis resident nevertheless reflects, 'It's all pretty comfortable and cheerful and busy in Indiana, with lots of old-fashioned human kindness flowing round; and it's getting better all the time. And I guess it's always got to be that way, out here in God's country,' a conclusion that assures readers that, since this is an Indiana novel, it could not end any way but happily.[105]

This type of 'fairy tale' ending was also important to the local reception of Tarkington's first novel. Though Woodress describes *The Gentleman from Indiana* as being inspired by a

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[103] Shumaker, *A History of Indiana Literature,* p. 332. Shumaker believes the 'intrusions' cause the story to 'drag.'

[104] Vanausdall, *Pride and Protest,* p. 55.

[105] Meredith Nicholson, *A Hoosier Chronicle* (Cambridge, MA: Riverside Press, 1912), p. 606. George Barr McCutcheon also aspired to produce realism, and actually seems to have succeeded in creating an unvarnished portrait of the state—Vanausdall calls McCutcheon's *Viola Gwyn* (1922) 'probably the most unflattering portrait of early Indiana ever to be produced by a Hoosier romancer.' Yet by 1922, she argues, Indianans had 'grown accustomed' to these types of depictions of Indiana frontier life and the novel did not make the impact of McCutcheon's romantic novels either locally or nationally. Vanausdall, *Pride and Protest,* pp. 50-51.

'genuine desire to extol the virtues of his native state,' rural Indiana readers were angry with Tarkington's initial depiction of a stultifying, dull Indiana life. Tarkington recalls, for example, being confronted by angry and disappointed friends and neighbors upon returning to Indianapolis from New York, where he had edited the book for serialization. After reading just the first few installments, he claimed, they were insulted by the portrayal of their home state: 'I was informed that my serial held Indiana up to scorn; I'd assaulted the sacred altars.'[106] Tarkington might have been exaggerating the negative response he received from Indianapolis residents—who, after all, lived lives far removed from the rural one depicted in Carlow County—but some editors of small-town local papers were indeed angry about their representation in print. A review of Tarkington's ongoing serial from the *Peru Republican* of Peru, Indiana (reprinted with a response in *The Indianapolis News*) groused that Harkless 'wears smoked glasses to keep the dreariness of the Indiana landscape from hurting his eyes, and ear-bobs to protect his tympanum from the rude jargon of the Hoosiers,' adding that 'every self-respecting Indianan hopes that the regulators will get the young man from the East for keeps when they make their regular raid in the next chapter.'[107] The transition from realism to romance, which increasingly takes hold of *The Gentleman from Indiana* as the story progresses and Harkless falls in love with Plattville, soothed the incipient rural outrage—something an advertisement for the book made sure to mention when it assured readers that 'it ends as all love stories should end—happily.'[108]

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[106] Booth Tarkington, *America Moved: Booth Tarkington's Memoirs of Time and Place, 1869-1928,* ed. by Jeremy Beer (Eugene: Front Porch Republic Books, 2015), p. 108.

[107] The response printed in *The Indianapolis News* is more forgiving, calling the serial 'a true and spirited picture of a phase of Indiana life still to be found in scores of places' (although not, clearly, in Indianapolis) and an 'admirable picture of a sturdy citizenship which any one might be proud to be allied with or sprung from.' 'Booth Tarkington's Hero,' *The Indianapolis News,* 23 August 1899, p. 4.

[108] Though this criticism was likely beneficial for the novel's sales: an advertisement for the complete novel in the *Indianapolis News* noted that the book had 'excited much criticism, just

The disconnect between *The Gentleman from Indiana*'s overwhelmingly positive national reception and its local one, particularly in terms of the local color aspect of the story, gets to the heart of the anxiety Midwestern residents felt over their regional identity in the early days of Tarkington's career. Tarkington knew exactly what Indiana critics were thinking about when they hoped that his novel would 'go far toward reclaiming Indiana from the opinion which many people in other states hold of it.'[109] Having gone to prep school in New England and university at Princeton, Tarkington remembered that when visiting the Eastern families of his school friends, his 'Hoosier origin was ignored with conscious tact by these kindhearted people' who behaved as if he 'had a physical defect, they so thoughtfully avoided seeming to be aware of it.'[110] Three years after the serialization of *The Gentleman from Indiana*, Tarkington published an essay in *Harper's Magazine* titled 'The Middle West,' which directly argued against various Eastern stereotypes of his region. He begins this essay by recounting another personal experience of regional discrimination, when a New York clergyman had told him, 'the people from your part of the country are improving steadily. Members of the younger generation have come East to our schools and colleges; […] and thus returning home, bring the West more and more toward the standard,' a statement that complacently reinforces the East's position as the 'standard' of American culture towards which the rest of the country must aspire.[111] In the rest of his article, Tarkington does not seem to question this cultural hierarchy so much as argue that the stereotype

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and unjust' but 'better than all,' it had 'sold at the rate of a thousand copies a day since its publication.' 'The Gentleman from Indiana,' *Indianapolis News,* 28 October 1899, p. 10.

[109] 'A New Author,' *Seymour Daily Democrat,* 5 August 1899, p. 5; 'The Gentleman from Indiana,' *Indianapolis News,* 28 October 1899, p. 10.

[110] Tarkington, *America Moved,* pp. 105-106. Kazin notes that though 'no one could have become more Bostonian than Howells,' Boston poet James Russell Lowell 'had corrected his Ohio ways with gentle patronizing humor down the years.' Kazin, *On Native Grounds,* p. 1.

[111] Booth Tarkington, 'The Middle West,' *Harper's Monthly Magazine,* 106 (1902), 75-83 (p. 76).

is one that applies as much, or as little, in all regions of the country. The Easterner alleges 'that it is the women of the West and of the Central States who are loud-voiced, nasal, r-burring, and twangy,' Tarkington notes at one point.[112] But, he continues, 'on the porches of the country club of the city at which we are glancing you will hear a twang no oftener than you will anywhere else. Every society in the world contains […] individuals who have voices unpleasing in quality; and of course, as it is everywhere, it is here.'[113]

However unfair it might be, an awareness that the Midwest was deemed sub-standard by the East coast runs throughout Tarkington's writing. In his first Pulitzer Prize winning novel, *The Magnificent Ambersons* (1918), written almost twenty years after *The Gentleman from Indiana*, Indianapolis native George Amberson Minafer declares, 'You know […] there are a lot of people in the East—in the South, too, for that matter—that don't think we've got any particular family or position or culture in this part of the country. […] I think it's time all their sort found out that three generations can mean just as much out here as anywhere else.'[114] While this reflects the Midwest's regional insecurity, it also, as 'The Middle West' did, implicitly reinforces the perspective that the East is the 'standard' against which the rest of the country is measuring itself, as well as the place where the final judgment about Midwestern culture will be made.

As if determined to answer the 'people in the East,' the ending of *The Gentleman from Indiana*, while making the novel less stylistically coherent, was crucial in leaving readers (local and national) with a positive view of the state. As a *St. Louis Republic* review of the novel

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[112] Henry James would also address American speech in a 1905 lecture, calling the 'national use of vocal sound' in the US 'slovenly.' Henry James, 'The Question of Our Speech,' in *The Question of Our Speech; The Lesson of Balzac: Two Lectures* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1905), pp. 3-52 (p. 25).
[113] Tarkington, 'The Middle West,' p. 81.
[114] Booth Tarkington, *The Magnificent Ambersons* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, Page & Company, 1919), pp. 252-253.

summarized: 'The beginning of Mr. Tarkington's story is as realistic as the most prejudiced follower of Zola could wish, but romanticism gets the upper hand of the author as the story proceeds, and few readers will object.'[115] Advertisements for the complete novel similarly advertised it both through its realism and its romanticism. Calling it a 'strong and realistic novel' containing 'extraordinarily real' pictures of a country editor's life, an advertisement printed in *The Indianapolis News* nevertheless states that 'the final charm of the tale lies in the delicacy and romance of the love story.'[116] By this point, after the publication of the serial's final installment—by which time Harkless has been convinced of the merits of his native state—Indiana residents were pleased with the novel's depiction of the state. Their earlier negative reaction to the initial chapters, however, suggests a more limited appetite for its 'extraordinarily real' aspects.

TARKINGTON'S HOOSIER POETS

In order to reflect on such questions of artistic production and literary representation, Tarkington's novels frequently include a character who writes. Poets, more specifically, feature in many of Tarkington's novels, including *Monsieur Beaucaire* (1900), *The Two Vanrevels* (1902), *Cherry* (1903), *The Turmoil* (1915), *Seventeen* (1916), and *The Magnificent Ambersons* (1918). Other Midwestern novels of this period frequently featured characters migrating from their small hometowns to the city in order to pursue creative careers. Rose of Hamlin Garland's *Rose of Dutcher's Coolly* (1895), for example, goes to Chicago to be a writer, declaring defiantly

[115] '"The Gentleman from Indiana": Booth Tarkington's Story of a "Hoosier" Town,' *St. Louis Republic*, 14 January 1900, p. 9.
[116] 'A New Book,' *The Indianapolis News*, 19 October 1899, p. 3.

upon her arrival that though the city is more '"grand and terrible"' than she expected, she is not afraid because '"it's where things are done."'[117] Eugene Wilta moves from a small town in Illinois to Chicago to study painting in Dreiser's *The Genius* (1915), and Thea Kronborg goes to Chicago from Colorado to become a singer in Willa Cather's *The Song of the Lark* (1915). T. Austin Graham's summary of Dreiser's characters, whose 'trajectories toward, within, and out of Chicago are intended to leave the impression that the city is […] a place that relentlessly pulls in people and raw material and capital, and sends them out again in altered forms,' reflects the thrust of much early twentieth century Midwestern writing, as well as the lives of its authors. Garland, Cather, and Dreiser were not unique in moving to Chicago or another large city in order to pursue literary careers.[118] In keeping his poets in their Midwestern small-town settings, however, Tarkington departed from this model.

In *The Gentleman from Indiana,* for example, Tarkington presents Plattville poet Miss Tibbs as a foil to the journalist Harkless. Miss Tibbs, the sister of the town's postmaster, is a minor character in the novel, but much like Ames in *Sister Carrie*, she is someone whose literary tastes and aspirations make her stand out. She is the first named character to appear, introduced before Harkless even steps foot into Plattville: 'Miss Tibbs […] used to make a point of walking up and down Main Street as often as possible, to get a thrill in the realization of some poetical expressions that haunted her pleasingly; phrases she had employed frequently in her poems for the "Carlow County Herald."'[119]

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[117] Hamlin Garland, *Rose of Dutcher's Coolly* (Chicago: Stone & Kimball, 1895), p. 210.
[118] T. Austin Graham, 'Amid Forces: Theodore Drieser's Chicago' in *Chicago: A Literary History,* ed. by Frederik Byrn Kohlert (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021), pp. 125-136 (p. 129).
[119] Tarkington, *The Gentleman from Indiana,* p. 4.

Miss Tibbs is a lifelong local—'she had never been beyond Carlow and the bordering counties in her life'—yet 'all her poems were of city streets and bustling multitudes.'[120] Taken by the idea of something she has never seen, she walks the town streets, 'murmer[ing] to herself, with the accent of soulful revel, "The thronged city streets," and "Within the thronged city," or, "Where the thronging crowds were swarming and the great cathedral rose."'[121] But while Miss Tibbs is preoccupied with city scenes, her local readers are more taken by those poems that are inspired by their native environment, written when 'her muse had been sylvan, speaking of "Flow'rs of May," and hinting at thoughts that overcame her when she roved the woodlands thro'.'[122] The temptation to reconfigure her small native town into something sublime is strong, but the verses that make the most impact are the ones that represent the town in a more romantic, picturesque light: 'Her verses beginning, "O, my native city, bride of Hibbard's winding stream […] When thy myriad lights are shining, and thy faces, like a dream, Go flitting down thy sidewalks when their daily toll is done," were pronounced, at the time of their publication, the best poem that had ever appeared in the "Herald."'[123]

Through Miss Tibbs, Tarkington addresses the literary temptation to embroider and dramatize, something he seems to be trying to resist in his own writing by aligning himself to Harkless's more journalistic—or realistic—perspective. His attempt to distance himself from the romanticizing tendencies represented by Miss Tibbs is apparent when Tarkington self-consciously acknowledges moments when the novel's plot skirts the edges of sensationalism and

[120] Tarkington, *The Gentleman from Indiana,* p. 4.
[121] Ibid.
[122] Ibid., pp. 4-5.
[123] Ibid., p. 5.

recasts them within the text.[124] One of the earliest and most prominent examples of this is also the start of the novel's central love story. Harkless, who has come up against the White Caps, a gang from a rough town in the Plattville area, is shot at while crossing a field in view of a friend's porch. When he runs empty-handed to confront his attacker, a woman convinces him to instead come with her and take shelter. Walking with Harkless in the aftermath of the shooting, the woman—Helen Sherwood, who is staying with the local family Harkless was on his way to visit—says that the incident 'was melodrama, wasn't it,' but Harkless laughs and insists it was comedy only, consciously revising the tone.[125] When Harkless recounts the White Caps' somewhat more successful attack later in the novel, he says, '"I thought they meant to lay me across the [railroad] track, but it didn't occur to them, I suppose—they are not familiar with melodrama,"' a statement that acknowledges the stereotypical direction the story could have taken and that draws attention to the novel's resistance to that trajectory.[126] At the end of the book, Harkless says that he had seen someone who looked like a friend of his, '"Homer Tibbs—or as Homer might look if he were in disgrace […] he slouched like a thief in melodrama,"' pointing out the incongruity of that type of figure both in Plattville and in the novel itself.[127]

Miss Tibbs, whose poetic inclinations conflict with the narrative voice of the novel itself, represents this stylistic tension within the text. Consider the moment the narrator juxtaposes the poet's and his own view of a town meeting: 'Miss Tibbs, seated on the platform […], viewed the expectant throng with rapture. It is possible that she would have confessed to witnessing a sea of

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[124] Mark Storey identifies the same 'oddly self-reflexive address to the reader' in Eggleston's *A Hoosier School-Master* in relation to that novel's love story, citing it as indicative of the novel's place 'between the sentimentality of popular fiction and the emerging self-consciousness of literary realism.' Storey, *Rural Fictions, Urban Realities,* p. 5.
[125] Tarkington, *The Gentleman from Indiana,* p. 75.
[126] Ibid., p. 215.
[127] Ibid., p. 355.

faces, but it is more probable that she viewed the expectant throng.'[128] In this moment, the narrator addresses Miss Tibbs's poetic tendencies by suggesting the two phrases she might consider to describe the waiting crowd. The narrator serves as a mediator between Miss Tibbs's overwrought descriptions and the somewhat more realistic account of the lecture that follows. Satirizing Miss Tibbs allows Tarkington to temper his own temptation toward romance with realism.

Three years later, in Tarkington's third published novel, *The Two Vanrevels* (1902), the Indiana setting provides another stage on which to debate the merits of realism and romanticism—this time more explicitly through a discussion of local literary taste. At first glance, *The Two Vanrevels* is a fairly typical historical romance and conforms to many of the standard features of the genre: Betty Carewe returns to her small Indiana hometown, Rouen, after attending school elsewhere and quickly wins the affection of two best friends, Tom Vanrevel and Crailey Gray.[129] Because of a longstanding feud with Betty's father, upstanding and reliable Tom is forced to keep his distance from Betty, while town rogue Crailey, who is engaged to another woman, courts Betty while pretending to be Tom. Unsurprisingly, this deception does not end well—believing Crailey to be Tom, Betty's father fatally shoots him, and Betty realizes it is Tom she has been in love with all along, fulfilling readers' expectations of a dramatic and romantic ending.

But while this story seems to be fairly straightforward, designed to appeal to popular tastes, Tarkington once again uses a romantic framework to address authorship and region

[128] Tarkington, *The Gentleman from Indiana,* p. 17.
[129] Rouen is modelled on Terre Haute, Indiana. Betty is named for Tarkington's mother, Elizabeth, and the story draws upon her schooldays at St. Mary-of-the-Woods, which Betty also attends. Woodress, *Booth Tarkington: The Gentleman from Indiana,* p. 92.

through a consideration of the production and consumption of literature in his nineteenth century Indiana town. After introducing the main characters and the relationships between them, Tarkington opens the second chapter rather surprisingly by asking: 'Does there exist an incredulous, or jealous, denizen of another portion of our country who, knowing that the room in the wooden cupola over Mr. Carewe's library was commonly alluded to by Rouen as the "Tower Chamber," will prove himself so sectionally prejudiced as to deny that the town was a veritable hotbed of literary interest, or that Sir Walter Scott was ill-appreciated there?'[130] This sentence, like the opening of *The Gentleman from Indiana,* seems to directly address common regional stereotypes—that Indiana is, first, unliterary, and second, that the novels the town would appreciate are romantic and sentimental. The author Tarkington chooses to prove this second point, Sir Walter Scott, is particularly telling: by accusing other regions of having these beliefs about the town's literary taste out of 'jealousy,' he firmly distances the town, and his own novel, from the tradition of historical romance associated with Scott and Indiana. In doing this, he is aligning himself with Mark Twain, who had famously written a dismissal of Scott's form of romance into *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1885)—a book which Tarkington greatly admired.[131]

But for all that, Tarkington's novel itself falls firmly into the category of historical romance. Indeed it opens, unironically, with the line, 'It was long ago in the days when men

[130] Booth Tarkington, *The Two Vanrevels* (New York: McClure, Phillips & Co., 1902), p. 20.
[131] Twain gives Scott's name to a steamboat wreck Huck finds, demonstrating his own view that Scott's form of historical romance is completely washed up. In an introduction he much later wrote to a biography of Twain, Tarkington declared that in his mind 'Huckleberry Finn is the great national figure of his period,' arguing that 'no other "character" of all fiction of that time lives not so vividly, or with anything like such triumph of humor and warm reality, as he does not in this later and greatly changed generation.' Booth Tarkington, 'Introduction,' in Cyril Clemens, *My Cousin Mark Twain* (Emmaus, PA: Rodale Press, 1939), pp. vii-xi (p. x).

sighed when they fell in love; when people danced by candle and lamp, and did dance, too, instead of solemnly gliding about; in that mellow time so long ago.'[132] Betty Carewe, the novel's heroine, is completely taken with a portrait of her great-uncle, who was killed in the French Revolution, and she loses herself in his old letters, which remind her of the 'historical novels which she read.'[133] Crailey Gray first meets Betty and captures her imagination while dressed much like her great-uncle's portrait for a fancy-dress party, a moment that drives the rest of the novel's plot. And in the context of the novel itself, the superior tone of this chapter's first line, which dismisses the stereotypical literary assumptions of other regional residents as 'jealousy,' is unfounded: it is not reading that takes place in Robert Carewe's 'Tower Chamber,' but gambling, a revelation that seems to confirm the beliefs of the 'sectionally prejudiced.'

But, as in *The Gentleman from Indiana*, Tarkington intends to complicate the romanticism of his novel. We can see this in the name of the town itself, Rouen, which is named after Gustave Flaubert's birthplace and the setting of much of *Madame Bovary* (1857), a novel which broke with Flaubert's earlier romantic stories and came to be seen as one of the novels that ushered in the realist movement in Europe.[134] If the first two chapters set up the tension between romanticism and realism, the debate is then played out within the novel in relation to another of Tarkington's poets: Crailey Gray. Never one to shy away from taking a controversial stance, Crailey spends evenings with the men of the town offending their conventional literary

[132] Tarkington, *The Two Vanrevels,* p. 1.
[133] Ibid., pp. 25-26. Eudora Welty sees place as central to Flaubert's novels, which she considers 'of the kind that is embedded immovably as rock in the country of its birth,' making Tarkington's homage to him in his place name a testament to his attempt to write locally grounded realism. Welty, 'Place in Fiction,' p. 48.
[134] Tarkington had also mentioned Rouen as a town in Indiana in *The Gentleman from Indiana.* For more on Flaubert, realism, and romanticism, see, for example, Stephen Heath, *Flaubert: Madame Bovary* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992).

tastes with his more progressive opinions. Echoing Bob Ames, another Indianan who challenged conventional literary taste, Crailey 'was rather radical in his literary preferences, and hurt the elder Chenoweth's feelings by laughing heartily at some poems of the late Lord Byron; offended many people by disliking the style of Sir Edward Bulwer, and even refused to admit that James Fenimore Cooper was the greatest novelist that ever lived,' disparaging and dismissing some of the most prominent 'romancers' of the nineteenth century.[135] But whereas in *The Gentleman from Indiana,* Miss Tibbs's romantic writing was aligned with the town's tastes but at odds with the more realist narrator, here it is the poet himself who is leading the shift towards reevaluating literary norms, something that reflects Tarkington's own authorial reevaluation of the type of writing he wanted to produce.

Perhaps this difference in taste is why Crailey finds himself looking away from his town and state in order to find literary validation. Rouen knows that Crailey is a 'genius' because 'his poems were "already attracting more than local attention," as the Journal remarked, generously, for Crailey had ceased to present his rhymes to that valuable paper. Ay! Boston, no less, was his mart.'[136] The benchmark by which Rouen is assessing Crailey's artistic talent is his reception in the East. While the townspeople might be stung by his no longer printing his poems in the local

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[135] Tarkington, *The Two Vanrevels,* p. 74. Edward Bulwer-Lytton, a nineteenth-century English writer and politician, was 'skilled in anticipating and satisfying changes in public taste,' writing in a variety of genres, from gothic romance to historical fiction. Today, he is probably best known for being the inspiration for the San Jose State English Department's annual Edward Bulwer-Lytton Fiction Contest, which seeks the worst first line of a novel published in the previous year because of his opening 'It was a dark and stormy night.' In emphasizing Crailey's dismissal of James Fenimore Cooper—the writer whose greatness the townspeople seem to take most for granted—the novel once again nods to Twain and his famous1895 takedown, 'Fenimore Cooper's Literary Offenses.' Mark Twain, 'Fenimore Cooper's Literary Offenses,' in *Essays and Sketches of Mark Twain,* ed. by Stuart Miller (New York: Barnes and Noble Books, 1995), pp. 287-298.

[136] Tarkington, *The Two Vanrevels,* pp. 73-74.

paper, his defection to Boston raises his value in their eyes. In describing Boston as Crailey's 'mart,' the newspaper also suggests that Boston is where literary value might also become monetary value. Through Crailey, Tarkington is able to address not only the East-West dynamic that he explored in his first novel, but also his own position as an author balancing his loyalty to his home state with his literary and commercial ambitions.

It is because of this that Crailey's impersonation of Tom Vanrevel, which forms the drama of the story, takes on particular significance.[137] In a conversation with Tom, Crailey compares his writing to a stage performance, declaring upon returning from a fishing trip: "Trips of a poetaster! It's then I write best, and write I will! […] Why, a man's thoughts are like actors performing in the air and all the crowding stars for audience!"'[138] In his first extended conversation with Betty, after she has saved him from a burning building, Crailey conflates his poetic abilities with performance in a more literary sense, when he channels the romantic figure he had appeared to her as the night before:

> "Now that you have saved my life," he said in a low, tremulous tone, "what are you going to do with it?" […] There was a long pause before she replied, and when she did, it was to his considerable surprise. "I have never seen a play, except the funny little ones we acted at the convent," she said, "but isn't that the way they speak on the stage?" […] it was with a

[137] Tarkington's often repetitive plots—and particularly his reliance on mistaken identities—have drawn attacks from critics who view his novels as formulaic. As Holliday, who is generally positive about Tarkington's work, argued, 'The basis of practically every story he has written […] has been a misunderstanding of one kind or another, of identity, of purpose, of character. And in repeated instances this misunderstanding has been of the most elementary sort, that of mistaken identity.' Holliday, *Booth Tarkington*, p. 83.
[138] Tarkington, *The Two Vanrevels,* pp. 190-191.

thrill of delight that he recognized her clear reading of him. He had been too florid again.[139]

By dismissing the type of melodramatic romance that Crailey would have expected to appeal to her, given her predilection for French romantic novels, Betty's discrimination between language suited to the stage and that suited to real life reveals a more critical stance than Crailey and readers might have anticipated.[140] Her 'clear reading' of Crailey's character—recognizing his disingenuousness from his overwrought language — preempts our own reading of Tarkington's novel, and our recognition of the internal tension between romance and realism that the novel struggles with. Speech that is 'too florid,' or that does not represent life as it is, but rather mimics artistic representations, is immediately identified as out of place and discordant. Tarkington, like Betty, clearly recognizes the gulf between real life and popular novels and plays, but his own novel struggles to come down firmly on the side of the former.[141]

Tarkington would return to these same questions of genre, local reception, and commercial value when he set out to write the novels that he believed would define his career. What became known as the Growth Trilogy, composed of *The Turmoil* (1915), *The Magnificent Ambersons* (1918), and *The Midlander* (1923), was a project of regional and national redefinition that Tarkington undertook in a conscious effort both to depict a changing society in the early twentieth century and to cement his own literary reputation. Though each features a different cast

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[139] Tarkington, *The Two Vanrevels,* p. 117.
[140] Tarkington himself wrote many professionally-produced plays over the course of his career. He distinguished these from his novels, telling an interviewer in 1916, 'When I am writing a play, I think of what the public wants. But I do not make these concessions when I am writing fiction.' Tarkington quoted in Albert Van Nostrand, 'The Plays of Booth Tarkington,' *The Princeton University Library Chronicle,* 17.1 (1955), 13-39 (p. 32).
[141] I will return to this idea of stage language versus everyday speech in relation to Zona Gale in Chapter 2.

of characters, all three novels deal with similar themes of industrialization in a small Midwestern city and the changes—often painful—that the city's increasing mechanization brings to the lives of its residents. Together they represent an effort to record the changes Tarkington saw in the Midwest and how they had come about, an almost journalistic effort in line with what I have argued was his career-long, if ambivalent, aspiration towards realism. For many critics, *The Turmoil* marked a dramatic departure in his work, a sign 'of Tarkington's coming into his full powers.'[142] However, the novel's treatment of its central protagonist, Bibbs Sheridan, suggests that not everything had changed: here again is a man returning to his home town, and a poet reflecting on writing.

Bibbs is the son of a new money family who have made their fortune in the first wave of manufacturing to come to their small Midwestern city. At the beginning of the novel, Bibbs returns home after an extended stay at a sanitarium where he was recovering from a mental and physical breakdown brought on by working in one of his father's factories. While Sheridan, Bibbs's father, is a born businessman, Bibbs feels overwhelmed and out of place in the industrializing city, which values 'progress' and 'bigness' over connection and creativity.[143] Bibbs's ongoing conflict with his father because of his resistance to working in the family business is presented in relation to the apparent incompatibility between the slower, more romantic way of life that had characterized the city before industrialization and the new, faster

[142] Adam J. Sorkin, '"She Doesn't Last, Apparently": A Reconsideration of Booth Tarkington's *Alice Adams*,' *American Literature*, 46.2 (1974), 182-199 (p. 182).
[143] Sherwood Anderson echoed the opening of this novel, which commented on the drive for 'bigness' that had taken over the small Midwestern city, when he also expressed anxiety about 'the terrible bigness of the country' which arose from what Jon K. Lauck calls 'the growing rootlessness in the nation.' Sherwood Anderson, Letter to August Derleth, 17 January 1940, Derleth Papers, WHS quoted in Jon K. Lauck, *From Warm Center to Ragged Edge: The Erosion of Midwestern Literary and Historical Regionalism, 1920-1965* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2017), p. 27.

way of life brought about by the city's development. It's a dissonance that manifests itself physically in Bibbs's speech and chosen profession. Bibbs speaks 'in a voice as slow as his gait; a drawl that was a necessity, for when Bibbs tried to speak quickly he stammered.'[144] And the slow and antiquated profession Bibbs would choose to pursue, if allowed to by his family, is that of poet. As a preview of *The Turmoil* in an Oklahoma newspaper put it, Bibbs 'has the habit of setting down his thoughts in memorandum books—and quaint thoughts they are.'[145] These thoughts, which the newspaper minimizes with the old-fashioned, diminishing adjective, 'quaint,' focus on the modern obsession with 'bigness' that has come to permeate the Midwestern city and which is at odds with the 'quiet' he had valued about the place. On one occasion when readers get to read Bibbs's writing directly, he looks over an old essay which begins: 'A man may keep a quiet heart at seventy miles an hour, but not if he is running the train. Nor is the habit of contemplation a useful quality in the stoker of a foundry furnace; it will not be found to recommend him to the approbation of his superiors.'[146] This essay accurately reflects the view of Bibbs's 'superior'—his father, Sheridan—when Bibbs tells him that he would like to write poems and essays instead of work in the family machine shop. While Sheridan is proud of the poetry prize Bibbs's sister Edith won (for a poem she stole from Bibbs), he values it only as an amateur fancy, something that contributes to establishing the family's social status and respectability. In Sheridan's mind, 'poetry's all right enough in its place' if left 'to the girls,' but for a man, who is supposed to 'do a man's work in this world' and contribute to the economy, he believes the only acceptable form of writing is advertising.[147] Sheridan declares that he would

[144] Booth Tarkington, *The Turmoil* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1915), p. 13.
[145] 'The Turmoil,' *The Beaver Herald,* 1 June 1916, p. 3.
[146] Tarkington, *The Turmoil,* p. 97.
[147] Ibid., p. 91.

'pay money for that kind o' writin'' while dismissing poetry and essays as 'the most out-o'-date kind o' writin' there is.'[148] These two views come up against each other repeatedly; how to reconcile writing and industry is one of the novel's central tensions.

The conflict between writing produced as art—Bibbs's poetry and essays—and writing produced in a business context—the advertisements that Sheridan values—is also tied in to questions of social class and modernity. The Vertrees, an old-money family with old-fashioned views who are being pushed out of the new social order, have an unsurprisingly negative reaction to the idea of writing as a way to earn money in a business context. In all of their conversations, the moment that seems to elicit the most genuine emotion from notoriously oblique communicators Mr. and Mrs. Vertrees—the point when the narrator tells us that Mrs. Vertrees is 'inspired for once almost to direct discourse'—is when the two parents insist that everything they do is for their daughter Mary's good alone.[149] Contemplating the future, Mr. Vertrees exclaims, 'We can go to the poorhouse, but Mary can't be a stenographer.'[150] The Vertrees' horror of Mary succumbing to this fate is primarily due to the signal this would send about the family's financial decline. But the Vertrees' abhorrence of the idea that Mary might act as an instrument through which to pass corporate language from its spoken to written form also suggests their discomfort with industrialism more generally. This is in stark contrast to Sheridan's point of view, in which producing 'useless' kinds of writing like essays and poems that do not yield either money or action is unacceptable.[151] The Vertrees demand that writing and industrial work are kept entirely separate, something increasingly difficult in an environment dominated by the spreading smoke

[148] Tarkington, *The Turmoil*, p. 91.
[149] Ibid., p. 175.
[150] Ibid.
[151] Ibid., p. 319.

of factories, while Sheridan curtails the range of acceptable written production to one specific form, in the service of those factories.

For Tarkington, as for many late nineteenth and early twentieth century authors, the tension between artistic integrity and the literary marketplace was a serious consideration. In *The Turmoil*, it is Sheridan's perspective that seems to ultimately win out. To a certain extent, Bibbs is able to repurpose his artistic nature when he enters the industrial workforce, taming the zinc machine, which had led to his physical and mental breakdown before the beginning of the novel, by singing along to the rhythm of its crashes and bangs. For the most part, however, Bibbs is subsumed into the cutthroat, fast-paced world of industry as the head of his father's company. After weeks and months of fighting his father's will, Bibbs seems to embrace his place in the family company quickly and wholeheartedly. To fit into the new industrialized world, this novel seems to conclude, Bibbs must forsake his poetic ambitions, suggesting that in this new world order, there is no place for literature outside of commerce.

THE WOMEN FROM INDIANA: TARKINGTON'S *ALICE ADAMS* AND DREISER'S *SISTER CARRIE*

Tarkington would return to the ideas introduced through these three poets in his second Pulitzer-Prize winning novel, a novel which, in many ways, represented the high-water mark of his career. *Alice Adams* was published in 1921, the year after Tarkington won the Pulitzer Prize for *The Magnificent Ambersons*, which became the opening work in the Growth trilogy.[152] According to Holliday, Tarkington was unenthusiastic about *Alice Adams*, complaining to his friend that he '"hated" it, […] and all the people in it.' 'The people are such a rotten,

[152] Tarkington dedicated *Alice Adams* to S. S. McClure, the man who gave him his start.

insignificant lot, and nothing ever happens except a continual piling up of petty detail,' Tarkington said, concluding grimly, 'Nobody will want it.'[153] But Tarkington was wrong: the public and critics alike loved *Alice Adams*, and for the reasons he thought they wouldn't. *Alice Adams* is indeed characterized by that 'piling up of petty detail'—the mundane details of real people's everyday lives. It is the closest Tarkington would come to a truly realist novel.

Rafael Walker asserts that there is much in *Alice Adams* to suggest that Tarkington 'sought to place himself in dialogue with his contemporaries, who were themselves in dialogue with the previous generation of realist writers,' and there are certainly many echoes of scenes and characters from the major realist novels published early in Tarkington's career.[154] Sorkin claims, for example, that Mr. Adams's situation is 'the reverse' of that of the patriarch in Howells's *The Rise of Silas Lapham.* In Tarkington's novel, it is Mrs. Adams's relentless nagging for Mr. Adams to leave his steady, but low-paying, job and elevate the family that eventually pushes him to go against his own desires, his business sense, and his morals to open a glue factory with a formula his employer had commissioned him to develop years earlier. In Howells's novel, 'Silas's scolding wife represents the tongue of his moral and social conscience and his dilemma is brought on by his success, not by his failure'—the opposite of Mr. Adams's ultimate situation—but Sorkin argues that there are 'identical points […] made by both novels about the ethics of business in relation to personal morality.'[155] Though the comparison with Howells's novel is apt, Alice herself bears more of a marked resemblance to another character,

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[153] Holliday, *Men and Books and Cities*, p. 73.
[154] Rafael Walker, 'The Second Phase of Realism in American Fiction: The Rise and Fall of the Social Self,' *Studies in the Novel*, 49.4 (2017), 493-517 (p. 508).
[155] Sorkin, *Alice Adams Revisited,* pp. 189-190. In *The Rise of Silas Lapham,* Silas's wife convinces him to loan money to a former business partner, Rogers, whom Silas had pushed out of the business, preventing him from making money from its success. Rogers mismanages the money and the Laphams lose a significant portion of their fortune as a result.

this time from Indiana's literary history: Dreiser's Carrie Meeber. Alice and Carrie play out two different versions of an ambitious young woman's life, with Carrie gradually gaining greater material success throughout the novel and Alice enacting, in many ways, the opposite trajectory. But there are similarities as well as differences between the two. Readers are introduced to Alice while she is sitting in front of a mirror, where she 'had been playing with the mirror's reflections—posturing her arms and her expressions, clasping her hands behind her neck, and tilting back her head to foreshorten the face in a tableau conceived to represent sauciness, then one of smiling weariness, then one of scornful toleration, and all very piquant.'[156] This is a habit Alice shares with Carrie, who could 'sometimes restore dramatic situations she had witnessed by re-creating, before her mirror, the expressions of the various faces taking part in the scene' and who often recalled 'some little grace of the mouth or the eyes which she had witness in another' in the 'privacy of her chamber.'[157] Alice imagines herself climbing out of obscurity by becoming an actress, a career Carrie actually pursues in Dreiser's novel. Fantasizing about coming back to her hometown as a successful actress, Alice imagines a detailed scene with Mildred Palmer, her rival for town newcomer Arthur Russell's affection: 'No doubt the pleasantest development of her vision was a dialogue with Mildred; and this became so real that, as she projected it, Alice assumed the proper expressions for both parties to it, formed words with her lips, and even spoke some of them aloud.'[158]

It is through theater that there is one of the closest echoes between *Sister Carrie* and *Alice Adams.* Carrie's first acting role is as Laura in a Chicago production of Augustin Daly's 1867

[156] Booth Tarkington, *Alice Adams* (New York: Grosset & Dunlap, 1921), p. 14.
[157] Dreiser, *Sister Carrie,* p. 173.
[158] Tarkington, *Alice Adams,* p. 137.

melodrama *Under the Gaslight*.[159] After Carrie has a nervy first act, the actor playing the play's hero, Ray, declaims:

> Society is a terrible avenger of insult. Have you ever heard of Siberian wolves? When one of the pack falls through weakness, the others devour him. It is not an elegant comparison—but there is something wolfish in society. Laura has mocked it with a pretence, and society, which is made up of pretences, will bitterly resent the mockery.[160]

It is in this moment that Carrie begins to fully inhabit her character, moving across the stage 'with a steady grace, born of inspiration' and 'shifting, with the necessity of the situation, to a cold, white, helpless object, as the social pack moved away from her scornfully.'[161] This is a turning point in Carrie's performance and a turning point in the novel itself, marking her eventual move away from Drouet, who suggested she take the role of Laura, towards Hurstwood, who is captivated by her performance, marking the start of his own inevitable decline.

The rhetoric that Mrs. Adams uses to convince Mr. Adams to leave his low-paying job for a riskier venture is strikingly similar to that employed by Ray, and it is a moment that also serves as a turning point in the family's fortunes. After Mrs. Adams overhears Alice making excuses as to why she cannot go to a party she clearly has not been invited to, she gives her own assessment of society girls to Mr. Adams. 'A crowd of girls like that, when they get a pretty girl like Alice among them, they act just like wild beasts. They'll tear her to pieces, or else they'll

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[159] Best known for a scene in which person is tied to railroad tracks and saved at the last minute, *Under the Gaslight* might have been the play Harkless was thinking of when he said: '"I thought they meant to lay me across the [railroad] track, but it didn't occur to them, I suppose—they are not familiar with melodrama."' Augustin Daly, *Under the Gaslight: A Totally Original and Picturesque Drama of Life and Love in These Times, in Five Acts* (New York: T. H. French, 1867), pp. 40-43; Tarkington, *The Gentleman from Indiana*, p. 215.
[160] Daly, *Under the Gaslight*, p. 14; Dreiser, *Sister Carrie*, pp. 200-201.
[161] Dreiser, *Sister Carrie*, p. 201.

chase her and run her out, because they know if she had half a chance she'd outshine 'em,' Mrs. Adams says, echoing Daly's 'wolfish' imagery and casting Alice's problems in the light of melodrama.[162] As in *Sister Carrie*, the invocation of these theatrical lines becomes a catalyst for real life change, in this case sparking Mr. Adams's decision to attempt to open a glue factory, rise in the social ranks, and protect Alice from the ravages of society.[163]

Mr. Adams's solution to the family's social situation—a glue factory—is indicative, however, of an important characteristic of Tarkington's novel as well as the Adams family: both are 'stuck' in their small Midwestern city. Dreiser's novel, on the other hand, is characterized by motion. In his 1930 Nobel lecture, Sinclair Lewis described 'Dreiser's great first novel' as coming 'to housebound and airless America like a great free Western wind,' giving 'fresh air' to America's 'stuffy domesticity,' a phrase which refers not only to Dreiser's stylistic innovations, but to the more literal sense of movement present in this novel.[164] Carrie begins the novel on a train, leaving her rural Midwestern hometown for Chicago, where she meets Drouet, who, as a traveling salesman, is constantly moving from city to city. Her relationship with Hurstwood develops through their carriage rides through the city, and comes to its breaking point when they leave Chicago, taking a train to Montreal and then to New York. It is here that Hurstwood, realizing he does not have a place in this new city, spends days aimlessly walking up and down

[162] Tarkington, *Alice Adams,* p. 210.
[163] Hugh Witemeyer, 'Gaslight and Magic Lamp in Sister Carrie,' *PMLA,* 86.2 (1971), 236-240 (p. 238).
[164] Sinclair Lewis, 'Speech Accepting the Nobel Prize for Literature,' in James M. Hutchisson, *The Rise of Sinclair Lewis, 1920-1930* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1996), pp. 235-246 (p. 238).

its streets, going nowhere. Even Hurstwood's former wife and two daughters are last seen in the novel on a train, about to embark on a European trip.[165]

Philip Fisher argues that the motion of *Sister Carrie,* epitomized by Carrie's rocking chair, is that of rising and falling rather than 'the linear motion of progress.'[166] Tarkington's story, however, does not even have this semblance of movement. Alice's time as the center of the city's social scene had come when she was a teenager and '"the other girls," her contemporaries, were away at school or college,' a crystallized moment in time during which change, in the form of her contemporaries' return, was inevitable, but could still be ignored. When they eventually did return, Alice 'may have seemed to lack freshness of lustre' in comparison, and suddenly found herself pushed aside and forgotten in favor of girls with more money and accomplishments.[167] Mr. Adams, too, is quickly becoming stuck in the social class his job affords him: Mrs. Adams complains that he had not become successful when 'the town was smaller,' suggesting a calcification of the social order even as the city grows physically.[168] So while, as Walker argues, Dreiser's heroine is 'unmoored of all predetermined relations and thereby able to enjoy boundless mobility and mutability,' Alice's family, social status, and personal history are stifling (sometimes literally, as the Adams family and Russell roast on a hot summer's day during the novel's disastrous climactic dinner). *Alice Adams,* then, is a version of Carrie's story that is forced to play out in the same location, in a city that can be socially constricting even as it is physically growing at an unwieldy rate.

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[165] See Philip Fisher, 'The Life History of Objects: The Naturalist Novel and the City,' in *Hard Facts: Setting and Form in the American Novel* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985), pp. 128-178 (pp. 155-156).
[166] Ibid., p. 155.
[167] Tarkington, *Alice Adams,* p. 113.
[168] Ibid., p. 211.

In order to try to escape, Alice and her father both turn towards sections of the city beyond the social reach of the upper class they are trying to rejoin. Alice's father turns to the old '"industrial district"' as the backdrop for his own bid to improve his circumstances. The district is a relic of the city's earlier days, 'a dismal and slummish quarter' and of the former industries, 'some of them died, perishing of bankruptcy or fire; and a few had moved, leaving their shells.'[169] In trying to establish his new factory among the 'shells' of those that had already failed, Mr. Adams is already doomed to fail, his vision incompatible with the changing social and economic realities of the city.

The city setting serves to create a contrast between Alice's romantic dreams and the novel's realist deflations. Readers are given an idea of Alice's position at the social periphery early in the novel, when, instead of buying violets for the dance like the other girls, she takes the trolley to a newly-opened park at 'the outskirts of the city' in order to collect the flowers herself—but even with the flowers Alice will remain at the outskirts, relegated to the edge of the dance floor and shunned by most of the guests.[170] This geographic reflection of Alice's position as an outsider becomes more prominent during her time courting Arthur Russell, a recent arrival in the Midland town who is not aware of her social standing (in no small part due to Alice's own efforts to keep him in the dark). Trying to avoid being spotted by high society, Alice takes Arthur for a walk in a street populated by 'gaunt-faced apartment-houses, old, sooty, frame boarding-houses, small groceries and drug stores, laundries and one-room plumbers' shops, with the sign of a clairvoyant here and there.'[171] '"There's a pretty little park at the end, but it's very proletarian, and nobody you and I know will be more likely to see us there than on this street,"'

[169] Tarkington, *Alice Adams,* p. 276.
[170] Ibid., p. 64.
[171] Ibid., pp. 231-232.

Alice explained to Arthur, who responded enthusiastically, '"What an imagination you have! […] You turn our proper little walk into a Parisian adventure."'[172] Arthur is entranced by the fiction Alice has created, one which transforms the dingy Midwestern city street into that of a romantic European capital. The insulated relationship that Alice creates for them is, in his mind, charming and otherworldly: his 'summer evenings with her had been as secluded as if, for three hours after the falling of dusk, they too had drawn apart from the world to some dear bower of their own,' the 'little veranda' where they sat together becoming a 'glamorous nook' and creating a pleasant isolation so that 'the back of the world was the wall and the closed door behind them.'[173] Sitting with Alice on her porch or walking in remote neighborhoods is, for Arthur, a reflection of their intimacy, but for Alice it is a necessity, and our own sense of Alice's social limitations—brought home in part by her own reflection on the precariousness of the fiction she is creating—serves to undercut the romanticism underlying Arthur's perception of their relationship.

This growing contrast between romantic expectations and reality comes to fruition at the end of the story, in an ending unusual for Tarkington. In a typical romantic novel, and in any of Tarkington's earlier novels, Arthur and Alice would end the story together, saving the Adams family and catapulting Alice into the center of society from which she has been excluded. The movie version of *Alice Adams*, released in 1935, did actually end in this manner—as Thomas Mallon says, 'Hollywood took *Alice Adams* […] and turned it into a Booth Tarkington novel,' a critique reflecting Tarkington's more usual penchant for unlikely happy endings.[174] In the novel,

[172] Tarkington, *Alice Adams,* p. 232.
[173] Ibid., p. 326.
[174] Thomas Mallon, 'Hoosiers: The Lost World of Booth Tarkington,' *The Atlantic* (2004) <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2004/05/hoosiers/302943/> [accessed 24 May 2020].

however, Tarkington pushes the story in a different direction. This Alice is a realist who knows that the two parallel versions of herself—one who is from a wealthy, socially respected family and the other who is on the brink of poverty—cannot exist simultaneously forever. 'What appeared to be the desired result was a false-coloured image in Arthur's mind; but if he liked that image he wouldn't be liking Alice Adams, nor would anything he thought about the image be a thought about her,' she realizes, and she is not surprised when Arthur never returns after his disastrous dinner with her family.[175] Without a wealthy husband and having lost the money Mr. Adams put into the glue factory, Alice and her family face a descent down the social ladder, but their eventual acceptance of their new positions—particularly by Alice and her mother, the two characters most prone to melodrama throughout the novel—reflects the ultimate triumph of realism over romanticism. Having looked upon the sign for a stenography school with dread throughout the story, 'hating the dreary obscurity of that stairway,' Alice decides to enroll, fulfilling the fate the Vertrees had feared for their own daughter in *The Turmoil*. For a moment, walking up the staircase, Alice slips back into her romantic mode of thinking: 'There came into her mind a whimsical comparison of her fate with that of the heroine in a French romance she had read long ago and remembered well […]. The story ended with the heroine's taking the veil after a death blow to love; and the final scene again became vivid to Alice, for a moment. […] It was a vision of a moment only, and for no longer than a moment did Alice tell herself that the romance provided a prettier way of taking the veil than she had chosen.'[176] Although readers had not, until this point, known what type of novels Alice reads, this acknowledgement that Alice, like Silas Lapham's daughter and Betty Carewe, had read and been influenced by romance

[175] Tarkington, *Alice Adams,* p. 159.
[176] Ibid., pp. 432-433.

novels is unsurprising. The novel ends with her ascending 'the wooden steps. Half-way up the shadows were heaviest, but after that the place began to seem brighter. There was an open window overhead somewhere, she found; and the steps at the top were gay with sunshine.'[177] Although this ending has hints of optimism, as Alice recognizes that the place she had pictured as full of 'pretty girls turning into old maids "taking dictation"' is not actually the terrible place she had imagined, it is a far cry from a typical Tarkington ending—or from the ending of *Sister Carrie,* where Carrie is left striving towards 'beauty' and 'dreaming' of happiness.[178] In representing the scenes that Alice had constructed in her imagination as worse than the reality, Tarkington undercuts romanticism for the final time in the novel in a manner reflective of his career-long considerations of genre and setting.

With this ending, *Alice Adams,* in its unflinching portrait of a family being pushed to the outskirts of society, is Tarkington's most stylistically and tonally coherent novel. It was successful with readers of sentimental novels as well as with the critics who detested them, and is often cited today as Tarkington's best novel. Yet in Alice's story, Tarkington reveals the precariousness of a writer between literary traditions, and of a region trying to find its identity in the face of regional expectations and in the midst of literary and cultural changes. As early as 1941, the Federal Writers' Program guide to Indiana commented that the state's 'contribution to the main stream of American literature might, from one point of view, have had greater significance if Hoosier authors had applied their talents more to the problem of interpreting their native State and less to the creation of sentimental fiction,' a comment suggesting that these

[177] Tarkington, *Alice Adams,* p. 434.
[178] Ibid., p. 140; Dreiser, *Sister Carrie,* p. 557. For an analysis of the ending of *Sister Carrie,* see, for example, Stephen C. Brennan, 'The Two Endings of *Sister Carrie,*' *Studies in American Fiction,* 16.1 (1988), 13-26.

authors had taken a wholly uncritical, romantic view of the Midwest in their writing.[179] But this is too simple. Indiana authors such as Tarkington, as well as Meredith Nicholson and George Barr McCutcheon, were much more conscious of the push and pull between realism and romance, and the relationship each mode had to their local setting as well as to their reception by local and national readers, than is often considered. And in creating these nationally-read representations of Midwestern life, Indiana authors soon began to be seen as not just representing regional life, but national life as well. 'The plays and books of Booth Tarkington not only set astir a thousand memories of an America that was,' Alexander Woollcott declared in 1924, 'but what is more, suggest to those of us who live in exile here [in New York] that that America continues.'[180] For many readers, Tarkington's romantic realism, despite its frequent stylistic dissonances, created a version of the country that appealed to everyday readers, establishing a popular view of Midwestern and American fiction that would go on to be tremendously influential during the 1920s.

[179] *Indiana: A Guide to the Hoosier State*, comp. by Workers of the Writers' Program of the Works Progress Administration in the State of Indiana (Terre Haute, IN: Department of Public Relations of Indiana State Teachers College, 1941), p. 151.
[180] Alexander Wollcott, 'Mr. Tarkington,' in *Enchanted Aisles* (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1924), pp. 116-123 (p. 118).

Chapter 2. 'Talking American' in the Midwest: Language and Identity in the Works of H. L. Mencken, Zona Gale, and Ruth Suckow

'Four Generations,' a short story by up-and-coming Midwestern author Ruth Suckow, appeared in the inaugural issue of a new literary magazine, *The American Mercury,* in 1924. The story was a quintessential example of the type of realism that had developed in the Midwest in the thirty years after the publication of Hamlin Garland's *Main-Travelled Roads* (1891). Set during a single afternoon on a Midwestern farm, it presents a snapshot of rural life through the lens of four generations of a German-American family who have reunited at their family home to have their photograph taken. The scope is narrow and the plot is minimal, but what makes Suckow's story stand out is her portrayal of the relationships between the characters, as she reveals the small tensions and pressures faced by the members of a multigenerational family.[1]

Suckow reveals these relationships linguistically, using dialect and accent to differentiate the characters from each other—and to reveal their relative 'Americanness.' The story's restricted setting emphasizes how many different varieties of English are spoken by the small cast of characters, from the heavily-accented speech of the German-born patriarch to the increasingly Americanized English of the younger generations, many of whom have moved

[1] Suckow would return to the idea of four generations in *The Folks*, the 1934 novel in which Leedice McAnelly Kissane argues Suckow's 'artistic development reaches its culmination.' The novel spans the first three decades of the twentieth century as it follows various members of an Iowa family and the tensions that arise between farming grandparents, their town-dwelling banker son, and his four children, whose decisions to either move away from their hometown or to stay there reflect different reactions to the cultural changes taking place in the United States. Leedice McAnelly Kissane, *Ruth Suckow* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1969), p. 94.

away from the family farm, to the 'Eastern accent' of Phyllis, the youngest of the family who has grown up outside of the Midwest.[2] The farther each family member has moved from the farm, the more 'precise' their English has become.[3] Aunt Em, married to the son now running the family farm, and her sister, Aunt Sophie, speak colloquially—'Ain't it a shame Edna couldn't get over,' one laments—but Charlie, who owns a bank in town, speaks in more standard English—'"Oh, now, you mustn't think of yourself as so old,"' he tells his father patronizingly.[4] Beyond these empty platitudes, he 'seemed to have nothing to say' to his German immigrant father, who 'had scarcely been off the place for years.'[5] Charlie's daughter Katherine, who has moved to her husband's native region of New England, feels similarly distant from her own parents and disconnected from her rural surroundings and 'ancestral home,' which now seems 'utterly alien to her.'[6] She was more comfortable in her husband's 'quiet old frame house in New England, with his precise elderly New England parents,' and she thinks longingly of her life there, complete with '"refinement," "culture," and Willis' father reading "the classics"' and 'taking the *Atlantic Monthly*.'[7] To Katherine, the literature and culture that define her New England life have no place on this Midwestern farm, a feeling that is reflected in her speech:

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[2] Ruth Suckow, 'Four Generations,' *The American Mercury,* 1 (1924), 15-21 (p. 16). This story was included in Suckow's first collection of short stories, *Iowa Interiors* (New York: Knopf, 1926). It was also chosen as the 1924 entry in Edward O'Brien's *50 Best American Short Stories 1915-1939,* which, as O'Brien describes in his introduction to the collection, presents the fifty stories 'which are most representative in their distinction' in order to present 'a panoramic picture of the period.' *The American Mercury,* edited by H. L. Mencken and Indiana native George Jean Nathan, professed a similar desire to 'attempt a realistic presentation of the whole gaudy, gorgeous American scene.' Both men saw Suckow's story as part of that 'panoramic' mission. Edward O'Brien, *50 Best American Short Stories 1915-1939* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1939), p. ix; 'Editorial,' *The American Mercury,* 1 (1924), 27-30 (p. 30).
[3] Ruth Suckow, 'Four Generations,' p. 16.
[4] Ibid., pp. 15, 17.
[5] Ibid., p. 17.
[6] Ibid., p. 19.
[7] Ibid.

while Katherine speaks grammatical English, she spends the majority of the story not speaking at all, 'lips closed firmly' to 'steel herself' against this rural ordeal and avoid saying anything that would hurt her parents.

As the two middle generations, and their different ways of living and communicating, chafe, Katherine's young daughter, Phyllis, comes across her great-grandfather. Left alone, the old man is gazing into the orchard beyond the house, which, after all this time, still feels 'foreign.' He is pleased, however, when he sees his great-granddaughter watching him, and gently asks, '"You t'ink Grandpa is a funny old man, den?"'[8] Little Phyllis is equally captivated by her unfamiliar relative. She stares at the German farmer as he sings her a song in his native language, presented in the text in the original German without a translation: *'Du, du machst mir viel Schmerzen, Weist nicht wie gut ich dir bin.'*[9] This interlude between two people who do not understand each other's words nonetheless seems like the first moment of genuine connection in the story. This connection had, after all, been the reason for this family gathering—Katherine had 'thought it right to bring Phyllis over here where her great-grandfather lived'—but they are both outsiders in this group of Midwesterners.[10] Both had been born and had grown up outside of the region, and the gathered relatives view them both as vaguely foreign: the great-grandfather, in his 'black cambric skullcap,' 'might have belonged to another world,' and 'there was something faintly exotic' about Phyllis's 'liquid brown eyes' and the yellow dress that made her stand out 'vivid as a canary bird against the dark green of the foliage.'[11] For a moment, as Phyllis listens to her great-grandfather's German song, this shared foreignness seems to bring the two

[8] Suckow, 'Four Generations,' p. 21.
[9] Ibid. These lines are from a German folk song, 'Du, du liegst mir im Herzen' ('You, you are in my heart'), believed to have originated in Germany in the early nineteenth century.
[10] Ibid., p. 19.
[11] Ibid., p. 16.

together in a moment of mutual feeling.[12] But then, 'with a little delicate scared movement, as if after all she had discovered that the place was strange,' Phyllis returns to her mother.[13] The story ends with this small rejection, the linguistic and generational divides as ingrained as ever.

The story's exploration of generational differences mapped out linguistically would have resonated with readers in early 1924, when debates about immigration and language were gaining particular momentum in the months before the passing of a new Immigration Act which would restrict the number of immigrants who were able to come into the United States. Undergirding this debate was a common desire to define what it meant to be 'American,' and to determine how that American identity should be communicated, debates in which the Midwest played a significant role. In this chapter, I will consider how Midwestern vernacular came to be regarded as American English and the implications of that association for authors who were writing during a period when language and its study was becoming especially prominent. The claim that Midwestern language—and, therefore, identity—was particularly American helped establish the region in the national consciousness. Midwestern authors used dialect not only to emphasize the realism of their novels, as an earlier generation had done, but to engage with the growing understanding of their region as representing the best aspects of the country as a whole, at times reinforcing this view and at others questioning its validity.

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[12] Willa Cather seems to have had the same sense of music as capable of conveying emotion in a way that transcends language. As Janet Giltrow and David Stouck describe, Cather's admiration for French actress Sarah Bernhardt, for example, lay in Bernhardt's ability to 'phrase her lines as if they were music.' Her appreciation for Bernhardt's performances was 'in no way diminished' by the fact that she spoke in a foreign language, 'for the emotional meaning of her performance communicated itself above the literal level of words.' Janet Giltrow and David Stouck, 'Willa Cather and a Grammar for Things "Not Named,"' *Style,* 26.1 (1992), 91-113 (p. 94); see also Richard Giannone, *Music in Willa Cather's Fiction* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1968).

[13] Suckow, 'Four Generations,' p. 21.

I will begin by considering how the use of Midwestern dialect in this period evolved alongside the shift from romanticism to a 'new realism,' which *The Midland* founder John T. Frederick described as 'quiet and outwardly uneventful' fiction that sought 'to realize values of inner experience.'[14] I will explore the critical commentary surrounding Gale's 1920 novel *Miss Lulu Bett* and its 1921 stage adaptation in order to demonstrate the ways in which the kind of Midwestern speech Gale employs was becoming associated with American English in general. I will then examine how this association plays out in H. L. Mencken's seminal work *The American Language* (1919). Finally, I will return to Ruth Suckow and her novels *Country People* (1924) and *The Odyssey of a Nice Girl* (1925) to consider Americanism through the lens of immigration. Through an exploration of these novels, I will argue that at least some Midwestern writers were using regional dialect to do more than add local color, picturesqueness, or realism to their stories. Instead, Mencken, Gale, and Suckow all used language as a way to shape and question how both 'Midwesternness' and 'Americanness' had come to be understood.

'THE LANGAUGE OF UNAFFECTED PEOPLE EVERYWHERE': REALIST DIALECT

In 1882, Mark Twain wrote a short sketch called 'Concerning the American Language' about his encounter on a train with an English visitor. The Englishman, intending to compliment Twain, tells him that 'Americans in general did not speak the English language as correctly as [Twain] did.'[15] Twain, however, does not see this as a compliment, and informs his traveling companion that the language he speaks is not in fact English, but American. He proceeds to baffle the

[14] John T. Frederick, 'The New Realism,' *The Palimpsest,* 32.3 (1951), 131-135 (p. 131).
[15] Mark Twain, 'Concerning the American Language,' in *The Stolen White Elephant, Etc.* (Boston: James R. Osgood and Company, 1882), pp. 265-269 (p. 265).

Englishman by listing examples, from word choice to pronunciation, of how the two diverge, concluding that if he wanted to, he could 'pile up differences here until I not only convinced you that English and American are separate languages, but that when I speak my native tongue in its utmost purity, an Englishman can't understand me at all.' The Englishman replies that 'it is about all I can do to understand you *now*,' and this Twain does take as a compliment, putting the two travelers on 'the pleasantest terms.'[16]

Although British English and American English have never been mutually unintelligible, the separation between the English and American languages that Twain's narrator insists upon was more than simple comedy.[17] As Americans began to differentiate themselves from the United Kingdom after gaining independence, intellectuals and writers worried about whether the new country would be able to establish its own literary tradition separate from and equal to those of Britain and other European countries.[18] These anxieties were often expressed in terms of language. In 1815, an article in the *North American Review* proposed that the United States could not produce original literature because the language in which it was written originated in a

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[16] Mark Twain, 'Concerning the American Language,' p. 269. Twain's satirical story echoes an earlier account of an 1818 encounter between British and American speakers of English recorded by Edward Everett, a Harvard professor and editor of the *North American Review* who would become a staunch defender of the variety of English found in the United States. While traveling on a coach in England in the company of five English men and women, he noted—taking the opposite view of Twain's carriage-mate—that 'these five Persons spoke worse English, than any five well dressed People that one would be apt to meet in any Part of America.' Allen Walker Read, 'Edward Everett's Attitude Towards American English,' *The New England Quarterly*, 12.1 (1939), 112-129 (p. 119).

[17] Kenneth Cmiel, '"A Broad, Fluid Language of Democracy": Discovering the American Idiom,' *Journal of American History*, 79.3 (1992), 913-36 (p. 918).

[18] This drive for differentiation was not unique to the United States: 'All first-generation representatives of a literature,' according to Pascale Casanova, understand 'the phenomenon of literary annexation by the dominant spaces to which they are subject and the necessity of creating distance and difference with respect to these spaces.' Pascale Casanova, *The World Republic of Letters*, trans. by M. B. DeBevoise (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004), p. 221.

country 'totally unlike our own.' 'How tame will his language sound,' asks the author, 'who would describe Niagara in language fitted for the falls at London bridge, or attempt the majesty of the Mississippi in that which was made for the Thames?'[19] Without a distinct or 'peculiar' national language, some Americans worried that their national literature would not be distinctive either.[20]

A number of approaches to regulating English in the United States arose in response to these questions of national identity and culture. Noah Webster, whose *Dissertations on the English Language* (1789) was one of the earliest attempts to consider the relationship between language and national identity in the United States, believed that formalizing a national language that differed from the English spoken in the 'mother country' was vital to establishing the new nation. Webster proposed a universal standard for spoken and written American through a 'national language,' based not on vocabulary but on a revised system of spelling and pronunciation, which he argued would 'render the pronunciation of the language, as uniform as the spelling in books.'[21] He claimed that this national language would allow every American to speak uniformly, flattening out the distinctions between social classes as well as reinforcing a universal American national identity.[22]

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[19] 'Essay on American Language and Literature,' *North American Review,* 1.1 (1815), 307-314 (p. 309).

[20] Ibid. William Carlos Williams argued in 1925 that Americans struggled to recognize American distinctiveness even when it did exist: 'Americans have never recognized themselves. How can they? It is impossible until someone invents the ORIGINAL terms. As long as we are content to be called by somebody else's terms, we are incapable of being anything but our own dupes.' William Carols Williams, 'Edgar Allan Poe,' in *In the American Grain* (New York: Albert and Charles Boni, 1925), pp. 216-233 (p. 226).

[21] Noah Webster, *Dissertations on the English Language* (Boston: Isaiah Thomas and Company, 1789), pp. 406, 369-367.

[22] Ibid., p. 397; Dennis E. Baron, *The English-Only Question: An Official Language for Americans?* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990), pp. 43-46. Webster's proposal was partially motivated by the prospect of personal gain—he suggested that the 'federal language' be

Others resisted any form of centralized control over the American language, focusing instead on the creation of a new vocabulary with the new words that were arising from the environment. In notes written for a possible lecture in the 1850s, Walt Whitman echoed many Americans when he said that 'the new world, the new times, the new peoples, the new vista, need a new tongue according.'[23] He advocated for an inclusive American language that embraced regionalisms, vulgarities, slander, and words more commonly found in the vocabularies of 'fighting men, gamblers, thieves [and] prostitutes' than in 'the dictionaries of authority.'[24] The inclusion of these words in the 'Real Dictionary,' he argued, was necessary to capture the spirit of the American people, and he instructed American writers to 'show far more freedom in the use of words' and to use the 'native idiomatic words' that 'would be welcomed by the nation, being of the national blood.' Whitman advocated for the benefits arising from the regional distinctiveness that Webster's 'federal language' would try to eliminate, arguing that these 'native idiomatic words' would give 'that taste of identity and locality which is so dear in literature.'[25]

based on his own reference books, which would be used in every classroom around the country—but his opinions reflected that of many Americans who advocated spelling reform as a way to establish American ownership over the English language. Later arguments for spelling reform reflected how debates around American culture and identity were evolving. By the time the Simplified Spelling movement was established in 1906, spelling reform was being promoted as a pathway towards efficiency. Jonathan Zimmerman, 'Simplified Spelling and the Cult of Efficiency in the "Progressiv" Era,' *The Journal of the Gilded Age and Progressive Era,* 9.3 (2010), 365-394.

[23] Quoted by Horace Traubel in Walt Whitman, *An American Primer,* ed. by Horace Traubel (Boston: Small, Maynard & Company, 1904), p. ix. Whitman never gave this lecture publically, but his notes were published posthumously in 1904 by Traubel.

[24] Ibid., pp. 7, 5.

[25] Ibid., p. 35.

By the late nineteenth century, it seemed clear that Whitman's approach to the American language was triumphing over Webster's—at least as far as literature was concerned.[26] Dialect writing, which emphasized the differences between regional speech patterns, became one of the dominant literary forms in the United States in the decades after the Civil War, so much so that Gavin Jones argues that the taste for dialect had become so acute in this period that stories were written primarily to showcase it.[27] The type of dialect writers employed was also changing. Before the Civil War, American humorists used wildly exaggerated dialects for comedic effect, but in the 1860s and 70s, authors began using dialect for more serious literary purposes. Use of dialect became a form of political commentary, and a signal that its author was on the side of marginal people.[28] Mark Twain, for instance, famously subverted readers' expectations by giving a Western local—marked as such by his dialectical speech—power over the more educated-sounding Eastern narrator who would normally have triumphed in comic fiction. In his first nationally successful story, 'The Celebrated Jumping Frog of Calaveras County' (1865), it is the dialect-speaking bartender whose story charms us, making the visiting narrator, who calls the story 'monotonous,' 'tedious,' and 'useless,' the one who ends up looking foolish.[29] This reversal of who in the story 'wins,' John Bird argues, was 'important in the development of

[26] Committees for regulating the use of English in the United States also appeared intermittently during the nineteenth century, but none were able to institute any linguistic rules, and all faded out of existence quickly and quietly. For more on attempts to regulate speech and language, see, for example, Allen Walker Read, 'American Projects for an Academy to Regulate Speech,' *PMLA*, 51.4 (1936), 1141-79; Thomas Paul Bonfiglio, *Race and the Rise of Standard American* (Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter, 2002).
[27] Gavin Jones, *Strange Talk: The Politics of Dialect Literature in Gilded Age America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), pp. 2-3.
[28] Ibid., pp. 37-38.
[29] Mark Twain, 'The Celebrated Jumping Frog of Calaveras County,' in *The Celebrated Jumping Frog of Calaveras County, and Other Sketches,* ed. by John Paul (New York: C. H. Webb, 1969), pp. 7-19 (p. 8).

realism' because the 'common speech of common people is elevated above a genteel, romantic vision.'[30]

As Twain's story demonstrates, dialect was fundamental to realism, which was emerging in the United States in the same period and adopted dialect as its 'most recognizable formal characteristic.'[31] William Dean Howells proposed that using the language real people spoke was a way to enhance fiction's place in cultural life: 'Let it speak the dialect, the language, that most Americans know—the language of unaffected people everywhere—and there can be no doubt of an unlimited future, not only of delightfulness but of usefulness, for it.'[32] While Howells acknowledged regional variations in speech and appreciated regional dialect in literature—as we saw in Chapter 1, when he praised James Whitcomb Riley's use of Hoosier dialect—he was also thinking of 'the language of unaffected people everywhere' as having a national element that would ultimately serve a unifying purpose in the United States. That national 'unaffected language' would soon become associated with the Midwest.

ZONA GALE'S LANGUAGE OF THE 'LITTLE REAL HOME TOWNS'

Zona Gale also believed in the power of regional language in forging a nationally appealing literature. Seldom read today, Gale was one of the more prominent Midwestern authors in the first decades of the twentieth century, becoming both critically and commercially successful for

[30] John Bird, 'Realism and the Uses of Humor,' in *The Oxford Handbook of American Literary Realism,* ed. by Keith Newlin (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), pp. 83-99 (p. 88).
[31] Stephanie Foote, *Regional Fictions: Culture and Identity in Nineteenth-Century American Literature* (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 2001), p. 3. See also Daniel H. Borus, *Writing Realism: Howells, James, and Norris in the Mass Market* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1989), pp. 22-23.
[32] William Dean Howells, *Criticism and Fiction* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1891), p. 104.

the stories, novels, and plays she set in her native Wisconsin. Gale grew up in the small town of Portage and attended college nearby at the University of Wisconsin in Madison. Shortly after graduation, however, and feeling that 'there wasn't any romance in Portage,' she left her hometown for Milwaukee and then for New York, where, in the common pattern of the time, she wrote for newspapers first as a staff writer and later as a freelancer, hoping to make her career as an author by drawing on surroundings she considered more conducive to producing literature.[33] In 1903, however, following a broken engagement, Gale returned home to live with her parents in Portage and, much to her surprise, found that 'her old world was full of new possibilities.'[34]

In many ways, Gale's return to the 'old world' is reminiscent of what Hamlin Garland described in *Son of the Middle Border* (1917), when his own return to the Midwest, and the suffering and struggle he found himself newly able to recognize, inspired him to begin writing the stories that appeared in *Main-Travelled Roads* in 1891, taking to his work 'like a miner' who had 'suddenly uncovered a hidden vein of gold.'[35] For Gale, however, literary possibility lay not in what she could tell the rest of the country about her region, but in what she believed the Midwest could tell the rest of the country about itself. As she recounted almost two decades later, 'One afternoon, there in Portage, I chanced to overhear a conversation. Some women were having tea together and were saying the very things which are being said *this* afternoon by hundreds of women all over the country. […] I listened to them, and suddenly I said to myself

[33] Julia C. Ehrhardt, *Writers of Conviction: The Personal Politics of Zona Gale, Dorothy Canfield Fisher, Rose Wilder Lane, and Josephine Herbst* (Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press, 2004), p. 24.
[34] Keene Sumner, 'The Everlasting Persistence of This Western Girl,' *American Magazine,* 91.6 (1921), 34-35, 137-141 (p. 139).
[35] Hamlin Garland, *A Son of the Middle Border,* ed. by E. H. Kemper McComb (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1917), p. 412.

[…] "This is the sort of thing people talk about, not only in Portage, but everywhere."'[36] For Gale, what defined the Midwest and made it fruitful material for her writing was its national representativeness.

Inspired by this snippet of conversation, Gale began writing a series of stories based on her hometown, five of which would be gathered together and published under the title *Friendship Village* in 1908. Gale's stories about the small Midwestern town of Friendship—which numbered over eighty by the time she wrote the final one in 1919—depicted what Marcia Noe and Nancy Neff call 'village life at its best,' where 'no one is really poor, sick, or lonely' and people can be counted on 'to do what is right.'[37] Friendship is an idealized version of a rural town and Gale's fiction capitalized on the market for sentimental small-town stories, many of which were being produced by Indiana authors. In the book's Author's Note, Gale plays on readers' emotions by extolling the virtues of a 'home town,' writing that she commends 'their kindly, brooding companionship, their doors to an efficiency as intimate as that of fairy fingers.'[38] Like the conversation that inspired Gale, the 'home towns' that Gale depicts are also portrayed as universal, as is the good feeling they engender in their inhabitants. As Constance Rourke wrote in *The New Republic* in 1920, 'The typical Friendship Village story is also a typical American Story.'[39]

Much like Suckow's 'Four Generations,' these 'Friendship Village' stories have minimal plots. In one story, a villager convinces many of the other residents to come together to cook and

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[36] Sumner, 'The Everlasting Persistence of This Western Girl,' p. 139.
[37] Marcia Noe and Nancy Neff, 'Reading *Miss Lulu Bett*: The Reception History of a Midwestern Classic,' *Midwestern Miscellany*, 31 (2003), 9-16 (p. 9).
[38] Zona Gale, *Friendship Village* (New York: The MacMillan Company, 1908), p. vii.
[39] Constance Mayfield Rourke, 'Transitions,' *The New Republic*, 13.297 (1920), 315-316 (p. 315).

eat a Thanksgiving meal; in another, a girl who left Friendship years before returns and is reunited with her family. Many recount the activities of the Married Ladies Cemetery Improvement Sodality which, reflecting the activity of countless women's societies that existed around the country, enhances the town in small ways. Even the improvement society resists change, however: explaining why they still use their original name despite the fact that their activities have moved beyond the town cemetery, the society's leader says, 'We've got started calling us that and we can't bear to stop. You know how it is—institutions or constitutions or ideas or a way to mix the bread, one of our deformities is that we do hate to change.'[40] This very resistance to change is one of the things that makes these stories so appealing. Most of the *Friendship Village* stories are narrated by an unnamed woman who has come to the town from some unnamed location, seemingly in the East. She appears to be escaping something from her past—although the stories never look too closely at what this might be, and give all weighty topics a wide berth—and she is charmed and comforted by the friendliness and generosity of her new Midwestern neighbors.[41]

Although the town is clearly intended to be in the Midwest, the precise location is left undefined. The narrator herself repeatedly says that she 'had come to Friendship chiefly to get

[40] Zona Gale, *Peace in Friendship Village* (New York: Macmillan, 1919), p. 293.
[41] In this, Gale's *Friendship Village* stories seem to be modeled on Sarah Orne Jewett's *Country of the Pointed Firs*, which is also narrated by a woman seeking to escape her urban life in a rural small town. Despite the many similarities between the texts, Gale and Jewett did not seem to have corresponded. Gale did exchange letters with Willa Cather and with Edith Wharton—both of whom Gale was explicitly compared to during her career—but she was never able to establish the community of women writers she seems to have wanted, something Catherine Kalish argues Gale rectifies in her idealized Friendship Village stories, which often feature women working together in community. Catherine Kalish, 'Nobody Sick, Nobody Poor: Zona Gale's Construction of a Feminist Utopia,' *Midwestern Miscellany*, 31 (2003), 25-33 (p. 29). See also Deborah Williams, 'Threats of Correspondence: The Letters of Edith Wharton, Zona Gale, and Willa Cather,' *Studies in American Fiction*, 25.2 (1997), 211-239.

away from everywhere,' a phrase that suggests that the village itself is nowhere, or at least at a remove from the world as we know it.[42] In describing the town, one of its most hardworking and considerate citizens characterizes its lack of pretension by saying, 'This town is more like a back door than a front—or, givin' it full credit, anyhow, it's no more'n a side door, with no vines.' The narrator continues, 'For indeed, we are a kind of middle door to experience, minus the fuss of official arriving and, too, without the old odours of the kitchen savory beds; but having, instead, a serene side-door existence, partaking of both electric bells and of neighbors with shawls pinned over their heads.'[43] In placing the town in an idealized 'middle' zone, which has the best aspects of everything—not too old-fashioned, not too modern—Gale seems to be acknowledging and bolstering the nation's perception of the Midwest as itself an idealized region, where the best features of the rest of the country come together.

Gale followed up *Friendship Village* with *Friendship Village Love Stories* in 1909, and she continued to publish stories set in the village throughout the following decade. She saw the interest in 'commonplace things' that her return to Portage inspired in her as setting the direction for the rest of her literary output, including that of her third novel, *Miss Lulu Bett* (1920).[44] Also set in the Midwest, this novel seems to follow a similar pattern as Gale's earlier Midwestern stories—at least at first glance. Just as reviewers of Tarkington's novels focused on his Midwestern roots, reviews of *Miss Lulu Bett* emphasized its regional setting. The *Brattleboro Daily Reformer* (Vermont) called the novel, 'A quiet little story of life in a mid-western town,'

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[42] Deborah Williams characterizes the town as 'a village outside the mainstream.' Deborah Lindsay Williams, 'Cosmopolitan Regionalism,' in *Middlebrow Moderns: Popular Women Writers of the 1920s,* ed. by Lisa Botshon and Meredith Goldsmith (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 2003), pp. 45-63 (p. 51).
[43] Gale, *Friendship Village,* p. 9.
[44] Sumner, 'The Everlasting Persistence of This Western Girl,' p. 140.

and a review in Philadelphia's *Evening Public Ledger* praised the novel for having 'the same intimate knowledge of Middle West life and character revealed in her other delightful and shrewdly enlightened fictions, doing for a great section of the country what Mrs. Wharton and Miss Wilkins have done for New England and Mr. Cable for the creole South.'[45] The *Baraboo Weekly News* (Wisconsin) unsurprisingly praised the novel on geographical grounds, claiming Gale and *Miss Lulu Bett* for the state by saying: 'On the whole, the trivialities exploited adroitly in this book makes it quite one of the best of the dozen or more that have been written by our busy Miss Gale—for is she not a near and cherished neighbor just over Portage-way, and, besides, one of our varsity alumnae,' a review that emphasizes Gale's productivity and native status rather than the merits of the novel itself.[46]

For most critics, however, *Miss Lulu Bett* marked a welcome departure from Gale's earlier work. The Public Library column in Washington D. C.'s *Sunday Star* noted that 'Miss Gale has vindicated the promise of her literary beginnings and produced in "Miss Lulu Bett" a book that the Atlantic's book shelf says is "without flaw."'[47] The *New York Tribune*'s star columnist, the satirist Heywood Broun, more explicitly admitted that 'Knowing Miss Gale as the author of books called by such titles as "Friendship Village" and "Friendship Village Love Stories," we approached "Miss Lulu Bett" with dire forebodings,' before conceding that the novel pleasantly exceeded his expectations by proving to be 'a shrewd, moving and often tart picture of small-town life.'[48]

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[45] 'Some New Worth While Novels,' *Evening Public Ledger*, 27 March 1920, p. 5; 'Library News: New Fiction,' *Brattleboro Daily Reformer*, 25 September 1920, p. 2.
[46] '"Miss Lulu Bett," Zona Gale's Latest Novel, Deals with Bickering, Commonplace People Yet Easily is One of Her Best,' *Baraboo Weekly News*, 22 July 1920, p. 1.
[47] 'The Public Library,' *The Sunday Star*, 25 July 1920, p. 6.
[48] Heywood Broun, 'Books,' *New York Tribune*, 19 April 1920, p. 8. Deborah Williams argues for a reading of the *Friendship Village* stories (and particularly the later ones) that gives Gale

Gale made this shift in 1920, aligning her change in narrative tone and style with what Anthony Channell Hilfer terms 'the twenties ethic of anticonformity and self-fulfillment.'[49] This was also the year that William Dean Howells died, something which Gordon Hutner argues 'symbolized the transition between the end of one era, American Victorianism, and the beginning of another, American modernism.'[50] With *Miss Lulu Bett*, Gale seemed to be leading the way in this new strain of post-Howellsian American fiction. Edith Wharton, for example, wrote to Gale to tell her that '"Miss Lulu Bett" and "Main Street" seem to me the two significant books in recent American fiction,' going on to discuss the 'new generation which you and Mr. Lewis seem to me to lead.'[51] A reviewer in *The Nation*, meanwhile, noted Gale was writing from the 'same part of the physical and moral world as Spoon River and Winesburg,' associating her brand of Midwesternness with that of Edgar Lee Masters and Sherwood Anderson. He adds that with *Miss Lulu Bett*, she was 'revenging herself on Friendship Village,' from which 'her nerves and her artistic honor have rebelled,' using language which would soon become more formally associated with the 'revolt' movement.[52] A review of Gale's dramatization of her novel in *The Bookman* characterizes her as laughing 'at our own provincialisms,' echoing the nationalism inherent in debates about American versus British English when it notes that 'we no longer need

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credit for a more complex social and political agenda than commonly thought. She suggests that Gale used Friendship Village as 'her lab' where she could conduct 'a series of fictional experiments that test her theories about how people interact.' Williams characterizes Gale's last collection, *Peace in Friendship Village*, as 'a model for postwar nationhood' where she could instruct her readers 'in the importance of resisting xenophobia and racism, while planting the seeds of what might be called a nascent cosmopolitanism.' Williams, 'Cosmopolitan Regionalism,' p. 47.

[49] Anthony Channell Hilfer, *The Revolt from the Village: 1915-1930* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1969), p. 135.

[50] Gordon Hutner, *What America Read: Taste, Class, and the Novel, 1920-1960* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009), p. 37.

[51] Williams, 'Threats of Correspondence,' p. 217.

[52] 'Reforms and Beginnings,' *The Nation* (1920), 557-558 (p. 557).

Bernard Shaw patronizingly to shout across the waters that we are a nation of villagers' because 'we have our Zona Gale and our Sinclair Lewis among us.'[53] Van Doren further entrenched the association between this group of authors in his 1921 'Revolt from the Village' article in *The Nation,* where he praised Gale for joining 'the chorus' of authors, including Masters, Anderson, and Lewis, who were breaking free of the American village.[54]

Hilfer argues that Gale 'never was altogether in phase with the emerging spirit' of rebellion and was instead 'dragged along without overmuch reluctance by the new current' rather than leading the charge, as Wharton and the *Bookman* review frame her as doing. There is no doubt, however, that in *Miss Lulu Bett,* Gale's perspective of the small town has undergone a shift.[55] Hilfer describes *Miss Lulu Bett* as 'an opposite of *Friendship Village*,' and Van Doren's article frames its setting of Warbleton as simply the reverse side of the same small-town coin. 'If the Friendships are sweet and dainty, so are they […] dull and petty,' Van Doren wrote, and through the story of Lulu's monotonous domestic life, Gale's novel exposes both the dullness and pettiness of small towns over and over again.[56] As the not too old, but no longer young, sister of a married woman, Lulu is trapped in her sister's house, serving Ina's family—and particularly her domineering husband, Dwight Deacon—without any space or say of her own. If Gale had once claimed that small hometowns are places to be returned to, Lulu's victory at the end of the novel is represented through her departure from the Deacons' house and, ultimately, her move away from Warbleton, a decision forced upon her by fear of the public censure she and

[53] 'Miss Lulu Bett (Zona Gale's dramatization of her own novel),' *The Bookman,* 52 (1921), 567-568 (p. 568).
[54] Carl Van Doren, 'The Revolt from the Village: 1920,' *The Nation,* 113.2936 (1921), 407-412 (p. 411).
[55] Hilfer, *The Revolt from the Village,* p. 136.
[56] Ibid.

the Deacons would have experienced when it became known that her marriage to Dwight's brother Ninian Deacon, which takes place earlier in the novel, was not legally binding. In this novel, then, the only way for Lulu to be happy with her new, legal husband, Neil, is to leave. In short, the novel suggests that Midwestern towns might not always be places of 'kindly, brooding companionship,' but often sites of gossip, suffocation, and surveillance.[57]

Most critical to this chapter is the way in which Gale's language undergoes a stylistic change to match this ideological shift. In *Miss Lulu Bett,* she notably drops the regional dialect that had peppered her *Friendship Village* stories in favor of more standardized language. While the speech of Friendship residents was often rendered phonetically—'Land, o' course we'll all go,' one of the characters responds to an invitation from a fellow Friendship resident—the characters in *Miss Lulu Bett* are rarely given any regional markers.[58] Despite Gale's less overt emphasis on language, the novel's reviews saw her new style as equally noteworthy. The *Baraboo Weekly News* notes that the novel is 'divested of a really delightful dialogue which exhibits the genius of the author and is the particular charm of her creations,' a characterization of Gale's language that brings to mind Howells's assertion that using the 'language of unaffected

[57] Gale wrote two new endings for *Miss Lulu Bett* when she adapted the novel into a play in 1921. In the novel, Lulu marries piano salesman Neil Cornish and leaves with him when they realize that their marriage will force them to reveal the truth about Lulu's earlier marriage to Ninian. However, Lulu does not marry Neil in either of the two endings she wrote for the play. In the first, Lulu leaves Warbleton alone and unmarried, and in the second, Ninian returns to town with proof that his first wife was dead, making his marriage to Lulu legitimate. The ending of the 1922 film version restores the original ending by having Lulu marry Neil. See Marilyn Judith Atlas, 'From Novel to Plays: Zona Gale and the Marriage Plot in Three Versions of *Miss Lulu Bett*,' *Midwestern Miscellany,* 30 (2002), 35-43; and Lea Jacobs, *The Decline of Sentiment: American Film in the 1920s* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008), particularly pp. 37-44.

[58] Gale, *Friendship Village,* p. 12.

people everywhere' would ensure the 'usefulness' as well as the 'delightfulness' of fiction. [59] Most of the reviews, however, suggest that *Miss Lulu Bett* represented a departure from the type of dialect writing Howells advocated—Broun, for example, specifically praises Gale's 'shrewdly-reported talk,' conjuring allusions to her background in journalism as well as to the representative mission of realism.[60] Gale's new approach to recording speech can be seen as early as the opening chapter, which introduces the Deacons 'at supper': '"Better turn down the gas jest a little," Mr. Deacon said, and stretched up to do so. He made this joke almost every night,' Gale writes in the first instance of dialogue in the novel, highlighting Mr. Deacon's tendency to fall back on the same jokes and speech patterns.[61] A little later during the meal, after an argument between the Deacons' daughter and her parents over whether or not she must eat what has been served, a scene which Gale says 'was enacted every day,' the Deacons discuss the merits of baked potatoes:

> "Baked potatoes," said Mr. Deacon. "That's good—that's good. The baked potato contains more nourishment than potatoes prepared in any other way. The nourishment is next to the skin. Roasting retains it."
> "That's what I always think," said his wife pleasantly.
> For fifteen years they had agreed about this.[62]

Instead of phonetic speech patterns, Gale now focuses her attention on conversational patterns. It is not the language's uniqueness, as indicated by phonetic dialect, that makes her characters' discussions interesting, but its universal dullness. Mr. Deacon's reiteration of 'that's good,' and Mrs. Deacon's 'That's what I always think' both reveal the phatic repetitiveness of the conversation itself, and the ease in which it is possible to slip into patterns of not just speech, but

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[59] '"Miss Lulu Bett," Zona Gale's Latest Novel, Deals with Bickering, Commonplace People Yet Easily is One of Her Best,' *Baraboo Weekly News*, 22 July 1920, p. 1.
[60] Heywood Broun, 'Books,' *New York Tribune*, 19 April 1920, p. 8.
[61] Zona Gale, *Miss Lulu Bett* (New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1921), p. 1.
[62] Ibid., p. 5.

thought. Mrs. Deacon's agreement with her husband is not deeply considered, but it is 'pleasant' for her to agree, and so she does. By emphasizing these mundane, rote conversations, Gale seems to be taking her fascination with the universality of language, which had inspired her *Friendship Village* stories, one step further, by drawing attention to the banality of this type of shared everyday speech. When Gale tells us that in October, Mr. Deacon 'might be heard asking: "Where's my beautiful fall coat?" we are sure that the same question has been asked every fall, and would continue to be asked every fall, without fail.[63]

Gale went on to adapt *Miss Lulu Bett* into a play, and in 1921 she won the Pulitzer Prize for Drama, becoming only the third person and the first woman to be awarded the Prize.[64] Robert C. Benchley, in the forward to the play, explicitly praised Gale's handling of conversational rhythms:

> Especially in its dialogue has the stage clung to an artificiality which even the best of playwrights seem unable to shake off […] Even the "old-home" talk of our rural dramas […] has become, in spite of its affectation of naturalness, so theatrical that whenever we hear a genuine housewife say it in a real kitchen we suspect her of trying to talk like an actress. Into this babel of artificial dialogue came *Miss Lulu Bett* bearing the revolutionary banner of banality. And under this banner march ninety-nine one-hundredths of American conversationalists.[65]

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[63] Gale, *Miss Lulu Bett*, p. 2.

[64] No other woman would win the award until 1931, when Gale's fellow Midwestern author Susan Glaspell won for *Alison's House,* a play set in her native Iowa.

[65] Robert C. Benchley, 'Foreward,' in *Miss Lulu Bett: An American Comedy of Manners* (New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1921), pp. xiii-xvi (pgs. xiii-xiv). Willa Cather pointed out the same characteristic of stage speech twenty-five years earlier: 'It is a strange fact that people on the stage can't talk the English language like their fellow mortals. […] If in the real world anyone should gurgle the word "innocence" in the sensational actress manner, he or she would

The line of dialogue that Benchley uses as an example of affectedly natural speech—'Land sakes, ain't them pies done yet?'—is reminiscent of the dialogue in the Friendship Village stories, emphasizing the evolution of Gale's thoughts about language—and, seemingly, about her home region. In suggesting that Midwesterners spoke in the same dull and predictable way as the rest of the country, Gale was participating in the ongoing debate about what 'realism' means and what type of speech represents it. Just as Howells's more genteel form of realism was going out of fashion, so too was the type of phonetically represented language he praised in the work of Edward Eggleston and James Whitcomb Riley. Instead, Gale's novel and its reception demonstrates that realism and accuracy of representation was becoming less about reporting the unique speech markers found in regional speech than about the banality of the type of everyday speech heard in homes around the country.

This shift made defining 'universal' American speech increasingly important, something New York theater reviewer Burns Mantle describes regionally in his review of *Miss Lulu Bett*'s opening night. The review, published in newspapers around the country, notes that after the play, Gale 'was duly presented as "Miss Zona Gale of Main street, Portage, Wis.,"' to the New York City audience, surely a deliberate reference to Sinclair Lewis's 1920 bestseller.[66] The review went on to emphasize regional differences, setting up a dichotomy between the rebellious, authentic Midwest and the artificial East: 'Thus did the play's premier take on a sectional interest, as though the middle west characteristically defiant, was saying to the effete east: "Well, you poor old painted frump, here is a real play about the real folk of a real section of the country:

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be sent to the first asylum that would risk receiving such a dangerous case.' Willa Cather, 'One Way of Putting It,' *Nebraska State Journal,* 21 January 1894, p. 16.

[66] Burns Mantle was one of the most preeminent theatre critics of the early twentieth century. In 1920, he began *The Best Plays, and The Year Book of the Drama in America,* an annual series summarizing the best plays of the previous year, and continued to edit the series until 1947.

observe it carefully and see how much less artificial and unreal it is than the sort of thing you most generously approve down here.'"[67] Mantle's use of direct speech, and his characterization of Midwesterners as 'real folk' from 'a real section of the country' suggests that despite Gale's emphasis on shared characteristics, authentic, everyday speech was still often seen as a particular regional feature, and, more specifically, a Midwestern feature.[68]

'WESTWARD THE STAR OF EMPIRE OVER LANGUAGE TAKES ITS WAY': MENCKEN'S AMERICAN LANGUAGE

In 1923, Montana senator Washington J. McCormick proposed a bill to officially rename the predominant US language 'American.'[69] Although it never went beyond the committee level, the

[67] Burns Mantle, '"Miss Lulu Bett" Lacks Essential Outlines of Drama,' *Omaha Sunday Bee*, 9 January 1921, p. 4-D. Mantle ultimately gave the play a disappointing review, arguing that the book, while a success itself, did not translate well to the stage. By the time he published the 1920-1921 edition of *The Best Plays*, however, he gave 'Miss Lulu Bett' an 'honorable mention,' noting that the play had 'worked its way into the success list after the text had been somewhat altered and a "happy ending" attached.' Burns Mantle, *The Best Plays of 1920-1921* (Boston: Small Maynard & Company, 1921), p. 8.

[68] In 1922, Gale contributed a piece on Wisconsin to *The Nation*'s 'These United States' series, which invited authors to write about their native states in order to demonstrate the 'distinctive colors of life among [the United States'] many sections and climates and altitudes.' Gale's piece opens by quoting two different types of Wisconsin residents: the 'New Englander, Scandinavian, German pioneer or son of a pioneer' and the 'prosperous townsman saving for his home.' By foregrounding the speech of native Wisconsin residents talking about everyday concerns, Gale once again emphasizes the universality of these two types of speakers in her home state. 'Divided We Stand,' in *'These United States': Portraits of America from the 1920s*, ed. by Daniel H. Borus (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1992), pp. 27-28 (p. 28); Zona Gale, 'Wisconsin: A Voice from the Middle Border,' in *'These United States,'* ed. by Borus (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1992), pp. 396-402 (p. 396).

[69] Joshua Miller, *Accented America: The Cultural Politics of Multilingual Modernism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), p. 96. McCormick was not the first (or last) person to propose renaming as a way of distancing the United States from its European past. Walt Whitman, for example, proposed renaming various American cities whose names came from European history, singling out Baltimore, New Orleans, St. Paul, and St. Louis as particularly in need of reevaluation. Whitman, *An American Primer*, p. 32.

bill's framing, which read in part that the 'name of the language of a country has a powerful psychological influence in stimulating and preserving the national ideal,' demonstrates both the overwhelming concern with national identity in the early 1920s and the ways in which debates about national identity had become tied to language.[70] They were also tied to literature, and much of the argument McCormick used to support his proposal considered the effect he believed the change would have on the United States' capacity to produce original, native literature. 'America has lost much in literature by not thinking its own thoughts and speaking them boldly in a language unadorned with gold braid,' he was quoted as saying in a satirical editorial, 'Language by Legislation.' He concluded, 'Let our writers drop their top-coats, spats, and swagger-sticks, and assume occasionally their buckskin, moccasins, and tomahawks,' a comparison which emphasized the native elements of 'American' by associating it with a Native American origin story for the United States instead of one that begins with colonization.[71]

The Nation's satirical response—'The trouble with this country is these here foreigners coming in and learning English out of grammar books instead of picking up American on the

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[70] H. L. Mencken, *The American Language: An Inquiry into the Development of English in the United States,* 4th edn. (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1949), pp. 82-83. For more recent attempts to regulate the use of English in the United States, see my article, 'Talking American in the Midwest: Linguistic Diversity and Authenticity in the Twentieth-Century United States,' *Journal of American Studies,* 56.1 (2022), 65-86.

[71] Many in this period turned to Native American imagery and folklore in order to establish a distinctive national history. The first issue of John T. Frederick's *The Midland,* for example, included a short story titled 'Silent Battle: A Tribal Episode of the Early West,' which Jeffrey Swenson argues reflects the magazine's desire to 'make concrete a connection to the history of the region' and present a 'pleasing fantasy of continuity between white settlers and American Indians.' See also Philip Rahv's 'Paleface and Redskin,' which placed Native American imagery against European-inspired gentility. Jeffrey C. Swenson, 'Middling Modernism and the Midwestern Little Magazine,' in *The Oxford Critical and Cultural History of Modernist Magazines: Vol. II: North America 1894-1960,* ed. by Peter Brooker and Andrew Thacker (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), pp. 558-575 (p. 569); Philip Rahv, 'Paleface and Redskin,' *The Kenyon Review,* 1.3 (1939), 251-256.

vacant lots where the boys would give them the merry-ha-ha if they pulled any of the high-and-mighty'—both picked up on both the nativist element of McCormick's argument as well as its stereotypically masculine framing, using phrasing—'these here foreigners'—and slang—'merry-ha-ha'—that established the version of 'Americanness' that was being promoted.[72] More subtly, the editorial also drew attention to the Midwesternness of this potential 'American' language. As a suggestion for how to 'boost' McCormick's proposal, *The Nation* proposed a committee on American English composed of H. L. Mencken and a series of Midwesterners: Warren Harding of Ohio; preacher Billy Sunday of Iowa and Illinois; and authors George Ade of Indiana and Ring Lardner of Michigan.[73] The *New York Times'*s own editorial 'Language by law established,' confirmed that 'Westward the star of empire over language takes its way. Main Street will have to look to its laurels,' an apparent reference to Minnesota author Sinclair Lewis's *Main Street,* which was notorious for its slang-inundated language.[74]

The Nation's situating of the American language firmly in the Midwest, even in a satirical sense, is an indication of the 'westward' direction in which linguistic standards were shifting in the United States at the beginning of the twentieth century, something H. L. Mencken—the only Easterner included on *The Nation*'s proposed committee on American English—seemed to recognize and promote. In 1919, Mencken had published *The American Language*, a study of primarily spoken language in the United States. This book was, as Raymond Nelson points out, 'the first attempt since Noah Webster's at an overview of the national language,' and in many ways, it follows the nationalist impulses of language debates

[72] 'Language by Legislation,' *The Nation,* 116.3014 (1923), 408 (p. 408).
[73] Miller, *Accented America*, p. 96.
[74] Quoted in Bonfiglio, *Race and the Rise of Standard American,* p. 137.

stretching back to Webster and Whitman in the nineteenth century.[75] Mencken aligns his crowd-sourcing method of assembling the 'collection of materials' which form the basis of his book with the democratic principles of the United States, following in the pattern of early Americans such as John Adams and Thomas Jefferson, who frequently related democracy to the way the American language should be used and regulated.[76] He also correlates his history of American English directly with the history of the United States itself, structuring the book around a historical timeline that stretches from the colonial days, through the Revolutionary War and the founding of the United States, up to the book's publication in the early twentieth century. By fashioning his book not only as a linguistic study, but also as a historical account of the United States' cultural separation from England through their diverging languages, Mencken sought to establish a distinct cultural history for the nation grounded in decades of linguistic evolution.

But although Mencken pitched his study as a national one, in selecting examples to demonstrate this democratic 'American' language he is fairly provincial. Many of Mencken's examples from fiction and commentary were written by Midwestern authors.[77] He cites Indianan

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[75] Raymond Nelson, 'Babylonian Frolics: H. L. Mencken and The American Language,' *American Literary History,* 11.4 (1999), 668-698 (p. 669).

[76] John Adams, for example, argued in 1780 'that the form of government has an influence upon language, and language in its turn influences not only the form of government, but the temper, sentiments, and manners of the people.' Adams quoted in Baron, *The English-Only Question,* p. 28.

[77] The linguist he most credits with informing his ideas on the American language was also a Midwesterner: Louise Pound, a native Nebraskan and college friend of Willa Cather who spent most of her career at the University of Nebraska. Mencken admitted that Pound had done 'capital work' studying Midwestern dialects in *The American Language* (even as he argued that linguists should be focusing on a general view of American English rather than a regional one), adding in 1945 that 'it was her work, more than that of any other philologian, that had set the investigation of American English on its legs,' adding that his own linguistic writing 'leaned heavily upon it.' H. L. Mencken, *The American Language: A Preliminary Inquiry into the Development of English in the United States* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1919), p. 143; H. L. Mencken, Louise Pound, and Arthur G. Kennedy, '"American Speech," 1925-1945: The Founders Look Back,' *American Speech,* 20.4 (1945), 241-246 (p. 241).

George Ade's 1906 view that 'the American must go to England in order to learn for a dead certainty that he does not speak the English language' and that 'there are two languages, the English and the American'; he also praises Ohio native Howells's dedication to writing as Americans truly speak instead of with language intended to appeal to British critics, commenting that Howells's novels 'are mines of American idiom, and his style shows an undeniable revolt against the trammels of English grammarians.'[78] He saves his most enthusiastic praise, however, for Chicago newspaper and short story writer Ring Lardner, for whom Mencken says 'the business of reducing' the American dialect 'to print had to wait.'[79] Mencken's view of Midwestern writing as quintessentially American predated *The American Language*. In a 1917 column, his hundredth contribution to *The Smart Set*, Mencken bemoaned the state of American literature, but noted his hope that Indianan Dreiser 'will probably do his best work hereafter.' He also praised 'two or three men who are sound artists, and yet as American as trading stamps or chewing gum: Booth Tarkington, George Ade, and Harry Leon Wilson'; in short, Mencken situated his hope for future American literary production firmly in the Midwest.[80] Three years later, in 1920, he seemed to view his optimism about the region as having been justified, calling Chicago 'the most thoroughly American of American cities' and declaring that 'with two exceptions, there is not a single American novelist of the younger generation […] who has not sprung from the Middle Empire that has Chicago for its capital.'[81] In his review of *Main Street*,

[78] Mencken, *The American Language* (1919), p. 18.
[79] Ibid., p. 191.
[80] H. L. Mencken, 'Taking Stock,' in *H. L. Mencken's Smart Set Criticism*, ed. by William H. Nolte (Washington, D.C.: Regnery Publishing, 1987), pp. 314-319 (p. 319). Harry Leon Wilson was an Illinois native who became a friend and collaborator of Booth Tarkington, with whom he co-wrote many successful plays.
[81] H. L. Mencken, 'The Literary Capital of the United States,' *The Nation* [London], 27 (1920), repr. in *Chicago Daily News* (1920) (n.p.). The 'two exceptions' were Abraham Cahan and James Branch Cabell; the Midwestern authors Mencken cited included Booth Tarkington, Willa

Mencken describes the novel as 'the typical story of an American family' and praises the realism of its language. 'Mr. Lewis represents their speech vividly and accurately. It would be hard to find a false note in the dialogue, and it would be impossible to exceed the verisimilitude of the various extracts from the Gopher Prairie paper, […] or of a speech by a boomer at a banquet of the Chamber of Commerce,' he wrote, equating literary achievement with representative accuracy despite thinking the characters 'remain flat.'[82]

Mencken's book helped to cement the association of Midwestern authors with his particular form of American English. A review of *The American Language* published in *Modern Philology* by James Root Hulbert, who would go on to coedit the *Dictionary of American English*, is highly critical of Mencken's 'distorted view of many things,' declaring that 'one could fill pages with examples of the errors resulting from the author's lack of systematic training.'[83] Despite this panning, however, Hulbert ends the review on an oddly positive note.

Cather, Sherwood Anderson, and Theodore Dreiser. A response to Mencken's essay emphasized that while Chicago may contain literary talent, New York was still the center of literary distribution: 'It is in New York magazines that most Middle Western readers learn what Middle Western writers are worth while; it is from New York publishers that they buy their next door neighbors' novels.' 'That Literary Capital,' *The Nation,* 110.2869 (1920), 844a (p. 844a).

[82] H. L. Mencken, 'The Story of an American Family,' in *H. L. Mencken's Smart Set Criticism,* ed. by Nolte (Washington, D.C.: Regnery Publishing, 1987), pp. 279-282 (pp. 280, 281-282).

[83] James Root Hulbert, 'Review: The American Language by H. L. Mencken,' *Modern Philology,* 17.5 (1919), 302-303 (pp. 302, 303). Mencken's book actually received a number of positive reviews from academics after its publication, including that of Brander Matthews, a professor of English at Columbia University whom Mencken excoriated as a member of the genteel tradition. In his review, Matthews said *The American Language* was 'a book to be taken seriously' and agreed with many of Mencken's opinions. Matthews himself had considered the growing divergence of American English and British English in *Americanisms and Briticisms with Other Essays on Other Isms* (1892), where he argued that 'there is no necessity to plead for the right of the Americanism to exist. The cause is won.' Brander Matthews, 'Developing the American From the English Language,' *The New York Times Review of Books,* 30 March 1919, pp. 157, 164, 170; *Americanisms and Briticisms with Other Essays on Other Isms* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1892), p. 5. See also Lawrence J. Oliver, 'Theodore Roosevelt, Brander Matthews, and the Campaign for Literary Americanism,' *American Quarterly,* 41.1 (1989), 93-111.

'Yet, despite the extraordinary faults that make it untrustworthy,' he concludes, 'the book contains a great deal of interesting correct information, and on many points the author has sound philological ideas. It is a convenient and useful work for the general reader.'[84] Hulbert's conclusion proved perhaps more prescient than he would have liked in light of his misgivings about the accuracy of the text. *The American Language*, and the subsequent editions Mencken published in 1923, 1927, 1944, and 1946, incorporating suggestions and revisions made by readers, became the popular foundation for the study of language in the United States. It is still in print today.[85]

'ALL-PURE AMERICAN' LANGUAGE?

Mencken's influence on the national perception of American English was significant given his circumstances in the years before his book's publication in 1919. Eventually known as one of the most prominent literary critics and commentators of the early twentieth century, Mencken had begun his career in Baltimore in the early 1900s as a young journalist, and then as the author of widely praised books on George Bernard Shaw and Friedrich Nietzsche.[86] In 1908, he was hired to write a monthly book column for *The Smart Set,* a New York City-based literary magazine, and in 1914, along with George Jean Nathan, the drama critic, he took over editorship of the magazine. Together Mencken and Nathan turned *The Smart Set* into one of the most successful

[84] Hulbert, 'Review: The American Language by H. L. Mencken,' p. 303.
[85] If this book was a way for Mencken to reframe his reputation in 1919, Raymond Nelson argues that Mencken's future reputation similarly 'relies heavily' on the lasting power of *The American Language,* in which he 'found ways to coordinate all of his virtues, outsmart most of his shortcomings, and achieve a durable integration of vision and nourishment.' Nelson, 'Babylonian Frolics,' p. 696.
[86] Bonfiglio, *Race and the Rise of Standard American,* p. 141.

and widely circulated literary magazines in the United States, publishing writing by both established and up-and-coming authors such as Theodore Dreiser, Eugene O'Neill, Edna St. Vincent Millay, and Sinclair Lewis.

Although Mencken remained editor of *The Smart Set,* and continued to have a significant influence on American culture through it until he and Nathan both left to start *The American Mercury* in 1924, his cultural and political reputation was damaged during the years leading up to World War I. Of German ancestry himself, Mencken had made a costly social and critical misstep by writing and publishing from a pro-German stance even as the United States became involved in World War I. For example, in November 1914, only a few months before the sinking of the American ship *Lusitania* by German U-boats, he published a pro-German piece in *The Atlantic*, and in 1917, the year the US entered the war, he was still writing laudatory profiles of German military leaders.[87] Mencken's pro-German views, so at odds with those of the rest of the country, put him and his editors in a difficult position, as editor Ellery Sedgwick's response to a 1915 submission to *The Atlantic* demonstrates. 'I am writing and twisting inside,' Sedgwick wrote to Mencken. 'Your reprehensible paper is damnably effective…However, it is within the bounds of possibility that we shall have war with Germany before this paper can be printed, and, of course, I have no desire to foment treason.'[88] Sedgwick ultimately decided not to publish the piece, a decision that was echoed by many other editors. As a result, Mencken was largely silenced for the duration of the war, something that rankled him for years.[89]

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[87] Jennie Rothenberg Gritz, 'Mencken: America's Critic,' *The Atlantic* (2002) <https://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2002/12/mencken-americas-critic/378513/> [accessed 15 August 2020]; H. L. Mencken, 'Ludendorff,' *The Atlantic Monthly,* 119.6 (1917), 823-32.
[88] Quoted in Gritz, 'Mencken: America's Critic.'
[89] Miller, *Accented America,* p. 64.

Mencken was not alone in facing discrimination during World War I, when all things German—including the language—came under attack. Immigrants had established robust German-language education systems and founded German-language publications in the time since their arrival in the United States, but after 1914, many states quickly began passing laws targeting these German institutions, making it illegal to teach or publish in any language other than English.[90] Iowa, a Midwestern state that had actively recruited immigrants by publishing informational pamphlets in many different languages during the 1890s, was one of the most aggressive in restricting the use of German.[91] As happened in many other states, the Iowa State Council of Defense outlawed the teaching of German; German-language parochial schools were forced to close, and German newspapers ceased circulation.[92] These restrictions culminated in the Babel Proclamation, an executive order issued by Iowa Governor William Harding on 23 May 1918. Arguing that freedom of speech does not 'entitle the person who cannot speak or understand the English language to employ a foreign language, when to do so tends, in time of national peril, to create discord among neighbors and citizens, or to disturb the peace and quiet of the community,' Harding established a set of wartime rules that required, among other restrictions, that all conversations in public places, on trains, and over the telephone be held in English only. Harding repealed the order shortly after the end of the war, but he maintained his opposition to the use of languages besides English in Iowa in his revocation of the Proclamation,

[90] For an in-depth analysis of the history of the German language in the Midwest, see Michael T. Putnam and Joseph Salmons, 'Multilingualism in the Midwest: How German Has Shaped (and Still Shapes) the Midwest,' *Middle West Review*, 1.2 (2015), 29-52. For a broader account of non-English publications in the United States, see Chapter 7, 'American Languages,' in Werner Sollors, *Ethnic Modernism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008), pp. 85-91.
[91] Stephen J. Frese, 'Divided by a Common Language: The Babel Proclamation and its Influence in Iowa History,' *The History Teacher*, 39.1 (2005), 59-88 (pp. 59-60).
[92] Ibid., pp. 60-61.

writing: 'National Unity can be best maintained by the employment of a common vehicle of communication, and this vehicle, in the United States, by reason of custom and law, is the English language.'[93]

If speaking German was suspect, knowledge of American English became a way to prove one's patriotism, and, for Mencken in particular, a way back into the good graces of the American public.[94] Within the first paragraph of the preface of *The American Language*, Mencken notes that he is an 'American born and bred,' and while he includes examples of how words have come into American from other languages—including German—his emphasis is on their assimilation into American, rather than their foreign origins.[95] Moreover, he argues that one of the defining characteristics of American English is its 'general uniformity throughout the country, so that dialects, properly speaking, are confined to,' among other minority groups, 'recent immigrants.'[96] In other words use of the American language was evidence of a universal

[93] William Harding, 'Revocation of Babel Proclamation, 1918,' State Historical Society of Iowa < https://iowaculture.gov/history/education/educator-resources/primary-source-sets/immigration-regulation-response-and/revocation-babel> [accessed 21 July 2020].
[94] Joshua Miller argues that many American intellectuals took a similar approach to Mencken: more books and articles were 'published on the subject of U.S. English during the three decades between 1918 and 1948 than had appeared in the previous 142 years in the nation's history.' Miller, *Accented America,* p. 107.
[95] Mencken included an example at the end of one of the sections in *The American Language* that highlights the rehabilitating power of the American language while explicitly avoiding any mention of anti-German sentiment. He wrote that during World War I, 'the *Illinoiser Staats Zeitung,* no doubt trying to keep the sense of difference [between British and American English] alive, advertised that it would publish articles daily in the *American* language,' a decision by the German-language newspaper that was more likely due to a desire to be seen as patriotically American than as a statement on the differences between British and American English, as Mencken surely recognized. Mencken, *The American Language* (1919), p. 18. Sollors does point out, however, that Mencken brought attention to American multilingualism in the stories and essays he published in *The American Mercury*, including, for example, an essay on 'The Yugoslav Speech in America' in 1927. Sollors, *Ethnic Modernism,* pp. 85-86.
[96] Mencken, *The American Language* (1919), p. 19. Contrary to this claim, the American Dialect Society, which had been active for twenty years by the time Mencken produced his book, was engaged in identifying regional linguistic markers. Mencken dismisses many of their

American identity, one that only excluded 'recent' immigrants. This personal Americanization effort seems to have worked for Mencken—Frederic J. Haskins's review, for example, dubbed Mencken 'the Christopher Columbus of Americanese.'[97]

But where was Americanese located? As Thomas Paul Bonfiglio explains, 'In general, the standard language of a nation will derive from the speech area that is also the center of economic and cultural power in that nation.'[98] In the United States, this made the Northeast, and in particular Boston, the center of the country's elite educational institutions, the clear linguistic standard bearer for many years. Noah Webster's early nineteenth-century system of spelling and pronunciation for his proposed 'federal language,' for example, incorporated the regional pronunciations and vernacular of his native New England, situating the Northeast as the place from which proper pronunciation should originate.[99] As fear of immigrant 'contamination' of American culture and language was on the rise in the early 1900s, however, Boston and New York, each once synecdoche for the nation, began to represent the type of cultural dilution that many Americans feared. By 1910, 75% of the population of the two cities was comprised of immigrants or the children of immigrants. This pushed those in search of a mythically 'unsullied' America to focus more attention on the Midwest, a region that was still perceived, inaccurately,

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conclusions, however, arguing that 'forms practically universal in the nation are discussed as dialectical variations' and criticizing the Society for 'essaying to study localisms before having first platted the characteristics of the general speech.' Mencken, *The American Language* (1919), p. 143.

[97] Quoted in Bonfiglio, *Race and the Rise of Standard English*, p. 141. Bonfiglio finds it 'purely hyperbolic' to consider Mencken 'the discoverer of "Americanese,"' suggesting that a 'more accurate trope would be the Paul Revere of the language, the alarmist with one monotonous reveille whose anti-British message was to set the tone for subsequent accounts of the etiology of standard American pronunciation.' Bonfiglio, *Race and the Rise of Standard English*, p. 142.

[98] Ibid., p. 2.

[99] For more on early American attempts to regulate language use in the United States, see Cmiel, '"A Broad, Fluid Language of Democracy,"' p. 915 and Baron, *The English-Only Question*, p. 87.

as ethnically homogenous.[100] In his memoir, Booth Tarkington recalled a 1911 conversation with an older Indianapolis judge that epitomizes this view. Commenting on the differences between Indianapolis and larger urban centers like New York and Chicago, the judge conflates immigrant status, race, and language, saying,

> Compared to [New York and Chicago], this is still an 'all-pure American' town. You go to the theater in New York and then come back and go to the theater here and the difference'll make you gasp! In a New York theater, between the acts, you'll hear everybody speaking our language, but you wonder why they do. Between the acts in a theater here you aren't surprised when they talk American, because they still generally look that way.[101]

The judge's clear association between a particular ethnicity and Americanness, as well as his characterization of the speech heard in the Midwest as 'American,' reflects the region's growing reputation as the most ethnically, culturally, and linguistically homogenous 'American' region. This ignored the fact that the Midwest did in fact have large, thriving immigrant populations—particularly Scandinavian and German.[102] By the end of 1910, over 85% of the German immigrants who had arrived in the United States had chosen to settle in Midatlantic and Midwestern states, and by the time World War I began, German immigrants were the largest non-English-speaking immigrant group in the nation, accounting for 8.7% of the American population.[103] The effect of this German immigrant history is still felt in the Midwest today: in

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[100] Bonfiglio, *Race and the Rise of Standard American*, p. 4.
[101] Booth Tarkington, *The World Does Move* (London: William Heinemann,1929), p. 128.
[102] For the purposes of this chapter, which considers two German-Americans in Mencken and Ruth Suckow, I will be focusing on the German immigrant experience, but Scandinavian immigrants from Sweden, Norway, and Denmark also flocked to the rural Midwest at roughly the same rates as German immigrants during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. I will discuss the experiences of other immigrant groups to the Midwest when I consider Margaret Wilson's *The Able McLaughlins* (1923) and Edna Ferber's *So Big* (1924), which were set in Scottish and Dutch communities respectively, in Chapter 3.
[103] Maris R. Thompson, *Narratives of Immigration and Language Loss: Lessons from the German American Midwest* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2017), p. 20.

2010, almost 20% of Illinois residents claimed German ancestry; in Wisconsin, that number was over 40%.[104] In spite of the language barrier between German immigrants and English-speaking residents, this wave of immigrants—who, according to a 1919 report, possessed 'ideas, customs, standards of living, modes of thought, and religion of the same general tenor as those of the earlier [Anglo-Saxon] settlers,' quickly became absorbed into the standard image of an 'American.'[105] As the judge in Tarkington's memoir commented, 'A few years ago the "typical American"—or maybe what we called the "average American"—was a lot more old-stock Anglo-Saxon, with German and Irish traces, than he is to-day,' a description that places German immigrant heritage firmly into his view of an acceptable American ethnicity.[106]

By the turn of the twentieth century, however, increased industrial development had begun attracting a new wave of immigrants to the United States and, more specifically, to the East Coast industrial centers. Beginning in the 1880s, a new influx of immigrants arriving much more rapidly and in higher numbers than ever before focused intense national attention on immigration. These new arrivals brought with them religious, political, and educational backgrounds that differed from those of earlier wave immigrants, and they tended to settle alongside other immigrants from their home countries.[107] To native-born Americans (even if they were themselves the children or grandchildren of immigrants), these new arrivals appeared

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[104] Thompson, *Narratives of Immigration and Language Loss,* p. 3.
[105] Howard C. Hill, 'The Americanization Movement,' *American Journal of Sociology,* 24.6 (1919), 609-642 (p. 610). It would be a mistake to assume, however, that these Northern and Western European immigrants did not face resentment and discrimination.
[106] Tarkington, *The World Does Move,* pp. 129-130.
[107] For a more comprehensive overview of the differences between the immigrants who arrived during these two waves of immigration and the resulting tensions that arose in the United States, see Edward George Hartmann, *The Movement to Americanize the Immigrant* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1948).

incapable of or, worse, unwilling to assimilate into American society.[108] And as the judge's comments suggest, discourse surrounding this wave, which was dominated by Southern and Eastern Europeans on the East Coast and Asian immigrants on the West Coast, was highly racialized. Bonfiglio describes Mencken's 'ideal speaker,' created in *The American Language,* as 'rural, rustic, and race conscious,' suggesting that he sees 'American' as under threat from other types of speakers.[109] Americanization programs led immigrants to believe they could alleviate the racial discrimination they often faced by becoming more traditionally 'American,' which ironically became associated with models of Northern European whiteness. As James Barrett and David Roediger explain, 'the processes of "becoming white" and "becoming American" were intertwined at every turn,' turning immigrant assimilation into not just a cultural issue, but a racial one.[110] It was in light of these anxieties, when the ideas of 'ethnic and linguistic heterogeneity' were being portrayed as 'political dynamite' and a 'serious cultural danger,' that the rural Midwest, which was less affected by this later immigration wave and was instead home

[108] In his 1919 report on the Americanization movement, for example, Howard Hill argues that 'unlike the earlier immigrants, many of the late-comers manifested no intention of making America a permanent home and no desire of becoming Americans.' Even those who did attempt to assimilate were often not considered American. Werner Sollors points out that use of 'American' by immigrants was seen by some critics as 'an erosion of the word,' prompting the creation of alternative terms such as '100% Americans,' 'native Americans,' 'only Americans,' 'real Americans,' or 'American-Americans.' Hill, 'The Americanization Movement,' p. 611; Sollors, *Ethnic Modernism,* p. 78.

[109] Bonfiglio, *Race and the Rise of Standard American,* p. 155.

[110] James R. Barrett and David Roediger, 'Inbetween Peoples: Race, Nationality and the "New Immigrant" Working Class,' *Journal of American Ethnic History,* 16.3 (1997), 3-44 (p. 6). For more on how this racialized discourse of Americanization and immigration affects twenty-first century immigration rhetoric, see J. David Cisneros, 'A Nation of Immigrants and a Nation of Laws: Race, Multiculturalism, and Neoliberal Exception in Barack Obama's Immigration Discourse,' *Communication, Culture & Critique,* 8.3 (2015), 356-75.

to fully assimilated Western European immigrants, emerged as the region that best represented an Anglo-Saxon Americanness.[111]

Although the ethnic and racial connotations have become less explicit, the linguistic association between the Midwest and the United States still exists today. While linguists continue to debate the status of the Midwestern dialect,[112] the popular view held today by most Americans, as Laura Hartley and Dennis Preston showed in their 1999 study on national dialect perception, is that the Midwest is the seat of 'General American' (other names include 'Midwest Bland,' as used by one South Carolina resident, or 'Boring Midwest,' according to a study participant from Michigan).[113] Today, according to sociolinguist Matthew J. Gordon, 'General American' is associated with the Midwest because the speech of this region 'generally lacks features that are salient markers of place to the ears of most Americans,' creating the 'perception that the region is "accentless."'[114] In other words, the region's indistinctness—the quality that has led to its reputation as 'flyover country'—is also what has allowed it to take on a quintessentially 'American' identity. In the early twentieth century, however, 'General

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[111] Philip Martin, 'Trends in Migration to the U.S.,' *Population Reference Bureau* (2014) <https://www.prb.org/resources/trends-in-migration-to-the-u-s/> [accessed 2 February 2020]; Sollors, *Ethnic Modernism,* p. 38.

[112] As recently as 1987, linguist Craig Carver declared the Midland dialect 'nonexistent,' arguing that what is generally conceptualized as the Midland dialect region is only a transition region between southern and northern dialects, and does not fit the criteria to be named a dialect in and of itself. Thomas E. Murray and Beth Lee Simon, 'What is dialect? Revisiting the Midland,' in *Language Variation and Change in the American Midland: A New Look at 'Heartland' English,* ed. by Thomas Edward Murray and Beth Lee Simon (Amsterdam: John Benjamins Publishing Company, 2006), pp. 1-29 (p. 5).

[113] Laura Hartley and Denis R. Preston, 'The Names of Us English: Valley Girl, Cowboy, Yankee, Normal, Nasal, and Ignorant,' in *Faculty Publications—Department of World Languages, Sociology, & Cultural Studies* (Newberg: George Fox University, 1999), pp. 207-238.

[114] Matthew J. Gordon, 'The West and Midwest: Phonology,' in *Varieties of English: The Americas and the Caribbean,* ed. by Edgar W. Schneider (Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter, 2008), pp. 129-43 (p. 129).

American' had distinct geographic associations, which, while less ideologically charged, are still culturally influential today. As David Marion Holman argues in a book comparing Southern and Midwestern regionalist writing, 'the Midwest is the region that defines itself most as nation and is accepted as such by other regions of the country. The South is a particular *place*; the Midwest is "the Heartland,"' a designation that strips the Midwest of its individuality while distinguishing it by virtue of its representativeness.[115] As I've already suggested, by the late nineteenth and early twentieth century many writers, and Midwestern writers in particular, began capitalizing on the popularity of American dialect speech and the new weight it was being given as 'literary' writing with the rise of realism to sell 'local color' stories and novels. These authors initially used regional language to reinforce the pleasant image of the Midwest most of the country was all too willing to believe in, but eventually they also began to challenge that view, questioning what exactly 'representative Americanness' should look—and sound—like.

RUTH SUCKOW'S ACCENTED MIDWESTERN AMERICAN

Ruth Suckow was the grandchild of German immigrants on her father's side, and, as we've seen in 'Four Generations,' German immigrants—and German immigrant speech—often appear in her work. This is an aspect of Suckow's writing that would have appealed to Mencken. In one letter sent early in their friendship, he inquired about Suckow's ancestry, noting the similarities between their German backgrounds and telling her that he believed that America's best literary output at this time was coming from writers of 'later immigration.'[116]

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[115] David Marion Holman, *A Certain Slant of Light: Regionalism and the Form of Southern and Midwestern Fiction* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1995), p. 17.
[116] H. L. Mencken, Letter to Ruth Suckow, 16 August 1922, Ruth Suckow Papers, MsCO706, Box 2, Folder 1, University of Iowa Special Collections, Iowa City, Iowa.

If Suckow is remembered at all today, it is not for her interest in depicting German-Americans, however, but for her representation of her home state of Iowa. Her first short story collection, published in 1926, was titled *Iowa Interiors,* and she remained a promoter and a critic of the state throughout her career. Even though she traveled and lived outside of the region in the later decades of her life and set some stories in California and New York, she is still thought of as a Midwestern author. When Sinclair Lewis included an extract from Suckow's first novel, *Country People* (1924), in his 1943 anthology *The Three Readers,* he described her as born 'in 1892 in Grant Wood's Iowa, where there is nothing to be seen but corn stalks and college towers and secretaries of agriculture,' a setting 'she has re-created in […] genuinely native novels.'[117] John T. Frederick, the founder and editor of *The Midland* magazine, clearly agreed, writing in 1931, 'When I think of the work of Ruth Suckow, I think of the Iowa hills […]. There is a vital sense of place in all she writes.'[118]

Frederick published Suckow's first short story, 'Uprooted,' in *The Midland* a decade before he made this assessment and only a few years after he founded the magazine for the purpose of promoting Midwestern literature.[119] Frederick named his magazine in honor of *The Midland Monthly,* which had been published out of Des Moines, Iowa from 1894-1899, and he saw himself as continuing a literary tradition associated with writers such as Eggleston and Garland. Just as Garland had hoped that Chicago could challenge the Eastern publishing

[117] Sinclair Lewis, 'Introductory Remarks,' in *The Three Readers,* ed. by Sinclair Lewis, Clifton Fadiman, and Carl Van Doren (New York: The Press of the Readers Club, 1943), pp. 173-177 (p. 176).
[118] John T. Frederick, 'Ruth Suckow and the Middle Western Literary Movement,' *The English Journal*, 20.1 (1931), 1-8 (p. 1).
[119] Suckow served as an editorial assistant on *The Midland* during the winter of 1921-1922, and it was Frederick who suggested she send some work to Mencken. Milton M. Reigelman, *The Midland: A Venture in Literary Regionalism* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1942), p. 20.

monopoly, Frederick hoped his magazine—subtitled 'A Magazine of the Middle West'—would push back against the New York publishing establishment which, as Milton Reigelman characterized it, 'remained blind to the real possibilities of American literature.'[120] Frederick's magazine, by contrast, would encourage Midwestern authors to write without having to cater to Eastern tastes. The first issue of *The Midland,* published in October 1915, put forth this mission by instructing writers that when sending submissions, they should let 'the winters to be no colder than a reputable thermometer registers them to be, the sandstorms no denser, the skies no brighter, and the men and women no more tolerant, no more intolerant than they are.' With this line, Frederick identifies what he saw as the two harmful models of authorial exaggeration: on the one hand, representing the Midwest as a place of particular environmental and physical hardship, 'a region of grim farms and restrictive farms'; and on the other, as a haven of idyllic comfort and 'folksy perfection.'[121]

Beginning to write in the early 1920s, Suckow found this debate as alive as ever. 'A subtle strain of either protest or apology runs through most of [the Midwest's] literature,' she wrote in 1923 or 1924. 'Most of the middlewestern books yet written—the novels of Willa Cather are the finest exception—have served the purpose of in some way getting rid of an ancient and almost ingrained inferiority complex. Full of vigor as some of them have been, they

[120] Reigelman, *The Midland: A Venture in Literary Regionalism*, p. 43. For more on Frederick's views on New York's publishing monopoly, see pp. 42-45. Tom Lutz, however, points out that even while arguing against the standardizing influence of the Eastern publishing institutions, Frederick aspired to join them. He submitted his own stories to East Coast magazines (including *The Smart Set* and *American Mercury*), published with Knopf instead of with his own regional press, and repeatedly inquired about an editorial position with *The Nation*, demonstrating the persistent draw of Eastern publishing prestige. Tom Lutz, *Cosmopolitan Vistas: American Regionalism and Literary Value* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2004), pp. 133-134.
[121] Ronald Weber, *The Midwestern Ascendancy in American Writing* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992), p. 178.

have usually lacked the artistic courage or certainty to be, at bottom, other than social documents.'[122] Although Suckow praises Cather for being able to overcome that sense of inferiority, Cather herself confessed to a pressure to write about locations and people 'more exciting' than those she had grown up in and around.[123] In discussing *Alexander's Bridge* (1912), her first novel, Cather writes that she set the story in London because 'London is supposed to be more engaging than, let us say, Gopher Prairie,' yet another reference to Lewis's *Main Street.*[124] Setting her next novel, *O Pioneers!* (1913), in Nebraska was, as Cather recounts it, not a strategic choice, but rather born of a personal urge to write something 'entirely for myself.'[125] She still doubted that anybody would want to read 'a story concerned entirely with heavy farming people, with cornfields and pasture lands and pig yards, —set in Nebraska, of all places!'[126] Ten years later, Suckow also seems to feel that there was a difference between the kind of art that was generally acceptable, and that which stemmed from her own landscape. 'Modern art, poetry, is—with exceptions few and unexpected as wild flowers—city-born,' Suckow wrote under the heading 'An Artist in Iowa' in a notebook she kept while living in Earlville, Iowa during the

[122] Ruth Suckow, 'Beauty in Iowa,' Ruth Suckow Papers, MsC0706, Box 24, University of Iowa Special Collections, Iowa City, Iowa.
[123] Willa Cather, 'My First Novels [There Were Two],' in *Willa Cather on Writing: Critical Studies on Writing as an Art* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1988), pp. 89-97 (p. 91).
[124] Ibid., p. 92. Writing to Cather after the publication of *Alexander's Bridge,* Sarah Orne Jewett, whom William Barillas credits as being of 'singular importance to Cather's development as a writer of place,' advised her, 'Of course, one day you will write about your own country. In the meantime, get all you can. One must know the world *so well* before one can know the parish.' Cather dedicated *O, Pioneers!* to Jewett. William Barillas, *The Midwestern Pastoral: Place and Landscape in Literature of the American Heartland* (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 2006), p. 55; Jewett quoted by Cather in 'Preface to Alexander's Bridge,' in *Willa Cather: Stories, Poems, and Other Writings* (New York: The Library of America, 1992), pp. 941-943 (p. 942).
[125] Cather, 'My First Novels [There Were Two],' p. 92.
[126] Ibid., p. 94.

winter of 1920-1921.[127] Yet she, like Cather, felt called to write about her native region. 'Art that I have chosen—art that has chosen me—is born of a brown pasture slope in windless sunlight, where birds call like the sigh of peace, where the brown creek tinkles, where a motionless tree casts one clear shadow.' She was also articulating a bias towards a specific rural version of the Midwest shared by Frederick and *The Midland.* Swenson argues that in pitching itself as the alternative to little magazines based in Chicago and New York, *The Midland* positioned 'itself as a magazine with a distinctly rural character,' and published stories and poems set in rural settings as opposed to urban settings at a ratio of eight to one.[128] By placing an emphasis on this aspect of the Midwest, *The Midland* had to balance 'standing on the cutting edge of literary expression' in order to compete with urban little magazines with attachment 'to a passing Midwestern pastoral landscape' that was more often associated with sentimentality and local color than with progressive fiction.[129]

Suckow thought deeply about how to forge a Midwestern writing that was true to itself, distinct from 'city-born' writing, and more artistic than the Midwestern novels that she saw as primarily 'social documents.' In 'Art in Iowa,' a notebook entry which her future husband, Ferner Nuhn, called 'a sort of manifesto of the artist at the outset of her career,' Suckow declares, 'Art to be of these brown roads, these fields, and rolling pastures, must not err like most young things by a hysterical self-distrustful affectation of over-sophistication. It must not be afraid to show its own simplicity, its own country clumsiness, its crudity […] So it will keep too its

[127] Ruth Suckow, 'An Artist in Iowa,' Ruth Suckow Papers, MsC0706, Box 24, University of Iowa Special Collections, Iowa City, Iowa. Suckow's husband, fellow writer and Iowa native Ferner Nuhn, published excerpts from this notebook under the title *Book of Hours* after her death in 1960.
[128] Swenson, 'Middling Modernism and the Midwestern Little Magazine,' p. 568.
[129] Ibid., p. 560.

freshness—the freshness of a field in early morning, of corn swelling to ripen.'[130] In emphasizing the fundamental simplicity of Midwestern art, Suckow is echoing Cather, who, in a 1913 interview, had declared 'Art ought to simplify—that seems to me to be the whole process.'[131] Suckow equated this simplicity with what she saw as the Midwest's freshness and youthfulness. This language draws on a history of rural small towns being portrayed as rejuvenating alternatives to urban spaces, such as in Sarah Orne Jewett's *The Country of the Pointed Firs* and Gale's *Friendship Village* stories, but also on a nostalgic view of the United States as a young country. Van Wyck Brooks had drawn attention to this in the title of his 1915 book *America's Coming-of-Age*, which, as I discussed in the Introduction, lamented what he saw as the United States' divided culture and urged a break from the genteel standards and 'literary English' of recent decades.[132] Suckow, too, frames the region as the place from which the fresh, youthful American art that Brooks is in search of can stem.

Suckow's definitive public statement on the distinctive art of her region came ten years later in 1931, when she gave a lecture on 'Middle Western Literature' at the University of Iowa.[133] She gave this lecture at the end of a decade during which the 'revolt from the village'

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[130] Ruth Suckow, 'Art in Iowa,' Ruth Suckow Papers, MsC0706, Box 24, University of Iowa Special Collections, Iowa City, Iowa.
[131] Bernice Slote, 'The Kingdom of Art,' in *The Kingdom of Art: Willa Cather's First Principles and Critical Statements 1893-1896*, ed. by Bernice Slote (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1966), pp. 31-112 (p. 81).
[132] Brooks remarked that 'Literary English with us is a tradition' which persists through 'prestige and precedent' and 'the will' of a 'dominating class' that is 'out of touch' with the 'national fabric.' He argued that the American literary tradition retained 'the spirit of the eighteenth century' at the cost of 'expressing a popular life which bubbles with energy.' Van Wyck Brooks, *America's Coming-of-Age* (New York: B. W. Huebsch, 1915), p. 15.
[133] This national Conference on Creative Writing was an early precursor to the Iowa Writer's Workshop and also featured Zona Gale as a speaker. For more on the Iowa Writers' Workshop, see Stephen Wilbers, *The Iowa Writers' Workshop: Origins, Emergence, and Growth* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1980).

movement had become the dominant critical framework through which to evaluate Midwestern writers.[134] In this address, however, Suckow praised the kind of writing that remained grounded in time and place. In particular, she attempted to define the quality—which, taking Ford Madox Ford's term, she labeled 'middlewestishness'—that emanates from the rural Midwest and makes its literature distinct. Suckow conceded that the region falls short in 'sheer obvious picturesqueness' and 'romance and color' in comparison to the American South West, has none of the 'forlorn charm' of the South, and cannot match the 'pure, stylized distinction' of New England. Yet what the Midwest does have, she insists, is 'authenticity.'[135]

If 'authenticity,' compared to the qualities with which she describes the other regions of the United States, seems elusive and indistinct, Suckow goes on to define it as meaning particularly 'American.' Once again using other regions as foils, Suckow argues that the Midwest has none of the urge to imitate Europe that New England and Spanish-influenced California do, asserting that even the imitations found in the Midwest are more 'American' than those found elsewhere, because they are only ever copied from other parts of the country. In terms that many other commentators would echo in the following decades, she argued that the Midwest is 'the solid center, the genuine *interior* of the United States.'[136] Suckow had used the same word in the title of her first short story collection, *Iowa Interiors.* The word has multiple referents, but Suckow is thinking primarily of the domestic interiors of homes, where many of her stories are set, as well as the interiorities of her characters. And by characterizing the Midwest as the American 'interior,' she seems to be attributing to it the same resonances of

[134] Jon K. Lauck, *From Warm Center to Ragged Edge: The Erosion of Midwestern Literary and Historical Regionalism, 1920-1965* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2017), p. 9.
[135] Ruth Suckow, 'Middle Western Literature,' *The English Journal*, 41.3 (1932), 175-182 (pp. 178-179).
[136] Ibid., p. 179.

domesticity and character, as well as simply its geographical location. 'What we have here in the Middle West, the particular way, the fresh way, in which the ancient stream of life manifests itself, colored and shaped by local conditions, has never been before and will never be again,' she concludes. 'We must catch it, or its essence is eternally lost. That is the deepest reason for a middle western literature.'[137]

This description of the importance of Midwestern literature brings to mind a common characterization of regional fiction more broadly as a genre that, as Stephanie Foote says, worked 'to preserve local customs, local accents, and local communities.'[138] By emphasizing this mission of preservation alongside the ephemerality of the way 'in which the ancient stream of life manifests itself' in the Midwest at the end of her speech, Suckow could be suspected of the type of nostalgia often credited to authors such as Tarkington. But while arguing that every region has 'one particular quality that is its own and differentiates it from all others,' Suckow insists that 'local quality is what gives form, color, and flavor. It does *not* give ultimate significance.'[139] In arguing that without 'the fundamental universal quality' the Midwestern novels she has discussed 'would not be literature,' Suckow reflects her own fundamental ambivalence about how to represent small-town Midwestern life.[140] This ambivalence has often led critics to characterize Suckow as part of the 'revolt from the village' movement. Mencken, for example, praised Suckow to Sinclair Lewis by situating her in relation to Dreiser, Sherwood

[137] Suckow, 'Middle Western Literature,' p. 182.
[138] Foote, *Regional Fictions*, p. 4.
[139] Suckow, 'Middle Western Literature,' p. 178.
[140] Ibid, p. 180. This emphasis on the importance of seeing the universal through the local aligns Suckow with many other thinkers during this period. William Carlos Williams, for example, praised Edgar Allan Poe by saying, 'What he says, being thoroughly local in origin, has some chance of being universal in application.' Williams, *In the American Grain*, p. 222.

Anderson and Lewis himself.[141] Modern critics often group Suckow similarly: Tom Lutz, for example, includes her along with Lewis and Anderson in a chapter titled 'The Revolt from the Village.'[142] But like Zona Gale, also included in this company, Suckow's body of work is more ambivalent about small towns than decisively critical, placing her more on the periphery of the 'revolt' movement than at its center. As John T. Frederick noted in 1931, although there was 'plenty' of the 'ugliness of middle western life' in Suckow's books, 'it is always balanced by something else, always tempered, always presented with essential fairness.'[143]

Frederick goes on to argue that Suckow's ability to 'infuse the familiar with new significance' and 'reveal to the emotions the meaning of the commonplace' is one of her greatest strengths, aligning her to Gale, who had been praised for her evocation of the banalities of everyday speech in *Miss Lulu Bett*.[144] Suckow's emphasis on the 'familiar' or 'commonplace,' as well as her ambivalence towards small towns, can be seen in many of the short stories in *Iowa Interiors,* and particularly in 'A Home-coming,' a story which bears many similarities to Gale's 1920 novel. Indeed, Suckow's story, first published in 1921, almost feels as if it could be a continuation of the narrative begun in *Miss Lulu Bett*. Laura, like Lulu, is an unmarried woman approaching middle age who has spent most of her life 'working herself to death' in service of her family.[145] In many ways, then, this story can be read as what might have happened to Lulu after she leaves her sister's home—particularly in the first ending Gale wrote for the play version, in which Lulu remains unmarried. In Suckow's tale, however, Laura is not escaping her

[141] Lutz, *Cosmopolitan Vistas,* p. 144.
[142] Ibid., pp. 137-48.
[143] Frederick, 'Ruth Suckow and the Middle Western Literary Movement,' p. 5.
[144] Ibid.
[145] Ruth Suckow, 'A Home-coming,' in *Iowa Interiors* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1926), pp. 18-36 (p. 24).

hometown but returning to it after many years away, having traveled with her mother and then lived with her brother's family in Colorado. Her childhood friend, Gertrude, who comes to visit, can see how difficult the time away has been for Laura by looking at her smile, which, once joyful, now 'left a lingering impression of sadness.'[146] That the two have grown apart is clear even from their outward appearance: Laura is 'thin and subtly faded,' while Gertrude is 'firmness and vigour' with 'thick auburn hair and a fresh, coarse skin.'[147] But although Laura, who has been away from her hometown for years, feels a sense of 'painful detachment' from things that felt 'so familiar' yet also 'great distances away,' Gertrude's firm entrenchment in the community is not portrayed as completely positive, either.[148] 'Gertrude was settled now,' Laura thinks of her friend, continuing, 'she was no longer receptive. She was fixed. She expected nothing.'[149] Like Laura's mother and her mother's friends in her childhood memories, Gertrude is now 'bounded by the world [she] spoke of.'[150] Laura's rootlessness is the source of her unhappiness, but Gertrude's rootedness is bad for her as well, even if she does not recognize it herself.

Suckow considers the literary ramifications of these relationships to hometowns later on within the story. Searching for something to do once Gertrude has left, Laura picks up a book she had brought from Denver that had been recommended by her sister-in-law. But the book, a 'hard, brilliant thing as hard as glass,' is painful to her, just as Gertrude's stories of the town had been difficult for her to hear. 'Where were books tender enough for her weariness,' she wonders.

[146] Suckow, 'A Home-coming,' p. 23.
[147] Ibid.
[148] Ibid., p. 27.
[149] Ibid.
[150] Ibid., p. 28.

'Where were books tender, and yet deep?'[151] Tom Lutz suggests that the answer lies in 'A Home-coming' itself. 'The story we are reading,' he argues, 'answers its protagonist's call for a literature adequate to representing the relation of the traditional to the modern, of the present to the past, both tender enough and deep enough.'[152] Suckow is clearly aiming to present an alternative to modern books characterized by their 'hardness' and 'sureness,' but she is also writing a different type of story than Gale's *Friendship Village* stories, which combat modernity with sentimentality.[153] And like Gale, Suckow demonstrates her departure from sentimental local color fiction in her use of dialect. Laura and Gertrude do not speak with any type of regional accent, but nearly every line spoken by the old woman in the Gothic house across the street from Laura, who has not ventured beyond her own front porch in years, is littered with dialectical markers. Scrutinizing Laura's house, the old lady ponders, 'No I just wonder—d'you s'pose she's goin' to stay? They ain't much baggage come—wonder why she don't stay with the brother.'[154] In this story, phonetically-depicted dialect is the language of surveillance of the type that characterizes the small town in *Miss Lulu Bett,* where neighbors watch each other's movements and comment on each other's behavior. Yet it also acts as a marker of an old-fashioned world that no longer matches the reality of the town. The character in 'A Home-coming' whose speech betrays the strongest dialect is also the character most 'bounded' by her surroundings. Just as the car full of young men and women passes by the entrance to Laura's and

[151] Suckow, 'A Home-coming,' p. 32.
[152] Lutz, *Cosmopolitan Vistas,* p. 146.
[153] In 1926, Suckow would warmly review Hemingway's *In Our Time* (1925) using these terms, praising its 'hard, sure, clean style.' Hemingway had a character read a Suckow story in his satire of Sherwood Anderson's style, *The Torrents of Spring* (1926). Ruth Suckow, 'Short Stories of Distinction,' in *Critical Essays on Ernest Hemingway's In Our Time,* ed. by Michael S. Reynolds (Boston: G. K. Hall & Co., 1983), p. 26 (p. 26); Ernest Hemingway, *The Torrents of Spring* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1964), p. 88.
[154] Suckow, 'A Home-coming,' p. 21.

the old woman's street at the end of the story, identifying it as a dead end—'Doesn't go anywhere,' one says of the road, with another agreeing, 'No, of course it doesn't'—Suckow's limited use of dialect in the novel suggests that there are narrative dead ends as well.[155] The breath of fresh air that Suckow introduces with the short coda in the young people's car is a relief to her readers after the stuffy interior of the Haviland house and the hopelessness of Laura's situation. But despite this feeling of freedom, the story leaves the tension between the traditional and the modern, between rootedness and rootlessness, unresolved.

Nonetheless, Suckow returned to her roots with her first novel, *Country People*, published three years later in 1924. Frederick described it as 'a compact epic of the Iowa soil,' and indeed, Suckow's descriptions of the landscape in the novel conform to the aesthetic set out in 'Art in Iowa.'[156] For example, in a moment marking the beginning of August and Emma Kaetterhenry's married life together, she writes 'They drove back to the farm down the dim, chilly road, the bare bushes thin and small, the fields spreading out black and sprinkled with snow'—a description that suggests bare, wintery potential with the promise of spring growth.[157] But although *Country People* would continue to accrue acclaim over the course of Suckow's career, the novel was not a financial success and its initial reception was lukewarm.[158] Even Frederick, one of Suckow's strongest advocates, found *Country People* 'only partially satisfying,' attributing his own disappointment with the novel to his impression that it was 'limited to some extent by a convention which Miss Suckow had created for herself—a notion as

[155] Suckow, 'A Home-coming,' p. 36.
[156] John T. Frederick, 'The Younger School,' *The Palimpsest*, 11 (1930), 78-86 (p. 83).
[157] Ruth Suckow, *Country People* (New York: Knopf, 1924), p. 49.
[158] Even John Crowe Ransom, who positively reviewed the novel in *The Tennessean*, acknowledged the difficulty of evaluating it, calling it 'so unusual that one is rather at a loss in estimating it.' '"Country People" An Unusual Book And an Able One: Ruth Suckow Proves Realest and Economical Craftsman," *The Tennessean*, 13 July 1924, p. 45.

to what a novel of "country people" should be and do.'[159] This criticism echoed those of readers from Suckow's home state, who were not at all pleased with the novel's depiction of the region or of its people. Reacting in a manner reminiscent of Indiana readers of Tarkington's *The Gentleman from Indiana,* Iowans worried that the farming characters in *Country People* would reinforce Eastern readers' negative impression of the Midwest. In letters to the *Des Moines Register,* they pushed back against Suckow's depiction of her protagonists. 'There are, without doubt, people exactly like the Kaetterhenrys, but they are not typical—not the typical retired farmers,' argues Clytie Devors Brooks, a resident of Toledo, Iowa whose letter was preceded by an editor's note which speculated about what Suckow had intended by naming her novel 'country people.' Brooks continues, 'The eastern people already have such a distorted idea of what Iowa farmers really are, that I am sorry to have this story added to their picture of us. We do occasionally think. We love our families. And while we may not be very intellectual, we are at least a notch or two above our livestock.'[160]

The 'country people' in question are three generations of a German-American farming family living in rural Iowa. The story is fairly familiar—August and Emma Kaetterhenry marry, have children, and work so hard at building up their farm that eventually they are able to leave it for a new house in town—but Suckow intentionally avoided many of the stereotypes of rural fiction. 'There is no writer or artist concealed among its characters who is destined to come back […] to write a book about, or paint a picture of, the farm of August Kaetterhenry,' she declared, alluding to such works as Cather's *My Ántonia,* which is told through the eyes of a man who has returned to Nebraska after years away in the East, or Anderson's *Winesburg, Ohio,* which ends

[159] Frederick, 'Ruth Suckow and The Middle Western Literary Movement,' p. 6.
[160] Clytie Devors Brooks, Letter to 'From Our Readers,' *The Des Moines Register*, 30 March 1924, p. 65.

with a young man's departure and the town's transformation into 'a background' onto which he will 'paint the dreams of his manhood.' [161] Instead, as Leedice Kissane argues, Suckow's 'country people are illiterate German peasants whom she presents in their unadorned reality,' and she refuses 'to act as an interpreter for them herself or to tell their story through a friendly narrator.'[162] This description brings the Kaetterhenrys' German roots into the foreground, something Suckow does with her narration as well. Not only does she refuse to filter the Kaetterhenrys' speech through a more traditionally 'American' narrator—as Cather does when describing the Bohemian and German settlers in Nebraska; Suckow frequently incorporates German words and speech patterns into the narrative voice itself. '*Ach*, I don't want to go there,' August says when he's being teased about going to town socials, and, later, Suckow uses the same German word to describe the Kaetterhenrys' new farm: 'The house—*ach*, that didn't matter so much.'[163] Describing Emma's mother's assessment of her son-in-law, Suckow incorporates another German word into the narration, when she writes that Grandma Stille thought that August was good for Emma, 'whom she considered weak and *läppisch*.'[164] The text does not translate this word—meaning 'silly'—into English, creating a sense of alienation between the Kaetterhenrys and the novel's English-speaking readers. Instead of using the narration to make the Kaetterhenrys more accessible, Suckow allows their language to bleed from the dialogue into the narration—a type of linguistic mixing that was particularly debated in 1924.

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[161] Lewis, *The Three Readers,* p. 176.
[162] Kissane, *Ruth Suckow,* p. 55. The novel's narrative voice is much commented on by its critics. Ronald Weber, for example, characterizes it as 'curiously distant and flat-toned.' Weber, *The Midwestern Ascendancy in American Writing,* p. 181.
[163] Suckow, *Country People,* pp. 39, 55.
[164] Ibid., p. 74.

This distance is heightened by the fact that Suckow also considers the effect of the war and the resulting anti-German sentiment on the family. At first, we are told, August had 'only a slight German feeling,' but when the United States entered the war, 'the taunts, the talk about Huns and *Boche,* made farmers like August for the first time actually realize their German ancestry.'[165] August eventually sends two of his sons off to fight for the United States, but Suckow describes his 'angry feelings' towards his fellow farmers and towards the interference of the draft in the operation of his farm, both of which 'awoke a deep racial resentment that could not come flaring out into the open but had to remain smoldering.'[166] This anger is mostly based upon confusion and hurt at his sudden alienation within his own town and country—'Hadn't he lived here all his life, been born twenty miles from here?' August wonders—but the narrative, published only a few years after the end of the war, is unexpectedly challenging in not being one of wholehearted American patriotism.[167] What's more, although the Kaetterhenrys move into town after their retirement from farming, building themselves a new house as a stereotypical gesture of their American success, they never feel completely comfortable there, with August especially struggling with the new way of life, where he felt like he 'had nothing to do.'[168] By presenting a move which should represent the fulfillment of the immigrant's American dream as unsatisfying, Suckow questions traditional narratives of assimilation.

By the third generation of the family, the influence of the German background has dissipated. All of August and Emma's children speak pure, unaccented English. Marguerite, the Kaetterhenrys' youngest daughter, assimilates so fully into town life, where she was 'popular in

[165] Suckow, *Country People,* pp. 100, 102.
[166] Ibid., pp. 102-103.
[167] Ibid., p. 108.
[168] Ibid., p. 159.

high school, had good marks in her studies, and went to all the parties,' that she was 'a kind of stranger at home' with her German farmer parents.[169] Yet Suckow ends her novel with a reminder of the novel's strong German influence. Speaking with one of her new town friends, Emma responds to her friend's suggestion that they must be thankful despite their troubles by saying simply: '*Ja*, that's true, too.'[170] By introducing a German word in the final sentence of the novel, Suckow reinforces linguistically the sense of distance the narrative has created between its German characters and its readers.

If readers' objection to the Kaetterhenrys lay partially in their foreignness, the appeal of Marjorie Schoessel, the protagonist of Suckow's next novel, *The Odyssey of a Nice Girl* (1924), lay precisely in her familiarity. Mencken described the novel as an 'extremely sound' document that tells 'the history of a typical girl in a small town of the Midlands—a girl almost mathematically normal'; R. T. Prescott described the protagonist Marjorie Schoessel as a girl 'only like a million others.'[171] Yet in this novel, too, Suckow addresses the cultural clash of recent immigrants to the United States with later generation Americans through the contrast between Marjorie's two sets of grandparents. While her maternal grandparents are 'native Americans from "York State,"' Marjorie's father's parents are German immigrants. Marjorie is ashamed of these grandparents because they 'were German, and lived in the country, and spoke broken English.'[172] When the family goes to visit these German grandparents on their farm in the novel's opening episode, the cultural and language barriers the different generations face seem to

[169] Suckow, *Country People,* p. 152.
[170] Ibid., p. 213.
[171] H. L. Mencken, 'The Library: Fiction Good and Bad,' *The American Mercury* (1926), 506 (p. 506); R. T. Prescott, 'Midwestern Writers: Ruth Suckow,' *Prairie Schooner,* 2.2 (1928), 138-141 (p. 140).
[172] Ruth Suckow, *The Odyssey of a Nice Girl* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1925), p. 12.

conflate. Later, arriving at the farm, the children find it 'strange' to watch their grandmother kiss their father and to 'hear her say, "Ja, Eddie, wie bist du den,"' a strangeness that has as much to do with the unfamiliar language as it does with seeing their father being treated as someone's child. Their grandmother can speak at least some English, greeting Marjorie and her brothers by saying, '"Ja, den dey are all here again,"' but her figure as she leads the way to the house 'was alien to them.'[173] Marjorie herself, just two generations removed from these native German speakers, speaks unaccented English and does not understand German, and when her mother tells her to speak to her grandmother 'even though it's hard,' she conflates the difficulty of relating to first generation immigrants with the difficulty of bridging the language gap between German and English. This opening scene is brief, and after the family leaves the farm early—at Marjorie's provocation—and goes back to their slightly more metropolitan Midwestern hometown, Marjorie's German grandparents are left behind, forgotten amongst the other adventures and challenges Marjorie faces as she grows up. In opening *The Odyssey of a Nice Girl* with this episode of linguistic discomfort, however, Suckow taps into the politics of the time by using German immigrant language as a foil for Marjorie's speech, immediately establishing her unaccented Midwestern English as the standard against which everything else is measured.

Suckow complicates this view of unified Americanness, however, by introducing another dialect—this time a regional American one—to achieve the same effect only a few short chapters later, when she compares Midwestern speech to Southern speech. Young Marjorie, along with thousands of other girls around the country, loves the Little Colonel Books series by Annie Fellows Johnston and spends many afternoons acting out the roles of the characters found within

[173] Suckow, *The Odyssey of a Nice Girl*, p. 17.

their pages.[174] The aspect of the books the girls are most taken with, and that Suckow focuses on in her depiction of the novels, is Johnston's romantic, nostalgic version of the antebellum South. The girls enact scenes from the stories, assuming the Southern dialect and accent that the characters use. Marjorie in particular is determined to learn the right way of speaking: '"We must practice talking Southern," Marjorie said, "the way the Little Colonel talks. You mustn't sound your *r*'s when you're talking Southern. You must say 'mothuh' and 'fathuh' and 'you-all'; and you must call door 'dough.' That's the way the Little Colonel does."'[175] On the page, the Southern words in Marjorie's instructions to her friends are isolated in quotation marks, and the Southern pronunciation of door—'dough'—is given directly next to Marjorie's pronunciation of it, which is recorded in standard spelling. Suckow's focus on Southern dialect and pronunciation in these scenes sets the Midwestern speech spoken by Marjorie into relief. When Marjorie and her friends finish playacting and strip away their fake Southern accents to return to their normal speech—which is almost always written in standard English—Midwestern speech once again emerges as a benchmark for Americanness and 'authenticity.'

These linguistic preoccupations come to a head in the middle of the novel, when Marjorie temporarily moves out of her home region. Throughout the first half of the book, her primary ambition had been to go to Boston, a place that represents the ultimate in sophistication. 'Boston stood, classic and white, in her imagination,' the narrator explains, a description that evokes images of classical Greek and Roman cities more than it does the reality of redbrick

[174] Annie Fellows Johnston's fifteen-book Little Colonel series, which first began to appear in 1895, was the most popular series of books for children in the early twentieth century. The least successful book in the series still sold an impressive 81,000 copies by the time of Johnston's death in 1931. See Sue Lynn McGuire, 'The Little Colonel: A Phenomenon in Popular Literary Culture,' *The Register of the Kentucky Historical Society*, 89.2 (1991), 121-46.
[175] Suckow, *The Odyssey of a Nice Girl*, p. 55.

Massachusetts.[176] Marjorie's impression of Boston as somewhere more 'classic' than her native Midwest is reinforced by her attitude to Eastern speech. Thinking about returning to the Midwest, she hopes that she could come back 'wearing different clothes, and with her hands very slim and strong. Perhaps she would have an Eastern accent and not sound her r's.'[177] In describing the Eastern accent she hopes to acquire, Marjorie picks up on the same aspect of speech, the pronunciation of r's, that she had given particular attention to in Southern speech. Yet while Marjorie had described the Southern accent by explaining how to *acquire* something new (Southern r's), she describes assuming an Eastern accent as *ridding* herself of an aspect of her Midwestern accent (its r's). This gives the impression that Eastern speech is not simply an alternative accent that Marjorie can exchange with her Midwestern one, in the same way she hopes to exchange her Midwestern clothes for Eastern clothes, but a standard of perfection that can only be achieved by eliminating the element that makes Midwestern speech incorrect by comparison.

Following the path of Suckow's own education, which took her from Iowa to the Curry School of Elocution and Expression in Boston for two years, Marjorie does eventually make her way to Boston as a student of elocution and declamation, a course of study that allows Suckow to draw special attention to the difference in accepted speech in the Midwest and the East.[178] In

[176] Suckow, *The Odyssey of a Nice Girl*, p. 73.
[177] Ibid.
[178] Edna Ferber, who I will explore in Chapter 3, also considered elocution training, but ended up becoming a journalist in her hometown instead. For a closer look at the social implications of the kind of elocution training Marjorie undertook, and the limitations imposed upon how the women who took these courses could use their qualifications once they had obtained them—something that plagues Marjorie throughout the latter part of the novel—see Marian Wilson Kimber, 'The Odyssey of a Nice Girl: Elocution and Women's Cultural Aspirations,' in *The Elocutionists: Women, Music, and the Spoken Word* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2017), pp. 1-26; Edna Ferber, *A Peculiar Treasure* (New York: Doubleday, Doran, and Co., 1939), p. 100.

Iowa, the pieces that would '"do to give"' were dialect pieces, such as poems by Indiana poet James Whitcomb Riley, whose 1907 poem 'The Raggedy Man' begins, 'O the Raggedy Man / He works fer Pa / An' he's the goodest man ever you saw!'[179] In Boston, however, dialect pieces—even those 'that had always brought encores at the lodge meetings in Wahseta'—are looked down upon.[180] Marjorie feels like an outsider among the Eastern girls who recite pieces by British Victorian poets such as Alfred Tennyson's 'The Lady of Shalott,' which begins, 'On either side the river lie / Long fields of barley and rye, / That clothe the wold and meet the sky'[181]; who say words like 'adorable' and 'perfectly cunning'; pronounce 'darling' and 'marvellous' as 'dahling' and '*mah*vellous'[182]; and who chatter 'in an alien speech with the r's in the wrong places.'[183] Marjorie soon comes to think the Eastern girls speak 'with the r's in the wrong places,' contradicting her previous beliefs about which regional speakers pronounce their r's correctly. Now that Marjorie is experiencing the East for herself, she sees the Eastern mode of speaking as incorrect and 'alien' as compared to her own. What's more, just as the Southern speech did, the speech of the Eastern girls who 'put their r's in the wrong places' appears phonetically on the page, as opposed to Marjorie's speech which remains in standard form.[184] It is Eastern speech which thus seems foreign to the novel's readers, just as it does to Marjorie.

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[179] Suckow, *The Odyssey of a Nice Girl*, p. 140.
[180] Ibid. p. 174.
[181] Alfred Tennyson, 'The Lady of Shallot,' in *The Complete Works of Alfred, Lord Tennyson,* Vol. II (New York: Frederick A. Stokes, 1891), pp. 1-3 (p. 1). Riley himself admired Tennyson and published his first poem under a pen name, Edryn, taken from Tennyson's *Idylls of the King*. According to George Hitt, Riley particularly 'loved the sound of the lines in "The Lady of Shalott."' Elizabeth J. Van Allen, *James Whitcomb Riley: A Life* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press), p. 53; George C. Hitt, 'James Whitcomb Riley,' *Indiana Magazine of History,* 32.3 (1936), 189-206 (p. 202).
[182] Suckow, *The Odyssey of a Nice Girl*, p. 168.
[183] Ibid., p. 179.
[184] In the 1948 edition of *The American Language,* Mencken characterized 'general American'—a type of speech which he notes is also referred to as 'Northern American,' 'Middle Western,'

By emphasizing the displacement Marjorie feels in Boston through the disorienting sensation of not speaking the native language, Suckow reintroduces the immigrant narrative she had evoked at the beginning of the novel. Now, however, it is Marjorie who finds herself in the position of the outsider, and the fact that her Eastern classmates 'were not sure of her' because she was from somewhere else and spoke differently reflects her own childhood discomfort with her foreign grandparents.[185] Like Mencken, Suckow evokes Midwestern English as a norm, but while Mencken had used the American language to bury the memory of his German background and to promote a unified view of the American language, Suckow emphasizes the heterogeneity of the speech present in the United States.[186] In setting Eastern and Southern dialects alongside the German English dialect of Marjorie's grandparents, Suckow creates a more nuanced picture of 1920s American culture than the one many Americans were looking to find in the Midwest. Marjorie's Midwest might be 'standard,' but her standard speech still sounds strange and foreign to some Americans.

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and American 'Standard' and that he claimed was spoken by 'the overwhelming majority of Americans'—by the pronunciation of r's. In his view, general American 'is constantly spreading, and two of its salient traits, the flat *a* and the clearly sounded *r*, are making heavy inroads in the territories once faithful to the broad *a* and the silent *r*.' H. L. Mencken, *The American Language: An Inquiry Into the Development of English in the United States, Supplement II* (New York: Knopf, 1948), p. 15.

[185] Suckow, *The Odyssey of a Nice Girl*, p. 164.

[186] The relationship between the 'folk' and immigrants and foreigners, Stephanie Foote argues, is central to regional writing. In 'creating the folk as specimens marked by their folkways, their accents, and their reliance on older notions of community,' she explains, regional writing also 'creates the folk as doubles of foreigners, or immigrants,' an association that '*defamiliarizes* narratives about the origins of national identity in the United States.' Foote, *Regional Fictions*, p. 6.

WHERE IS AUTHENTIC AMERICANISM?

By the end of *The Odyssey of a Nice Girl,* Marjorie herself has found life in the 'authentic' Midwest unsustainable. Upon returning to her hometown, Marjorie's education, and her years living independently in Boston, leave her dissatisfied with the Midwestern life she had once loved. Her family cannot understand why teaching elocution and declamation does not appeal to her. After years of aimlessness, Marjorie finally leaves the Midwest for good to go to Colorado, where she marries a man who plans to purchase and run a fruit farm—a decision that surprises her resolutely supportive mother, who is prompted to recall Marjorie's intense childhood dislike of her German grandparents' farm.

In making this move to the far West—something a younger Marjorie would never have considered —the novel harkens back to the immigrant narrative begun with Marjorie's grandparents and continued during Marjorie's time in Boston. Marjorie's choice to go West is directly prompted by a trip she takes there with her parents, but its roots lie in those two years she spent in the East, during which she became best friends with Emily, a fellow declamation pupil and a Westerner from Colorado. Marjorie felt relieved that she did not have to dramatize her life in the Midwest when talking with Emily, as she occasionally found herself doing for her Eastern friend, Dorothy, who 'had found an inexhaustible joy in hearing Marjorie talk about Buena Vista; thinking of the West as a wilderness, all of a piece, inhabited by Indians, wild animals and cornfields.' With Emily, as with no one else in Boston, Marjorie could talk 'about home—get clear her ideas of it, not have to make it '"wild" and untrue,' a statement that echoes Frederick's mission for *The Midland.*[187] At the same time, however, she felt a different pressure to defend her home state to Emily, who dismissed many things, such as 'the lodge and the clubs,'

[187] Suckow, *The Odyssey of a Nice Girl,* p. 210.

that formed the foundation of Marjorie's life in the Midwest, and who 'scorned the Iowa country, because it wasn't "wild," because it had no mountains and no ocean—nothing worth while, only cornfields.' After a year negotiating between Dorothy's Eastern views of a wild Midwest and Emily's Western views of a Midwest that is not wild enough—something the region itself is also constantly navigating—Marjorie returns to Iowa for the summer, where she 'caught the breath of the prairies with a sense of recognition that was almost more of a discovery than her first sight of strange places.'[188] Yet upon moving back to the Midwest permanently after her degree ends, this sense of homecoming soon gives way to the more critical feelings of a visitor or an outsider.

Readers are not given much insight into Marjorie's own views on her new life in Colorado, or into whether or not this move further West finally satisfies her. After Marjorie decides to move, the novel shifts from her point of view to that of her mother, who is back in Buena Vista to finalize her own move to Colorado to be near her daughter. Her mother is fiercely protective about Marjorie's choices while speaking to her friends, but privately she can only look on with surprise at 'how amazingly Marjorie had given up all the things that she used to want,' admitting to herself that 'she had never really understood what Marjorie was "after."'[189] Before the narration shifts, Marjorie herself finds it difficult to explain why she was drawn away from her hometown to the Colorado mountains. Looking back ruefully on the past few years of her life in Iowa while on the train out of town—a scene reminiscent of the ending of Anderson's *Winesburg, Ohio,* although that train was going East—the closest she is able to come to an epiphany is by concluding that at the bottom of all of her aspirations and decisions, 'there had been one thing after all—the need to satisfy the craving for something that was deep and

[188] Suckow, *The Odyssey of a Nice Girl,* p. 211.
[189] Ibid., pp. 358, 362.

beautiful and beyond what people called "everyday things."'[190] As we've seen, the authenticity of the Midwest was often associated with 'everyday things,' and it is this that Marjorie ultimately seems unwilling to accept, seeking instead a more romantic denouement, an American sublime.

Perhaps most strikingly in the context of this chapter, the version of Americanness Marjorie has found in the West is silent. When talking with Len Pooley, a Western boy she spends time with during that first trip to Colorado, she acknowledges that 'she still liked to have him wear a wide-brimmed Western hat and to have thin sunburnt hands,' a description that mirrors Marjorie's own hopes for how she would change after spending time in the East—that she would come back to the Midwest 'wearing different clothes, and with her hands very slim and strong.'[191] Len's Western speech is unimportant to her, however, and it never appears on the page for us to interpret. While Marjorie fixated on other characters' speech throughout the beginning of the novel, pinning her views of the South and the East on each region's accent, she does not pick out any aspects of Western speech to focus on, and she does not consider how to adjust her own Midwestern speech to fit into the West. Mencken's *The American Language* had helped associate Midwestern language with American language, and Zona Gale's fiction demonstrated how the representation of that Midwestern language evolved from the stereotypical phonetically-represented dialect of *Friendship Village* to a more universally recognized version of 'everyday' speech in *Miss Lulu Bett.* Suckow, by comparing Midwestern language to that of other Americans, depicts the Midwest as the most 'authentic' and representative of the nation as a whole—but then questions the implications of that representativeness. All demonstrate that language can be used to define a certain type of Americanness, but in finishing her story in a

[190] Suckow, *The Odyssey of a Nice Girl,* p. 349.
[191] Ibid., p. 178.

place where speech is limited, Suckow suggests that this type of representativeness is not, and should not be, the end of the story.

Chapter 3. The Midwestern Pulitzer Prize: 'Wholesomeness' in the Prize-Winning Novels of Margaret Wilson, Edna Ferber, and Sinclair Lewis

In 1930, Sinclair Lewis won the Nobel Prize for Literature, becoming the first American author to do so since the Prize was first awarded in 1901.[1] For many, an American author's recognition on this prestigious international stage—what Pascale Casanova refers to as a 'consecration'—was valuable proof that the nation's literature had, as critic Malcolm Cowley notes, 'ceased to be a minor province of British literature.'[2] As the international figurehead for the newly acknowledged national literature, Lewis was a fitting choice, as he frequently emphasized the distinctly 'American' characteristics of his novels. *Main Street* (1920), which made Lewis a household name in the United States and beyond, does this especially explicitly. The first sentence of the prologue states: 'This is America—a town of a few thousand, in a region of wheat and corn and dairies and little groves.'[3] Opening like this immediately establishes the setting of the novel—which at face value is about one small town in Minnesota—as a microcosm of the country as a whole, boldly declaring its representativeness from the first line. Lewis

[1] Two more American winners soon followed Lewis: Eugene O'Neill won the 1936 Nobel and Pearl Buck won in 1938. The rumored second choice for the 1930 Prize, Theodore Dreiser, never won, however. Losing to Lewis in 1930 was, as Richard Lingeman says, 'particularly galling' because Dreiser 'felt he took precedence as an American realist.' Richard Lingeman, *Theodore Dreiser: An American Journey 1908-1945* (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1990), p. 343; see also 'Dreiser is Favored to Win Nobel Prize,' *The New York Times*, 9 October 1930, p. 7.
[2] Pascale Casanova, *The World Republic of Letters*, trans. by M. B. DeBevoise (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004), p. 126; Malcolm Cowley, *After the Genteel Tradition: American Writers 1910-1930* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1964), p. 4.
[3] Sinclair Lewis, *Main Street* (New York: Penguin, 1995), p. xxviii.

continues in a similarly mock heroic tone throughout the rest of the prologue, seemingly suggesting that the Main Street of Gopher Prairie, and all of the many main streets located around the country, are 'the climax of civilization,' concluding, 'That this Ford car might stand in front of the Bon Ton Store, Hannibal invaded Rome and Erasmus wrote in Oxford cloisters.' This, much like the rest of the novel, is clearly satirical—far from believing small town Main Street culture is indeed the culmination of human civilization, Lewis thought that small town life such as the one he represents in his novel was dull and stultifying. Yet Lewis was not only concerned with the 'town of a few thousand' or 'America.' His opening sentence shifts scale repeatedly, ending somewhere in between with the 'region of wheat and corn and dairies and little groves'—in other words, the Midwest.

Erik Axel Karlfeldt, the Secretary of the Academy who presented the Nobel Prize, began his address by emphasizing Lewis's specifically Midwestern roots, describing 'the great prairie' which serves as the backdrop for *Main Street* with almost as much detail as Lewis himself does in his novels. Karlfeldt was keen to point out European elements in Lewis's fiction—such as 'the exiled German Jew, Gottlieb' and 'the Swedish doctor, Gustaf Sondelius' in *Arrowsmith*, or 'the problem "Europe-America"' in *Dodsworth*—and he notes that the prairie was 'a part of America which for a long time has had Swedish contacts.'[4] But he comes back to the point that 'Sinclair Lewis is an American.' Why? Because, Karlfeldt asserted, 'he writes the new language—American.'[5]

[4] Erik Axel Karlfeldt, 'Presentation,' in *Literature 1901-1967: Nobel Lectures, Including Presentation Speeches and Laureates' Biographies,* ed. by Horst Frenz (Amsterdam: Elsevier Publishing Company, 1969), pp. 271-277 (p. 271).
[5] Ibid., pp. 274, 275, 276.

This suggests that Lewis's award can be seen as a powerful acknowledgement of the equation of the American language with the vernacular of the American Midwest. In particular, Lewis's novels are characterized by his abundant use of slang, so much so that Edith Wharton, with whom he had begun corresponding after *The Age of Innocence* was awarded the Pulitzer Prize over *Main Street*, suggested that in his next book he 'should use slang in dialogue more sparingly' because 'the real art in this respect is to use just enough to *colour* your dialogue, not so much that in a few years it will be incomprehensible.'[6] A more recent critic, Ronald Weber, agrees, arguing that 'Lewis' delight in his ability to mimic American talk always seems on the verge of overwhelming the thin line of his story.'[7] It is certainly true that Lewis relished the Midwestern conversational style. A letter that George Babbitt dictates to be sent out to potential clients, for example, is a *tour de force* in vernacular: 'Say, old man! I just want to know can I do you a whaleuva favor? Honest! No kidding! I know you're interested in getting a house, not merely a place where you hang up the old bonnet but a love-nest for the wife and kiddies…Say, did you ever stop to think that we're here to save you trouble?'[8] In catching what Alfred Kazain calls 'the tone, the speech, of the pervasive American existence,' Lewis established his novels as distinctly American.[9]

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[6] Edith Wharton, 'Letter to Sinclair Lewis,' *The Letters of Edith Wharton*, ed. by R. W. B. Lewis and Nancy Lewis (London: Simon & Schuster, 1988), pp. 454-456 (p. 455). Wharton also had linguistic advice for Zona Gale. In Gale's case, Wharton's criticism had to do with what she called 'this endless succession of chopped up, click-click sentences, each with its own little adroit "pop" of a surprise,' which, she argues, 'suggests the *tempo* of hurried, racing, breathless lives.' Wharton reminded Gale to pay attention to 'that mighty inheritance of English speech.' Hermione Lee, *Edith Wharton* (London: Chatto and Windus, 2007), p. 621.
[7] Ronald Weber, *The Midwestern Ascendency in American Writing* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992), p. 170.
[8] Sinclair Lewis, *Babbitt* (Oxford: Worlds Classics, 2010), p. 31.
[9] Alfred Kazin, *On Native Grounds: An Interpretation of Modern American Prose Literature* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1956), p. 165.

Lewis himself was extremely aware of the honor and responsibility conferred upon him as the representative of American arts and letters. The Nobel Prize was an award he had aspired to win since his breakout after the publication of *Main Street,* when he urged his publisher to find Scandinavian translators and publishers for the novel in order to bring it to the committee's attention.[10] Having achieved his goal, he carefully prepared his lecture—a requirement of receiving the Prize—and delivered it on December 12, 1930. The lecture, titled 'The American Fear of Literature,' acknowledges the fact that the Swedish Academy 'honored America by assuming that the Americans are no longer a puerile backwoods clan, so inferior that they are afraid of criticism, but instead a nation come of age and able to consider calmly and maturely any dissection of their land, however scoffing'—an allusion perhaps to Karlfeldt's remark that the fact that 'the new great American literature has started with national self-criticism is a sign of health.'[11] The majority of Lewis's own speech, however, modified this optimistic view. From the opening paragraphs of his speech, Lewis warns his listeners about 'certain trends, certain dangers, and certain high and exciting promises in present-day American literature' in order to demonstrate the progress the United States still needs to make in appreciating its national literature.[12] The 'certain institutions' that Lewis alludes to include the American Academy of Arts and Letters, which consistently ignored many of his contemporaries, including Willa Cather and Edna Ferber, both Midwesterners and Pulitzer Prize winners.[13] 'I should not expect any

[10] Mark Schorer, *Sinclair Lewis: An American Life* (London: Heinemann, 1961), p. 299.
[11] Sinclair Lewis, 'Speech Accepting the Nobel Prize for Literature,' in James M. Hutchisson, *The Rise of Sinclair Lewis, 1920-1930* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1996), pp. 235-246 (p. 236).
[12] Lewis, 'Speech Accepting the Nobel Prize for Literature,' p. 235. Lewis also seems to have been alluding to Van Wyck Brooks's 1915 essay 'America's Coming-of-Age.'
[13] The American Academy of Arts and Letters was created in 1904 as a more selective tier of its parent organization, the National Institute of Arts and Letters, which had itself been founded in 1898 for the 'advancement of art and literature.' Architects, artists, writers, and composers were

Academy to be so fortunate as to contain all these writers,' he concludes, 'but one which fails to contain any of them, which thus cuts itself off from so much of what is living and vigorous and original in American letters, can have no relationship whatsoever to our life and aspirations.'[14]

At this point in his career, Lewis had been passed over for the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction—the United States' most prestigious literary prize in the early twentieth century—twice, once for *Main Street* in 1921 and once again for *Babbitt* in 1923. In 1926, he was finally awarded the Prize for *Arrowsmith,* but refused to accept it. In his letter publicizing this rejection, he argued that 'all prizes […] are dangerous' because they make authors too concerned with 'tickl[ing] the fancy of a haphazard committee,' and called the Pulitzer 'particularly objectionable' because of its lack of attention to 'actual literary merit.'[15] Many, however, saw Lewis's rejection of the Pulitzer as a simple act of retaliation for not having won for *Main Street,* and as a publicity stunt—by sacrificing a mere $1,000, he achieved worldwide publicity. When Lewis accepted the Nobel four years later, he claimed to have been accosted as he was boarding the ship to Sweden by a critic who insisted that 'in awarding the Nobel Prize to a person who had scoffed at

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eligible for election to the Institute, whose membership was capped at 250, and members of the Institute were then eligible for election to the Academy, where membership was limited to 50. Although Lewis praised Ferber in his speech, his condemnation of the National Institute of Arts and Letters seemed to cause her to change her mind about not accepting her own nomination. 'The utterances of Mr. Sinclair Lewis, on the occasion of receiving the Nobel Prize, have caused me to change my mind,' she wrote to Burton J. Hendrick in 1930. 'I accept the election.' Lewis himself became a member of the Institute in 1937 (after first declining an invitation in 1921). R. W. B. Lewis, '1898-1907: The Founders' Story,' in *A Century of Arts and Letters: The History of the National Institute of Arts & Letters and the American Academy of Arts & Letters as Told, Decade by Decade, by Eleven Members,* ed. by John Updike (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), pp. 1-27 (pp. 4, 15-17); Edna Ferber quoted in Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., '1928-1937: The Infiltration of Modernity,' in *A Century of Arts and Letters,* pp. 86-104 (p. 97).

[14] Lewis, 'Speech Accepting the Nobel Prize for Literature,' p. 241.

[15] Sinclair Lewis, 'Letter refusing the Pulitzer Prize for *Arrowsmith*,' Appendix 5 in James M. Hutchisson, *The Rise of Sinclair Lewis, 1920-1930* (Philadelphia: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1996), pp. 232-234 (pp. 232-33).

American institutions as much as I have, the Nobel Committee and the Swedish Academy had insulted America.'[16] In his own address, Karlfeldt was careful to clarify that 'it is institutions as representatives of false ideas, and not individuals, that Mr. Lewis wants to attack with his satire,' distancing the Academy from this view.[17] Still, many American authors, scholars, and critics were displeased with the Academy's choice, citing everything from Lewis's politics to his artistic style, and the congratulations Lewis received from the literary community, including many of the authors he drew attention to in his Nobel Lecture, were tepid at best.[18]

One of the most frequent questions Lewis received after the announcement of his Nobel Prize was why he was willing to accept that award when he had not been willing to accept the Pulitzer. Backtracking on some of his earlier remarks about prizes in general, he answered that rather than being an award for one single novel, as the Pulitzer was, the Nobel was an award that recognized an author's entire oeuvre, and he was happy to be recognized for that. Secondly, Lewis asserted that the Nobel's stipulation that the Prize be given to 'the most distinguished work of an idealistic tendency' posed a more literary standard than the Pulitzer's clause directing that the chosen work would be the one 'which shall best present the wholesome atmosphere of

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[16] Sinclair Lewis, 'Speech Accepting the Nobel Prize for Literature,' p. 236. Princeton professor and member of the American Academy of Arts and Letters Henry Van Dyke criticized Lewis's win in the same terms: '"It used to be that Americans were taught to honor traditions. […] Nowadays, the modern idea is to scoff at these traditions."' Calling Lewis's Nobel an insult to America, he said that it '"shows the Swedish Academy knows nothing of the English language. They handed Lewis a bouquet, but they gave America a very back-handed compliment."' 'Nobel Prize Award to Lewis is an "Insult" to America, Says van Dyke, Hitting Scoffers,' *The New York Times,* 29 November 1930, p. 1.

[17] Karlfeldt, 'Presentation,' p. 273.

[18] Schorer, *Sinclair Lewis: An American Life,* pp. 545-548. Schorer cites Sherwood Anderson and Ernest Hemingway, who called the award a 'filthy business,' as two of the authors who were displeased with Lewis's win (although Hemingway was consoled by the fact that it had eliminated the 'Dreiser menace').

American life.'[19] These remarks were widely criticized by the American press, who recalled that in his letter declining the Pulitzer he had declared all prizes to be 'dangerous' and had called on his fellow authors to question 'whether any prize is worth' recognizing the authority of a prize-giving body.[20]

In this chapter, I will look at the American prize culture Lewis was reacting against by analyzing some of the novels that *were* successful in winning the Pulitzer, the nation's highest literary honor, during the 1920s. In particular, I will consider why Midwestern writers—including, eventually, Lewis himself—were particularly successful in winning the literary honor at a time when the region's 'peak' influence was thought to be over. The Pulitzer Prize for the Novel was first awarded in 1918, and six of the first eight Prizes went to Midwestern novels.[21] By looking closely at the novels of two of those Prize winners, Margaret Wilson (1924) and Edna Ferber (1925)—the latter included in Lewis's list of noteworthy American authors, the former not—as well Lewis's belated winner, *Arrowsmith*, I will consider just what it was about (some) Midwestern fiction that so appealed to the Pulitzer juries in this period.

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[19] Schorer, *Sinclair Lewis: An American Life*, pp. 545-548. As Kjell Espmark demonstrates, however, the Nobel Prize committees also debated how to interpret the literature prize's specification that the award go to the candidate who had conferred 'the greatest benefit on mankind in an ideal direction.' He identifies four phases of interpretation from the beginning of the twentieth century until World War II that he suggests 'reflect the changing sensibility of an Academy continuously renewing itself.' He labels the phase he sees as governing the 1930s the 'Universal Interest' phase, reporting that the Committee in this period decided on 'writers within everybody's reach, from Sinclair Lewis to Pearl Buck.' Kjell Espmark, 'The Nobel Prize in Literature,' in *The Nobel Prize: The First 100 Years*, ed. by Agneta Wallin Levinovitz and Nils Ringertz (London: Imperial College Press, 2001), pp. 137-164 (pp. 138-140).

[20] Schorer, *Sinclair Lewis: An American Life*, p. 446.

[21] Seven Midwesterners won the Pulitzer in its first ten years: Ernest Poole (1918), Booth Tarkington (1919 and 1921), Willa Cather (1923), Margaret Wilson (1924), Edna Ferber (1925), Sinclair Lewis (1926), and Louis Bromfield (1927). Neither Poole's nor Bromfield's novels were set in the Midwest, however.

PULITZER PRIZE FOR THE (MIDWESTERN RURAL FICTION) NOVEL

The first Nobel Prizes, which Swedish inventor Alfred Nobel established in his 1895 will, were announced in more than a hundred newspapers worldwide and drew immediate international attention. As the Washington D.C. *Evening Times* declared in October 1900, 'The world of art, literature, and science is looking forward with intense interest to the award one year from next December of the valuable Nobel Prizes for supremacy.'[22] Among the five original awards, which encompassed Physics, Chemistry, Physiology or Medicine, and Peace, was a Prize for Literature. This was not the first prize established to reward literary excellence: Britain's Royal Society of Literature, for example, had been handing out a Gold Medal to recognize literary achievement annually since 1823.[23] Yet the way the Nobel Prizes were established, the publicity that heralded them, and what Michael Sohlman calls their 'global and internationalist scope and mission' set these apart.[24] As Amitav Ghosh notes, 'the Nobel Prize was itself both symptom and catalyst of a wider condition: the emergence of a notion of a universal "literature," a form of artistic expression that embodies differences in place and culture, emotion and aspiration, but in such a way as to render them communicable.' Ghosh's uncle—a keen reader whose taste was 'guided largely by prevalent opinion'—had prided himself on his bookshelf of Nobel winners when Ghosh was growing up in Calcutta in the mid-twentieth century.[25] Intended to introduce writers

[22] 'Award of Nobel Prizes,' *The Evening Times,* 10 October 1900, p. 3.
[23] James F. English, *The Economy of Prestige: Prizes, Awards, and the Circulation of Cultural Value* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005), pp. 41-42.
[24] Michael Sohlman, 'Introduction,' in *The Nobel Prize: The First 100 Years,* ed. by Agneta Wallin Levinovitz and Nils Ringertz (London: Imperial College Press, 2001), pp. 1-4 (p. 2).
[25] Amitav Ghosh, 'The March of the Novel Through History: The Testimony of My Grandfather's Bookcase,' *The Kenyon Review,* 20.2 (1998), 13-24 (p. 16).

to the wider reading world—creating what Casanova calls 'international literary space'—the Nobel Prize was poised to influence international reading taste as no prize had been able to yet.[26]

Shortly after the first Nobel Prize award ceremony in 1901, Joseph Pulitzer, an American newspaper publisher, began to put his own plans for a similar 'grand scheme' in motion.[27] A Hungarian immigrant who had worked his way up to become one of the most influential figures in American journalism as the owner of the *New York World*, Pulitzer had long harbored the desire to establish a journalism school, which he believed would help elevate the profession to the status of medicine and law. In an effort to make his proposal more appealing, Pulitzer set money aside for a series of annual Prizes for 'particular journalists or writers for various accomplishments, achievements, and forms of excellence' as part of the gift he planned to give to the American university that would house his school.[28] These Prizes appealed to newly elected Columbia University president Nicholas Murray Butler, and both Pulitzer's journalism school and his Prizes found a home in New York.

In creating a Prize for the American Novel, Pulitzer made an important statement about the prestige of the country's literary output. By the time the first Pulitzer Prize for the Novel was awarded in 1918, no American author had yet been honored by the Nobel, already the world's most well-regarded literary prize. American authors had been producing experimental and

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[26] Indeed, Casanova notes that 'the greatest proof of literary consecration, bordering on the definition of literary art itself, is the Nobel Prize,' which 'writers everywhere are agreed in recognizing […] as the highest honor of the world of letters.' Casanova, *The World Republic of Letters*, pp. xii, 147.

[27] John Hohenberg, *The Pulitzer Prizes: A History of the Awards in Books, Drama, Music, and Journalism, Based on the Private Files Over Six Decades* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1974), p. 9. Pulitzer was not the only person to be inspired by the Nobel Prize, which sparked a proliferation of prizes around the world, as James English demonstrates in *The Economy of Prestige*, pp. 28-29.

[28] Joseph Pulitzer quoted in James Boylan, *Pulitzer's School: Columbia University's School of Journalism, 1903-2003* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003), pp. 4-5.

compelling literary work for decades, but as a national literature, it was still often not considered worthy of serious critical attention in non-English-speaking Europe. With a few exceptions—Mark Twain, for example—American authors did not make a significant impact on the European literary scene beyond the UK, and the country was generally considered 'grossly materialistic' and 'culturally barren,' qualities which many thought would preclude it from producing a national literature worth notice.[29] This was, in part, a self-fulfilling prophecy—with little existing respect for American literature, few translations of American works were produced in European languages, including Swedish, which kept American literature largely out of consideration for the Nobel Prize.[30]

By the 1920s, however, this was beginning to change. Woodrow Wilson's prominent role as an international figure in the years after World War I brought renewed attention to the United States, prompting a decade of translations and critical reevaluations of American arts and letters on the international stage.[31] As the most prominent American literary prize on offer during this decade, the Pulitzer Prize for the Novel was well-placed to bring attention to writers that its judges considered worthy of representing the American literary tradition. However, during its first decade the Pulitzer Prize for the Novel was characterized by frequent reassessment of types of novels it should be rewarding.[32] Fewer than fifteen years after the first Fiction Prize was awarded in 1918, Butler sent a letter to the Advisory Board's secretary addressing the criticism the award had received since its inception. 'The jury on the novel is the one which is most

[29] Carl L. Anderson, *The Swedish Acceptance of National Literature* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1957), p. 9.
[30] Ibid.
[31] Ibid.
[32] In 1948, the Prize was renamed in order to encompass all forms of fiction instead of just the novel. James Michener's *Tales of the South Pacific,* a collection of loosely related short stories, was the first book to win the renamed Fiction Prize when it was chosen that year.

vigorously attacked,' Butler wrote, noting the critical disparagement provoked by the most recent choices, Oliver Lafarge's *Laughing Boy* (1929) and Margaret Ayers Barnes's *Years of Grace* (1930).[33]

The first Prize, however, which was awarded to Ernest Poole for *His Family* (1917), had been uncontroversial, if relatively unheralded.[34] The novel follows a widower trying to reconnect with his three daughters and cope with a changing world, and it shares a number of similarities with the novel chosen for the following year's Prize, Booth Tarkington's *The Magnificent Ambersons.*[35] Like that novel's George Amberson Minafer, who has to come to terms with the changes industrialization brings to his small Midwestern city, the protagonist of Poole's novel, Roger Gale, is unsettled by the way New York has changed. The novel opens with a lament for his lost city: 'He was thinking of the town he had known. […] the mighty throbbing city to which he had come long ago as a lad from New Hampshire.'[36] The narrator clarifies that the New York Roger longs for is a city 'where American faces were still to be seen upon all its streets, a cleaner and a kindlier town, with more courtesy in its life, less of the vulgar scramble.'[37] This is a description that echoes the ideas in Tarkington's own analysis of the changes that have taken

[33] Hohenberg, *The Pulitzer Prizes*, p. 91.
[34] Poole's *The Harbor,* a socialist novel about unions and labor protests at the New York waterfront, had been a bestseller in 1915, and while his second novel was still well-received, even hitting the same spot on the bestseller list, it did not make quite the same impact. Poole's biographer, Truman Frederick Keefer, suggests that the Prize for *His Family* was 'in part recognition of the importance of its predecessor.' Truman Frederick Keefer, *Ernest Poole* (Boston: Twayne, 1966), p. 55.
[35] When judging the 1921 Prize for the Novel, Hamlin Garland dismissed Poole's 1920 novel *Blind: A Story of These Times* as 'a tract,' a strange criticism coming from Garland, whose most famous work can be characterized by its strong political agenda. Fritz H. Oehlschlaeger, 'Hamlin Garland and the Pulitzer Prize Controversy of 1921,' *American Literature,* 51.3 (1979), 409-414 (p. 412).
[36] Ernest Poole, *His Family* (New York: Macmillan, 1917), p. 1.
[37] Ibid.

place in the small Indiana city that forms the background for *The Turmoil*: 'Not so long ago as a generation, there was no […] heaving, grimy city; there was but a pleasant big town of neighborly people who had understanding of one another, being, on the whole, much of the same type.'[38] Both express the increased anxiety about immigration in this period that I discussed in Chapter 2. When thinking about his daughter, Deborah, who is the principal of a school catering to these immigrant populations, Roger admits that he 'had a deep aversion for those millions of foreign tenement people, always shoving' who 'had flowed up like an ocean tide,' adopting the 'flood' metaphor that has characterized the discourse surrounding immigration for decades and reflected the anxieties that were pushing the linguistic and cultural standard of Americanness towards the Midwest during the 1910s and 1920s.[39]

By the end of *His Family,* Roger has become closer to his three daughters and, through them, has come to terms with and even embraced the changes he sees in his beloved New York, looking out upon the city 'as into a promised land' peopled no longer by masses of strangers, but by 'Deborah's big family.'[40] But while Roger adapted to modern, multicultural life, after Poole's win, the Pulitzer Prize—as if in search of 'American faces'—turned its focus away from the East Coast to the Midwest. 'What is old-fashioned? What is normal? What is wholesome? What is nice?' Roger's eldest daughter, Edith, asks herself while trying to raise her many children in the

[38] Booth Tarkington, *The Turmoil* (New York: Harper and Brothers Publishers, 1915), p. 2.
[39] Poole, *His Family,* p. 16. See, for instance, Gerald V. O'Brien, 'Indigestible Food, Conquering Hordes, and Waste Materials: Metaphors of Immigrants and the Early Immigration Restriction Debate in the United States,' *Metaphor and Symbol,* 18.1 (2003), 33-47; and Thomas Paul Bonfiglio, *Race and the Rise of Standard American* (Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter, 2002), p. 193. Tom Buchanan uses similar language in *The Great Gatsby* when he refers to the argument in a book he is reading, based on Theodore Lothrop Stoddard's *The Rising Tide of Color* (1920): 'The idea is if we don't look out the white race will be—will be utterly submerged.' F. Scott Fitzgerald, *The Great Gatsby* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1925), p. 16.
[40] Poole, *His Family,* pp. 311, 312.

city.[41] The Pulitzer Prize committee, in trying to determine what type of American literature it wanted to present to the world, was asking itself the same questions.

Edith's third question—'What is wholesome?'—is particularly apt given a change Butler made to Pulitzer's Plan of Award shortly before the first Prizes were given out in 1917. Pulitzer had set out in his will exactly how the Prizes should be awarded—a plan that still remains, for the most part, in effect today. While the specifications for the journalism awards were professionally and precisely phrased, the specifications for the arts and letters awards, though no less specific, were indicative more of Pulitzer's idealistic thinking than of critical rigor. The Prize for Drama, for example, specified that the Prize be given 'For the original American play […] which shall best represent the educational value and power of the stage in raising the standard of good morals, good taste, and good manners,' a description that encouraged juries to emphasize morality and pedagogy over craftsmanship and artistic excellence.[42] The specification for the Novel Prize was even more demanding: Pulitzer's will determined that that Prize would be given 'for the American novel published during the year which shall best present the whole atmosphere of American life, and the highest standard of American manners and manhood.'[43]

In putting the Plan of Award into effect in 1915, Butler paid close attention to the specific language Pulitzer had used.[44] Worried, for example, that the masculine pronouns used throughout the plan, and in the phrase 'American manners and manhood,' would legally disqualify women from winning the Prize for the Novel, Butler ensured women would be

[41] Poole, *His Family,* p. 32.
[42] 'Original Terms of the Pulitzer Prizes in Literature,' Appendix A, in W. J. Stuckey, *The Pulitzer Prize Novels: A Critical Backward Look* (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 1981), p. 263.
[43] Ibid.
[44] Hohenberg, *The Pulitzer Prizes,* p. 22.

eligible by putting the matter to a vote by the Advisory Board.[45] This attention to linguistic detail makes the one small change Butler made to the Prize specification even more significant. When he submitted the Plan of Award to the trustees and the Advisory Board for approval, Butler amended the line specifying that the Novel Prize be awarded to the novel that best represents the 'whole atmosphere of American life' to read the 'wholesome atmosphere of American life.'[46] The change was no typo or mistake—the extra four letters were italicized in the Plan of Award Butler submitted for approval, drawing attention to the change.[47]

The Advisory Board approved this amended Plan without comment and Butler characterized the changes as 'slight' and 'insubstantial,' but these extra four letters would go on to have an outsized impact on the first ten years of the Pulitzer Prize for the Novel.[48] The first formal objections to the Prize's wording arose as early as 1920.[49] Stuart Pratt Sherman, serving on his first Prize jury, suggested Joseph Hergesheimer's *Java Head* (1919) for that year's Prize, but upon rereading the award specifications, he determined that *Java Head* did not 'at all obviously conform' to the requirement that the winning novel represent 'the wholesome atmosphere of American life.'[50] Sherman did not pursue his nomination, and no award was given

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[45] Hohenberg, *The Pulitzer Prizes,* p. 23.
[46] Ibid., p. 56.
[47] Ibid.
[48] Stuckey points out that Pulitzer's will gave the Prize administrators leeway to change these conditions, crediting the fact that the Prize retained the same specification for its first eleven years to 'the insistence of Nicholas Murray Butler.' W. J. Stuckey, *The Pulitzer Prize Novels: A Critical Backward Look* (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 1981), pp. 8-9.
[49] According to Casanova, 'the sanctioning authorities of world literary space,' such as the Nobel Prize for Literature judges, 'are the guardians, guarantors, and creators of value, which is nonetheless always changing, ceaselessly contested and debated'—something also apparent in American literary space through the history of the Pulitzer Prize. Casanova, *The World Republic of Letters,* p. 127.
[50] Lewis, who admired Hergesheimer and had dedicated *Main Street* to him (as well as to novelist James Branch Cabell), included a passage from *The Three Black Pennys* in *Babbitt.* Looking for a book to read—in a scene reminiscent of Ruth Suckow's 'A Home-Coming'—

that year, but in a letter to that year's jury chairman, Robert Grant, he raised the question of the Prize's wording, arguing, 'If the jury sticks to the letter of these conditions, will it not make itself a laughing stock to the younger generations? […] We ought not to crown a licentious work, but I don't believe we should hold off till a novel appears fit for a Sunday School library.'[51]

Hamlin Garland, serving for the first time as a Pulitzer juror that year, took the opposite view.[52] Although his two fellow jurors on the Drama Prize jury were agreed that Eugene O'Neill's *Beyond the Horizon* was clearly the most deserving play, Garland was staunchly against awarding it the Pulitzer. Like the Novel Prize, the specifications for the Drama award prioritized 'good morals, good taste, and good manners.'[53] In Garland's view, O'Neill's play, which depicts an unhappy marriage and foiled dreams, was not 'enobling,' and he argued instead for Percy MacKaye's *Washington: The Man Who Made Us*, which had received a lukewarm reception from audiences and critics but which was, in Garland's mind, 'the only one that has dignity and beauty of appeal.' Facing firm resistance from his fellow jurors, Garland finally agreed to endorse their recommendation that O'Neill be awarded the Prize, but he still lamented

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Babbitt dismisses a novel by Joseph Conrad, a collection of poems by Vachel Lindsay, and a book of essays by H. L. Mencken, feeling in them 'a spirit of rebellion against niceness and solid-citizenship.' Spotting *The Three Black Pennys*, Babbitt thinks he's found a novel that would contain 'an adventure story,' but finds instead yet more 'discontent with the good common ways'—an complimentary assessment, coming from Lewis. Lewis, *Babbitt*, p. 225.

[51] William Lyon Phelps, the same juror who had recommended *The Magnificent Ambersons* for the Prize in 1919, had suggested that Zona Gale's *Miss Lulu Bett* be awarded that year's Prize, but the novel was deemed ineligible because it had been published in 1920 and not in 1919, much to the jury's regret. Hohenberg, *The Pulitzer Prizes*, pp. 50-51, 55.

[52] Garland would go on to serve on a number of Novel Prize juries; he also won the 1922 Pulitzer Prize for Biography for *A Daughter of the Middle Border,* the follow-up to his 1917 autobiography *A Son of the Middle Border.*

[53] Hohenberg, *The Pulitzer Prizes,* p. 46-47.

in a letter to Columbia University secretary Frank Fackenthal that 'I cannot regard O'Neill's play as "noble" or "uplifting" which I believe are the expressed terms of the bequest.'[54]

These internal debates over the 'wholesome' specification became embarrassingly public when Lewis objected to the Prize's wording in declining the 1926 award. By this point, Lewis already had a contentious relationship with the Pulitzer. In 1921, *Main Street* had been recommended to the Pulitzer Prize Advisory Board by that year's Novel jury as the most Prize-worthy book. The circumstances surrounding what happened next are not clear (although Butler is often considered to be responsible, influenced perhaps by Garland, the jury chairman who was known to have disliked *Main Street*), but in any case, the Advisory Board ultimately rejected the jury's choice, awarding the Prize instead to *The Age of Innocence*.[55] Juror Robert Morss Lovett, incensed, published a letter in *The New Republic* criticizing the decision. In it, he quotes the Prize specifications, and specifically the clause that the winning novel represent the 'wholesome' American atmosphere, suggesting that it is actually Wharton's novel that does not meet those requirements. Through its social criticism, he argues, *Main Street* 'had led its readers to formulate for themselves a higher standard of life, and to purge the small-town atmosphere of

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[54] Hamlin Garland quoted in Hohenberg, *The Pulitzer Prizes*, pp. 46-48. By 1925, when Garland was once again asked to serve on the Drama Jury, even he regretfully recognized that the plays he favored had begun to fall out of style. 'I am all out of key with the pornographic drama of our day,' he told Fackenthal, 'and I could not vote an award to any such play no matter what its technical excellence might be.' Fackenthal persuaded Garland to join the jury, but after preliminary discussions with his two fellow jurors he insisted he be allowed to resign. That year's Prize was ultimately awarded to Sidney Howard's *They Knew What They Wanted*, which was one of thirteen plays investigated by the New York County District Attorney after citizens complained about its morality. The play was exonerated, but the investigation was featured in the Associated Press article announcing the 1925 Pulitzer Prizes. '"So Big" Is Named Year's Best Novel: Wins Pulitzer Prize—Play Attacked as Immoral Also Wins,' *The Evening Star*, 27 April 1925, p. 16; Hohenberg, *The Pulitzer Prizes*, p. 96.

[55] William H. Gass described Wharton's win as 'the single outstanding choice of the Pulitzer Prize Committee during its tenure.' William H. Gass, 'Prizes, Surprises, and Consolation Prizes,' *The New York Times*, 5 May 1985, p. 1.

certain unwholesome tendencies,' making the claim that the book 'actually accomplished something' towards the creation of more 'wholesome' small towns and launching an early critique of the way the phrase was being understood and interpreted.[56]

Frustrated at having been passed over for *Main Street* and again a few years later for *Babbitt,* yet another bestseller, Lewis had planned his refusal of the Prize for *Arrowsmith* well in advance. In the weeks before the 1926 Prize was announced, he wrote to his publisher, Alfred Harcourt, that '"ever since the *Main Street* burglary, I have planned that if they ever did award it to me, I would refuse it, with a polite but firm letter […] which shall make it impossible for any one ever to accept the novel prize (not the play or history prize) therefore without acknowledging themselves as willing to sell out.'[57] Lewis linked his objection even more specifically to the word 'wholesome' than Lovett had, arguing that its inclusion in the Prize specifications 'would appear to mean that the appraisal of the novels shall be made not according to their actual literary merit but in obedience to whatever code of Good Form may chance to be popular at the moment.'[58]

Some doubted Lewis's sincerity in taking this ideological stance. 'Mr. Lewis has the right to refuse any prize awards offered to him, whether he does so from principle or from self-exploitation,' Ralph Pulitzer, Joseph Pulitzer's son and a member of the Advisory Committee, was quoted as saying.[59] A less diplomatic editorial in North Dakota's *Bismarck Tribune* described Lewis's letter as 'a nasty, sassy little note,' chalking his objections up to the move of 'a clever, shrewd, canny salesman' and noting that 'Not even good wares sell so well as properly

[56] Robert Morss Lovett, 'A Communication: The Pulitzer Prize,' *The New Republic,* 22 June 1921, p. 114.
[57] Schorer, *Sinclair Lewis: An American Life,* p. 446.
[58] Lewis, 'Letter refusing the Pulitzer Prize for *Arrowsmith*,' p. 233.
[59] 'Lewis Refuses Pulitzer Prize,' *The New York Times,* 6 May 1926, p. 1.

advertised wares not so terribly good!'[60] *The Daily Worker,* however, thought Lewis's refusal of the Prize was 'laudable' and a necessary revolt against the Pulitzer Prize committee, which they accused of a type of censorship 'effective and subtle' but still 'vicious.' 'Let the Pulitzer gang hereafter confine their donations to such banal creatures as Harold Bell Wright and other scribblers who eulogize the Babbitts,' the article concluded. 'Their game is up as far as competent writers are concerned.'[61] Lewis's biographers are also divided on how to read the letter. Mark Schorer, writing in 1961, dismisses Lewis's objection to the Prize's wording, arguing that the 'general principles that he then invoked, whatever their merit may have been, were secondary' and noting that Lewis only mentioned the Prize's restrictive specifications because 'motive and intent must be buried under the arguments that would substantiate principle.'[62] Richard Lingeman, by contrast, argues in his 2002 biography that there is 'no doubting the sincerity in [Lewis's] defiance of the Old Guard' and that Lewis 'did not write this letter to publicize his next novel but to evangelize the creed of the new literature.'[63]

Whatever his motivations, Lewis had successfully drawn attention to the Prize's wording, making Americans and international readers aware that the committee was not exactly looking for the *best* novel of the year. And Lewis was surely correct in his conclusion that the requirement that the winning novels 'best represent the wholesome atmosphere of American life' had impacted which books were honored, even beyond the controversy over *Main Street*. The word 'wholesome' had long been used to distinguish between acceptable and non-acceptable novels. In 1890, for example, in a speech arguing for the institution of copyright laws in the US,

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[60] 'Getting America's Goat,' *The Bismarck Tribune,* 14 May 1926, p. 8.
[61] 'Exposing the Pulitzer Prize,' *The Daily Worker,* 8 May 1926, p. 4.
[62] Schorer, *Sinclair Lewis: An American Life,* p. 446.
[63] Richard Lingeman, *Sinclair Lewis: Rebel from Main Street* (New York: Random House, 2002), p. 280.

Republican Congressman Henry Cabot Lodge distinguished 'foreign books' and 'second-class English novels […] written about dukes and duchesses and lords and ladies […] which hold up ideals utterly hostile to ours' from 'wholesome American books,' which fill American children 'with American ideals, […] and with respect for American society.' [64] In terms of the Pulitzer, as Caroline B. Sherman noted in 1931, the phrasing of the Prize specifications 'seemed to suggest inevitably to judges a farm atmosphere and a vigorous type of farm man or woman,' adding that 'for several successive years, beginning with 1923, the record reads like an awarding of a rural-fiction prize.'[65] More specifically, the difference between 'whole' and 'wholesome,' as John K. Hutchens later said, was the difference between Theodore Dreiser and Booth Tarkington, a characterization that distinguishes between two types of Midwestern sensibilities.[66] Dreiser's novels might have represented the 'whole atmosphere of American life'—his debut novel *Sister Carrie* (1900) is as much a New York novel as a Chicago novel—but they were certainly not seen as 'wholesome': the publisher of his 1915 novel *The Genius* banned shipments of the book and withdrew it from bookstores after being threatened with legal action because of the novel's 'lewd' and 'profane' content.[67] Tarkington, on the other hand, remained quintessentially and stereotypically Midwestern in the public imagination, producing novels steeped in what Dreiser

[64] Henry Cabot Lodge, 'International Copyright: Speech in the House of Representatives, May 2, 1890,' in *Speeches and Addresses, 1884-1909* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1909), pp. 49-56 (pp. 55-56).
[65] Caroline B. Sherman, 'Farm Life Fiction Reaches Maturity,' *The Sewanee Review,* 39.4 (1931), 472-483 (pp. 476-477).
[66] John K. Hutchens, 'Time: 4:24 p.m. Prizes: Pulitzer,' *New York Herald Tribune Book Review,* 8 May 1955, p. 2.
[67] Paul S. Boyer, *Purity in Print: Book Censorship in America from the Gilded Age to the Computer Age* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2002), pp. 37-40.

called the 'poetic and folksy charm' of their shared home state.[68] Indeed, as Lewis complained, Midwestern authors who were writing with Garland's standard in mind—Tarkington being a prime example—were well-placed to succeed, for 'wholesomeness' had become associated with a certain type of nostalgic, quintessentially American Midwesternness.[69] It was, however, a type of wholesomeness that was already going out of fashion, as Garland's decision to distance himself from the Prizes by the mid-1920s demonstrates.[70]

Nevertheless, in the first decade of the Pulitzer Prize, when the winning novel was required to depict the 'wholesome atmosphere of American life,' juries rewarded novels that represented this latter type of Midwesternness, awarding the Prize to Tarkington twice (for *The Magnificent Ambersons* in 1919 and *Alice Adams* in 1922) and passing over Dreiser's *An American Tragedy* for the 1926 award. Rather than revisit Tarkington, however, I want to consider some less well-known, and less enduring, Midwestern Prize novels. By looking at Margaret Wilson and Edna Ferber—two authors whose early novels represent a type of Midwesternness that advocated for small towns, community, and 'good values'—I will consider how 'wholesomeness' came to define a certain type of Midwestern writing, which in turn came

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[68] Theodore Dreiser, 'Indiana: Her Soil and Light,' *The Nation*, 3 October 1923, repr. in *'These United States': Portraits of America From the 1920s*, ed. by. Daniel H. Borus (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1992), pp. 120-127 (p. 123).

[69] Reflecting on the work of Indiana author George Barr McCutcheon in 1930, for example, Garland observed, 'None of us ever grudged George his fortune, for his work was good, wholesome entertainment, of more real value, perhaps, than the laborious attempts at social history which so many others of us were making,' identifying 'wholesomeness' with the type of romantic Indiana novel I discussed in Chapter 1. Hamlin Garland, *Roadside Meetings* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1930), p. 282.

[70] Garland, who characterized himself as a 'literary displaced person' by 1923, spoke out that year in favor of censorship, which he viewed as 'organized collective protest against debasing forms of art.' Many Indiana authors who had achieved popularity at the beginning of the twentieth century agreed with him—Tarkington and McCutcheon, for example, both supported censorship in order to, as McCutcheon phrased it, 'clean our rapidly spreading Augean stables.' Boyer, *Purity in Print*, pp. 111-113.

to be associated with the nation as a 'whole.' But 'wholesomeness' was not as straightforward a quality as Sherman's characterization suggests. Margaret Wilson's *The Able McLaughlins* and Edna Ferber's *So Big* share certain themes, but they used their characters' Midwestern backgrounds and their novels' settings in order to make very different statements about American culture in the 1920s.

MARGARET WILSON: 'THE MOST MIDDLE WESTERN OF ALL MIDDLE WESTERNERS'

Margaret Wilson described herself as 'the most middle western of all middle westerners.' Though she lived in many places around the world during her life—Chicago, India, and the United Kingdom—she always identified with Iowa, her home state. To her, being Midwestern meant having an appreciation for 'the simplicities of life' such that 'to this day my nose prefers the fundamental and rhythmic odors of a sunny manure pile to such jazzy intricacies of incense as burns, say, in St. Mark's of the Bowery.'[71] This comparison of the rural smells she loves to those of an Episcopalian church in New York City reflects the ongoing rivalry between the Midwest and New York, and hints at Wilson's strongly religious background, which was a central theme in much of her writing.[72] It also emphasizes the Midwestern upbringing that informed many aspects of Wilson's first novel, *The Able McLaughlins,* which won the Pulitzer Prize in 1924. Her appreciation for the 'fundamental and rhythmic' as opposed to the 'jazzy' defines that novel, which emphasized what Clarence Andrews describes as the 'qualities of warm

[71] Margaret Wilson quoted in Clarence A. Andrews, *A Literary History of Iowa* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2005), pp. 35-36.
[72] Wilson was a Presbyterian missionary in India and, upon her return to the United States in the 1910s, spent two years at the University of Chicago divinity school.

humor, of tenderness, of toughness, of thriftiness, of compassion, of common sense, of intelligence and self-reliance,'—in other words, of Midwestern 'wholesomeness.'[73]

The Able McLaughlins had already been recognized on the national stage when it won the inaugural Harper Prize Novel Contest for debut novels published in 1922-1923 out of a pool of seven hundred and fifty entries.[74] In the wake of this award, Henry Seidel Canby, a literary critic and first Editorial Chair of the *Book-of-the-Month* Club, said that it deserved the award 'for its fine literary art and for its sound substance of rich American life,' adding that 'it also possessed that quality rarer in fine literary work than style or penetration; it stirred the emotions and appealed to the universal love of a good story effectively told.'[75] This evaluation, in praising both Wilson's depiction of the 'sound substance' of American life and its 'universal' appeal, suggested a novel well-suited to the Pulitzer Prize's specifications. The jury agreed, and *The Able McLaughlins* was chosen unanimously as the novel that would win the 1924 Novel Prize.

But even though rewarding *The Able McLaughlins* did not cause much of a stir in 1924, Wilson's win has often been considered a confounding one in the decades since. In a 1971 article reacting to the announcement that the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction would not be awarded that year, critic Walter Clemons lists four '"standards," or rules of thumb' which he says can be discerned from the previous five decades of winners, including 'Rule One,' that 'middlebrows, to use the polite term, get it early in their careers' and 'Rule Three, moral uplift is desirable.' Clemons cites many winning novels from the Pulitzer's first decade as evidence for these 'standards,' including

[73] Andrews, *A Literary History of Iowa,* p. 36.
[74] This competition became one of a number of publishers' prizes designed to discover unknown authors. Harper and Brothers, the award's founders and the publishers behind *The Able McLaughlins,* of course had a vested interest in drawing attention to this particular unknown author.
[75] Canby quoted in Andrews, *A Literary History of Iowa,* p. 36.

Cather's *One of Ours*, which won the 1923 Prize, and Ferber's *So Big*, but he dismisses Wilson's winning novel from consideration, listing it as one of the 'mysterious titles' he would be 'skipping rapidly' over.[76] And yet the appeal of Wilson's morally uplifting, middlebrow, Midwestern novel is hardly mysterious. In fact, it corresponds closely to the 'standards' set by other Midwestern rural novels of the decade. Like Tarkington's *The Magnificent Ambersons*, it considers the changing Midwestern landscape, positioning the region in the context of a national historical framework. It also considers immigration and Americanization—often through dialect and language—while focusing on English-speaking immigrants who were generally seen as fully assimilated into American culture by the 1920s. The main characters all make moral decisions when put to the test, while the villain—frequently humanized throughout the novel—receives his comeuppance by the end, qualifying *The Able McLaughlins* for the Pulitzer according to Clemons's third 'Rule,' that 'moral uplift is required.' It also features pioneers who are awed by the promise of the Midwestern landscape, appealing to an instinct towards national mythologizing that the Pulitzer Prize specifications also seem to reflect. As W. J. Stuckey argues, the novel 'fits neatly into the emerging pattern of Pulitzer novels about American life: simple people plus hard work (pioneer hardship) equals a "noble, inspiring picture" of America's past,' making it the first of 'a long series of Pulitzer books about the American frontier which agreeably combine sentimental "romance" under a glossy patina of realism.'[77] So while Wilson's novel might not have been the most memorable or lasting Pulitzer Prize winner, its very derivativeness allows it to best represent the rural Midwestern stereotypes that underpinned the Pulitzer Prize's decision-making in the 1920s.

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[76] Walter Clemons, 'The Last Word: The Pulitzer Non-Prize for Fiction,' *The New York Times,* 6 June 1971, p. 55.
[77] Stuckey, *The Pulitzer Prize Novels,* p. 48.

Wilson's novel is a classic Midwestern tale heavily influenced by her own family background, although she herself had left Iowa years before its publication. After attending the University of Chicago, she left the United States to go to India as a missionary, and in 1923 she moved to England permanently after marrying an Oxford tutor who would go on to become a prison warden—experiences she incorporated into her later books.[78] In her first novel, however, Wilson looked back on—and romanticized—her native state, setting the action in Iowa during the final years of the Civil War and the subsequent decade. The novel follows a community of Scottish immigrants, focusing in particular on the lives of Wully McLaughlin and Chirstie McNair, who both immigrated to Iowa from rural Scotland as children and who fall in love while Wully is home from the war on temporary leave. Chirstie becomes pregnant by someone else, but Wully decides to marry her anyway, banishing the child's father from town and claiming the child as his own. The couple has years of happiness together, during which the novel's focus turns to Chirstie's father and new stepmother, Alex and Barbara McNair. This unsuited pair—a zealously thrifty farmer and a city-native who comes to America expecting a much grander life than the one she finds—clash over the comfort of their rural farm life and add an element of humor to the novel, something John T. Frederick says is 'one of the rarest ingredients in Iowa farm fiction.'[79] But the novel shifts tone again when the biological father of Chirstie's son suddenly reappears, threatening the peaceful life they have made and raising questions of morality, family, and duty.

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[78] 'Books and Authors,' *The New York Times,* 10 February 1924, p. 43. *Daughters of India* (1928) and *Trousers of Taffeta* (1929) both incorporated aspects of Wilson's experience in India, and *The Dark Duty* (1931) and *The Valiant Wife* (1933) considered the British justice and prison systems.

[79] John T. Frederick, 'Rediscovery of the Pioneers,' *The Palimpsest,* 31.2 (1951), 127-130 (p. 129).

In setting this story decades earlier, Wilson's novel fit into a trend of mythologizing the Iowa pioneer that Frank Luther Mott, an Iowa native who would become an editor of *The Midland* magazine in 1925, described in an address delivered before the Academy of Science and Letters at Sioux City in March 1923. 'The pioneer and all his train are now arrived safely in the realm of Romance,' Mott said, placing the Iowa pioneer into a larger history of mythologized American figures such as 'Indiana scouts,' 'forty-niners,' and 'cowboys.'[80] Frederick similarly traced the 'effort to portray the westward movement of the nineteenth century' to the 'decade of the 1920's, especially in the Middle West,' citing Wilson's novel as one of the Iowa novels that does this most successfully.[81] The farmers in Wilson's novel, and particularly Wully, her protagonist, embody the classic pioneer figure with their deep connection to the land. While Wully and his father both farm to make a living, Wilson represents their deeper motivations as more ideological than materialistic: 'There was more in it than perhaps anyone can say—certainly more than he ever said—all that keeps farm-minded men farming. It was the perfect symbol of rewarded, lavished labor, of requited love and care, of creating power, of wifely

[80] Frank Luther Mott, *Literature of Pioneer Life in Iowa* (Iowa City: State Historical Society of Iowa, 1923), p. 4.

[81] Frederick, 'Rediscovery of the Pioneers,' p. 127. This pioneer-mania spread into other mediums as well. Donna Campbell describes 'large public statues such as August Leimbach's *Madonna of the Trail* and John Gregory's *Pioneer Woman* (1927)' which 'proliferated' during the 1920s, preserving the memory of the American frontier past at a time when modern-day life was more characterized by industrialization and development than by breaking new ground. Edna Ferber would satirize these statues of pioneer women in her 1930 novel *Cimarron*, in which an Oklahoma town funds a statue intended to 'embody the Oklahoma pioneer woman.' The statue the town eventually receives, however, features a man instead of the Madonna figure the town had wanted. Donna Campbell, '"Written with a Hard and Ruthless Purpose": Rose Wilder Lane, Edna Ferber, and Middlebrow Regional Fiction,' in *Middlebrow Moderns: Popular American Women Writers of the 1920s*, ed. by Lisa Botshon and Meredith Goldsmith (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 2003), pp. 25-44 (p. 32); Edna Ferber, *Cimarron* (London: William Heinemann Ltd., 1930), p. 378.

faithfulness, of the flower and fruit of life, its beauty, its ecstasy.'[82] Ruth Suckow, in her 1942 historical novel *New Hope,* would describe farming in similar terms. In that novel, Andy, a farmer through and through, tells his brother that while he looks upon the land 'as an investment first of all,' he looks at it 'as the place where we live and are going to raise our crops.'[83] Both descriptions frame farming as a noble and spiritually-nourishing pursuit, and are a far cry from Garland's description of farming in *Main-Travelled Roads,* which presents an image of a farmer 'clad in a ragged grey coat, with uncouth, muddy boots upon his feet' walking with 'head inclined toward the sleet, to shield his face from the cold and sting of it.'[84] Wilson's and Suckow's farmers, in more closely adhering to the 'Romantic' expectation of farmers and pioneers, represent both the 'highest standard of manners and manhood' and the idea that hard work inevitably leads to success, a tenet of the American dream that Garland's brutal portrait of Midwestern farming disputed and that Stuckey claims is one of the most sustained themes running through the early Pulitzer novels.

Wilson's novel, then, uses a historic framework to create a heroic past for the United States, and for the inheritors of the pioneer tradition she depicts. Explaining why Iowan authors had begun to write these pioneer figures into their fiction, Mott sums up their appeal as stemming from the fact that Iowans 'are proud of the courage and hardihood of our fathers and grandfathers and a little proud of ourselves for having descended from them.'[85] Wilson's fictional family bears close resemblance to her own family of Scottish Covenanters who had settled on the Iowa prairie after immigrating, and Wilson brings the connection of early Iowans

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[82] Margaret Wilson, *The Able McLaughlins* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1923), pp. 171-172.
[83] Ruth Suckow, *New Hope* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1998), p. 93.
[84] Hamlin Garland, *Main-Travelled Roads* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1894), p. 87.
[85] Mott, *Literature of Pioneer Life in Iowa,* pp. 4-5.

to their relatives into the novel. Mr. Knight, the stranger who brings Wully back to the farm at the beginning of the novel, makes so great an impression on Wully's brother Andrew through his kindness that 'fifty-seven years later, when that stranger's grandson was one of the disheartened veterans of the World War who came to [Andrew's] office looking for work, the whole scene rose before him in such poignancy that he had to turn his head away abruptly, remembering,' before offering the young man a job, emphasizing the beneficial aspects of having been descended from these types of figures.[86] In comparison, Wilson also tells the story of a miller who 'bought […] ten thousand acres of Iowa land' during the pioneer era and whose sons 'nowadays […] go round and round this stuffy little globe in their yachts' and 'berate his memory yawningly because he didn't buy a hundred thousand acres,' setting up a dichotomy between those Americans who are rooted in the land, like Wully, and those who are lacking not only this rootedness, but spiritual depth that, in Wilson's novel, is tied to the hard work of homesteading.[87] In creating this contrast, Wilson not only celebrates the Midwest's pioneer past but offers a lesson to her readers aligned with those of 'public moralists' concerned that 'dissatisfaction and pleasure seeking' was beginning to affect not only the children of the wealthy, but of the working class as well.[88] This historical response to present-day anxieties allows Wilson's novel to fit into a tradition of historical novels which Gordon Hutner suggests 'spoke to an America trying to make sense of its destiny' by explaining 'how the past becomes the present.'[89] In Wilson's view, American success is not linked to financial inheritance—as her

[86] Wilson, *The Able McLaughlins,* p. 6.
[87] Ibid., p. 233.
[88] Stuckey, *The Pulitzer Prize Novels,* p. 34.
[89] Gordon Hutner, *What America Read: Taste, Class, and the Novel 1920-1960* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2009), p. 85.

biting depiction of the wealthy sons demonstrates—but to the inherited culture of hard work and good deeds done selflessly, a message firmly aligned with the Pulitzer idea of 'wholesomeness.'

Wilson also depicts a familiar story of Americanization in this novel. For many of the characters, the unlimited land of the Midwest is the stuff of dreams: 'From the time he was ten years old, he had dreamed of America,' Wilson writes of John McLaughlin.[90] Once the family arrives, the McLaughlins' entrance into the prairie setting is described through language. 'Fifteen years ago one might have gone west for months without hearing a human voice,' the opening of the novel tells us, but John's arrival with his wife and eight children—the defense of the 'farsighted pioneer' against 'the hush that maddens'—had broken 'the immediate part of the centuries' silence,' making the family's first mark on the prairie an intangible, yet permanent one.[91] But this change, Wilson suggests, goes both ways, as the McLaughlins, too, are affected linguistically by their new environment. Wilson does not often write in phonetic dialect, but she makes it clear that the Scottish farmers are speaking in an accent different than that of her readers. When, for example, Wully's mother Isobel McLaughlin remembers her son Allen's song about their community, the narrator reassures the readers, who may have been wondering about the rhyme scheme—which, read in an American accent, would not work—that 'In his pronunciation the meter was perfect, and Sprouls and McDowells rhymed perfectly, both of them, with "holes."'[92] Later, when Wully is out searching for the father of Chirstie's baby, one of the searchers casually remarks that if they '"knew the girl to ask, we might learn something."'[93] '"Girl" when he pronounced it rhymed with peril,' the narrator tells us as Wully jolts awake, the

[90] Wilson, *The Able McLaughlins,* p. 22.
[91] Ibid., pp. 1, 2.
[92] Ibid., pp. 20-21.
[93] Ibid., p. 212.

Scottish rhyme triggering his sense of alarm.[94] These differences in pronunciation, while not as obvious as phonetic speech, still give readers the sense of the McLaughlins as outsiders. The opening of the novel, for example, is framed in classic local color style, by a visitor to the community, who is bemused, but eventually charmed, by the religious Scots. And the older generation is even proud of their outsider status. 'Some Americans might have smiled to know that this immigrant family never for a moment considered Americans in general their equal, or themselves anything common,' Wilson writes of the McLaughlins early in the novel. 'They were far too British for that.' For the older generation, acting 'American' was something to discipline in their children: 'Until the war, when some young McLaughlin had shown signs of intolerable depravity, his father had entirely extinguished the last glimmer of it by saying, […] 'Dinna ye act like a Yankee!'"[95]

By the time the novel begins, however, as this passage suggests, the McLaughlins have already softened towards 'Yankees' due to Wully's wartime experience. Wully himself shows his commitment to his new country when he chastises himself for 'Yammering away in bits of a forsaken dialect,' framing his Scottish speech as something he is intentionally leaving behind.[96] Wully's brother John, too, distances himself from his native dialect, and 'was never too tired to choose an idiom as far removed as possible from the one he heard around him.'[97] While home for the summer, John, who studies in Chicago for most of the year and is the most formally educated of the McLaughlin clan, expresses his frustration with his family's speech. 'What was it they spoke, he demanded scornfully […]. It was Scotch no longer. It wasn't English. It wasn't

[94] Wilson, *The Able McLaughlins,* p. 212.
[95] Ibid., p. 86.
[96] Ibid., p. 28.
[97] Ibid., p. 173.

American, certainly.'[98] Wully and his mother are mystified and amused by John's disapproval of their accents and 'tendency towards Scotticisms,' and his pedantic ways are largely dismissed as the byproduct of his urban education.[99] For readers, however, John's statement both acknowledges the existence of an 'American' English and emphasizes the process of the McLaughlins' continuing Americanization, as their language evolves away from 'Scotch' towards a new form of English arising from the American environment.

Another form of Americanization is associated with Barbara McNair, the only one who, according to John, 'spoke pure anything.'[100] Her arrival from Glasgow in the middle of the novel jolts readers out of the insider's view the novel had adopted.[101] Coming from an urban background, and unmoved by the McLaughlins' love of the land, she is shocked to see the frontier conditions of her new life after she marries Chirstie's recently-widowed father. Insisting that her new home is 'an old sty,' she cannot reconcile her expectations to the reality of Iowa farm life, especially having first experienced the United States while traveling in the East. 'Had she not from the train seen many a little snug place among comforting hills, livable little places! But that had been, to be sure, far from this, in the east,' the narrator explains, setting up the familiar comparison between the East and the Midwest that runs throughout Midwestern fiction. 'The further west they came, the more they traveled into desolation.'[102] Decrying the state of her own house, Barbara thinks: 'If only there had been even a little white house, and a fence, and a few flowers sending up their endearing shoots! But this! And her from Glasgow! Words failed

[98] Wilson, *The Able McLaughlins,* p. 173.
[99] Ibid., p. 174.
[100] Ibid., p. 173.
[101] For discussion of Barbara McNair from a feminist perspective, see Judy Cornes, *Sex, Power, and the Folly of Marriage in Women's Novels of the 1920s: A Critical Study of Seven American Writers* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Co., 2015), pp. 90-111.
[102] Wilson, *The Able McLaughlins,* p. 100.

her.'[103] But even Barbara, the outsider most resistant to the Iowa environment, eventually finds her place in the state. Overcoming her husband's stinginess, she convinces him to build her the house she envisioned when she traveled to America. Driving up to the McNairs' after the renovations, the narrator tells us, 'One saw a trim white house, inside a smart white fence, upon a jaunty rise of ground, with a gay white fowl-house in the rear, and in the front yard—what sights for pioneer eyes! Crimson hollyhocks, just beginning to open.'[104] This house physically embodies Barbara's American dream, and its ultimate fulfillment confirms that the Midwest is not in fact a place of desolation, but the perfect setting for Barbara's Americanization.

The crimson hollyhocks in her front yard, in particular, most explicitly demonstrate Wilson's concept of Americanization. Searching for flowers to plant in her prairie garden, Barbara stops outside a house belonging to a German immigrant whose garden is full of blossoms. Barbara and the German woman cannot communicate with words, but through 'that look on her face that was understood by frontierswomen of many tongues,' Barbara is able to convey her question to the woman, who brings her to one of her neighbors who came to Iowa from New England.[105] This woman gives Barbara a cutting from a peony that 'her mother had brought from eastern to western Ohio many years ago.' She had inherited the flower from her own mother, 'who came a bride to Ohio from western New York, clasping it against her noisy heart' and from her great-grandfather, who 'had brought it west in New York in his saddle bag, soon after Washington's inauguration.'[106] This history of the plant connects the two women to a chain of immigrants stretching back decades, and holding tight to her own cutting on the wagon

[103] Wilson, *The Able McLaughlins,* p. 151.
[104] Ibid., p. 179.
[105] Ibid., p. 160.
[106] Ibid., p. 163.

ride home, Barbara begins to sing. 'That was the first day she sang in the United States of America,' Wilson writes, adding, 'It was her "Americanization."'[107] Wilson's version of 'Americanization,' then, is one that erases differences between background and language, foregrounding the prairie as a space of national as well as regional assimilation.[108]

Despite its award-winning status, Wilson's novel did not trigger the kind of discussion in her home state of Iowa that Ruth Suckow's *Country People* would inspire the following year. Indeed, aside for some references to the Harper Prize, which reported the novel's win largely without editorial commentary, *The Able McLaughlins* does not seem to have been discussed or reviewed extensively. A report on a book club meeting published in the local newspaper in O'Neill, Nebraska, for example, noted that the book was the subject of discussion in the most recent meeting, but the only other thing the Club Reporter has to say about *The Able McLaughlins* is that it is 'well written' and a 'modern book,' a striking comment given the palpable air of nostalgia that permeates both the novel and the path of Wilson's career.[109] Wilson went on to write several novels based on her experience as a missionary in India and on her husband's career as a prison governor, but she eventually returned to the McLaughlins, setting her tenth and final novel *The Law and the McLaughlins* (1936) in the Iowa immigrant community. Although most critics deemed the novel a weak follow-up to her 1923 novel, some seem favorably disposed towards it simply because of the echoes it contains of Wilson's earlier work. *The New York Times*, for example, was positive, praising the novel as 'a remarkably

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[107] Wilson, *The Able McLaughlins,* p. 164.
[108] In Cather's *My Ántonia,* it is also a garden that helps Jim Burden begin adjusting to Nebraska after moving there from Virginia. 'I was something that lay under the sun and felt it, like the pumpkins, and I did not want to be anything more,' Jim says of sitting in his grandmother's garden. 'I was entirely happy.' Willa Cather, *My Ántonia* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1918), p. 20.
[109] 'Literary and Art Department,' *The Frontier,* 5 February 1925, p. 1.

successful study of a pioneer community, and a charming companion piece to "The Able McLaughlins."'[110] Graham Greene also praised Wilson's simplicity of style when he compared *The Law and the McLaughlins* favorably to *The Big Money* (1936), the third in John Dos Passos's U. S. A. trilogy. While he criticizes Dos Passos's creativity as having been 'confined to the rather superficial inventions of the Camera Eye and the News Reel, and the interpolation into his narrative of brief biographies of real people,' which he claims 'are far more vivid than the characters,' he praises Wilson as having 'a passionate gift for the very simple direct narrative.'[111] Quoting Wilson's novel, Greene insists that 'the real fact'—meaning human motivation and characterization—is what 'Miss Wilson, unlike Mr. Dos Passos, never forgets.'[112] Although Greene found the sequel to *The Able McLaughlins* 'less satisfactory' than her earlier novels, he commended Wilson as 'a writer of fine moral discrimination and a passionate awareness of individual suffering,' an assessment that brings to mind the Pulitzer Prize specifications.[113] While Dos Passos's trilogy was an experimental attempt to achieve a whole view of American life—what Greene dismissively calls 'sympathy founded on statistics'—*The Able McLaughlins* used its narrative simplicity to create something 'wholesome.'[114] In the early days of the Pulitzer Prize, it was this wholesome Midwesternness, rather than Dos Passos's experimental modernism, that was recognized on the national stage.

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[110] 'More About Those McLaughlins: The Law and the McLaughlins,' *The New York Times,* 25 October 1936, p. 7.
[111] Graham Greene, 'Fiction Chronicle, January 9th, 1939,' in *Articles of Faith: The Collected Tablet Journalism of Graham Greene,* ed. by Ian Thompson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), pp. 96-101 (p. 100).
[112] Ibid.
[113] Ibid., p. 101.
[114] Ibid., p. 100.

EDNA FERBER'S MIDWESTERN 'PROPAGANDA'

The following year, the Pulitzer Prize again went to a novel set in a Midwestern farming community of recent immigrants. But unlike Wilson's novel, which did not make a significant impact on either critics or the reading public beyond its prize wins, Edna Ferber's *So Big* (1924) quickly shot to the top of the bestseller lists, making its Pulitzer Prize win seem like a natural reward for its significant impact. Yet *So Big*, superficially similar to Wilson's Prize winner, used the Midwestern rural framework for very different purposes: while Wilson had written a fairly uncritical, nostalgic novel of frontier life, Ferber was much more concerned with using the Midwest to question national perceptions of success and 'Americanness.'

Like Wilson, Edna Ferber spent her childhood in the Midwest. Born in Kalamazoo, Michigan, she spent seven years with her family in Ottumwa, Iowa before moving to Appleton, Wisconsin, where she graduated high school and began her career as a newspaper reporter. Though she eventually moved away from the Midwest, living in New York for most of her adult life and publishing novels set all over the United States during the course of her career, the Midwest always had a particular appeal to her as a region that was 'an integral part of the American way of life.'[115] Ferber's early novels drew heavily upon her own experience as a Midwesterner, and *So Big*, Ferber's third novel and the one that won her the Pulitzer Prize,

[115] Edna Ferber, *A Peculiar Treasure* (New York: Doubleday, Doran, and Co., 1939), pp. 256, 255. Today, Ferber is best known for the Hollywood film adaptations of her novels, including adaptations of *Cimarron*, *Giant*, and *Show Boat* (which was also adapted into a popular musical). J. E. Smyte argues that based on critical and box-office acclaim, only William Faulkner and John Steinbeck,' among her contemporaries, 'had careers that were in any way comparable.' J. E. Smyte, *Edna Ferber's Hollywood: American Fictions of Gender, Race, and History* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2010), p. 13. In an article titled 'Middle-Class, Middle-West Me,' Ferber responded to the question of why she wrote about 'commonplace middle-class people' from 'Chicago or some such Middle-Western wilderness' by saying that 'No other kind of person fascinates and excites my writing sense.' Quoted in Julie Goldsmith Gilbert, *Ferber: Edna Ferber and Her Circle* (Montclair, NJ: Applause Books, 1999), pp. 398-399.

demonstrated the benefits of rural, small-town life, of home-grown American art, and of honest hard work, themes which attracted the Pulitzer Prize committee as well as a national audience of enthusiastic readers.

Ferber wrote the first draft of *So Big* when she returned to America after a year abroad in Europe, which, in the early 1920s, was still recovering from the devastation of the first World War. 'It was always, for me, a glorious feeling—that of coming down the Bay into New York Harbor,' she recounted in her 1939 memoir, *A Peculiar Treasure.* 'But this time I saw these things with something like hysteria. […] I stared with unbelieving eyes, like an immigrant, at the fruit and vegetable stalls; at the grocers' lavish windows.'[116] In this scene of return, Ferber echoes Henry James, who, upon returning to the United States in 1904 after several years in Europe, is shocked by the materialism and desire to 'move, move, move, as an end in itself, an appetite at any price' that he finds there.[117] She stands out, however, as a writer inspired by a return to the United States in the early 1920s, a decade during which many of the most prominent American authors had left the United States for Europe. Many of these 'exiled' authors (most notably Ernest Hemingway and F. Scott Fitzgerald) were Midwesterners; as Ford Madox Ford described it, 'Young America from the limitless prairies leapt, released, on Paris,' reflecting the perception of the Midwestern small town as a prison that many 'revolt' authors had begun to

[116] Ferber, *A Peculiar Treasure*, p. 276.

[117] While Ferber recalls herself seeing the New York dock as if through the eyes of an immigrant, James takes the opposite approach, framing himself as a 'native' American coming to terms with a New York reshaped by 'aliens.' 'That loud primary stage of alienism which New York most offers to sight—operates, for the native, as their note of settled possession […] so that *un*settled possession is what we, on our side, seem reduced to,' James writes, so that he thinks longingly 'of the luxury of some such close and sweet and *whole* national consciousness as that of the Switzer and the Scot.' Henry James, *The American Scene* (London: Chapman and Hill, 1907), pp. 84-86. The emphasis is James's.

popularize in this period.[118] Recognizing this exodus of American authors to Europe, and with the backdrop of the roaring twenties—which she recognized as its own form of 'hysteria'—outside her window, Ferber began *So Big*.

Though she said she felt compelled to write the novel, Ferber did not anticipate that it would be a success. Echoing Willa Cather's own skepticism about the appeal of her subject and setting while writing *O, Pioneers!*, her first Nebraska novel, Ferber claims that she did not believe anybody would want to read a story 'of a middle-aged woman in a calico dress, with wispy hair and bad teeth, grubbing on a little truck farm south of Chicago.'[119] Ultimately, however, her fears that nobody would want to read a novel where 'nothing ever really happened' were proven unfounded.[120] The novel became an immediate best seller—the first of seven in Ferber's career—and was still selling well fourteen years later when she wrote her memoir, defying the expectations of *New York Tribune* reviewer Burton Rascoe, who told Ferber that he predicted that the novel would be 'dead and forgotten' within a year.[121]

At the heart of *So Big* is Selina Peake, who, far from being considered a mere 'middle-aged woman,' was heralded by reviewers as 'a woman whom adversity could not down.'[122] After her father, a gambler who had raised Selina in cities around the country, dies suddenly, leaving her alone in Chicago to fend for herself, she moves to a rural Dutch community as a

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[118] Ford is quoted in Carlos Baker, *Hemingway, the Writer as Artist* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1972), p. 19.
[119] Ferber, *A Peculiar Treasure*, p. 280.
[120] Ibid., p. 276.
[121] Ibid., p. 281. Of all the writers on the *Bookman* bestseller lists from 1900 until 1960, only Winston Churchill appeared more often than Ferber, making the top ten list nine times to her seven. Smyte argues that if Ferber's sales through book clubs or by mail order were included (*Publisher's Weekly* only considered books sold to bookstores or libraries), Ferber's sales 'would have been off the charts.' Smyte, *Edna Ferber's Hollywood*, p. 18.
[122] 'Best 1924 Novel,' *The Bismarck Tribune*, 29 April 1925, p. 4.

schoolteacher. Initially out of place in this new environment, she eventually falls in love with farmer Pervus DeJong and remains in High Prairie permanently, spending the next decades of her life protesting against the community's outdated farming methods and gender stereotypes and raising her son, Dirk, nicknamed 'Sobig.' As a 'symbol for all the abstractions which certain minds can uncritically accept as "good,"' Stuckey suggests, Selina, a quintessential American heroine, is 'the perfect embodiment of the early Pulitzer code.'[123] Even her face revealed 'the stuff of which pioneer women are made,' a description which connects her story to Wilson's pioneer novel from a year earlier. And like Barbara McNair, city-raised Selina undergoes a Midwestern conversion. When she is struck with 'a great wave of nostalgia for the dirt and clamour and crowds of Chicago' after weeks of living in High Prairie and returns to the city for a weekend visit, she finds herself disappointed by a city that 'wanted none of her,' where the noise 'roared in her ears now grown accustomed to the prairie silence.'[124] Returning to the Poole household a day earlier than planned, she is, by contrast, overwhelmed with welcome and 'astonished to find how happy she was to return to' the farmhouse, where even the discomforts have 'taken on the dear and comforting aspect of the accustomed.'[125] Although Selina had promised herself during her disheartening city trip that she would strive to become 'terribly important,' it is clear that a stable home and family is now more valuable to her than material success.

This newfound rootedness is represented through Selina's deep appreciation for the land around High Prairie. In this, as well as her use of intellect and experimentation to advance her farm, Selina is an echo of Willa Cather's Alexandra Bergson, the central figure in *O, Pioneers*

[123] Stuckey, *The Pulitzer Prize Novels,* p. 55.
[124] Edna Ferber, *So Big* (New York: Grosset & Dunlap, 1924), pp. 58-59.
[125] Ibid., p. 60.

(1913).[126] 'For the first time, perhaps, since that land emerged from the waters of geologic ages, a human face was set toward it with love and yearning,' Cather writes of Alexandra. 'It seemed beautiful to her, rich and strong and glorious.'[127] Selina's awakening towards the land reads similarly: 'There was born in Selina at this time a feeling for the land that she was never to lose. Perhaps the child within her had something to do with this. She was aware of a feeling of kinship with the earth; an illusion of splendor, of fulfillment.'[128] Here, Ferber ties Selina's connection with the land to her own fertility, reframing the masculine appreciation of the land as a symbol for 'wifely faithfulness' and 'the flower and fruit of life' in Wilson's novel into a feminized image of female 'kinship' between the land and Selina, both of which are capable of producing new life.[129] Cather, in *O, Pioneers!,* similarly reframed the traditional frontier narrative to become less rigidly gendered. 'The history of every country begins in the heart of a man or a woman,' she writes when Alexandra is surveying the land, opening up the pioneer narrative to include both men and women in a way that, William Handley argues, 'offers a feminized agrarian alternative to masculine "America."'[130] Ferber takes this one step further, representing Selina, the only female farmer in High Prairie, as the only one who truly knows how to work the

[126] Ferber seems to have been jealous of Cather's general critical success, which she addressed in a letter in 1931. 'I'm enclosing the Times review of Willa Cather's new book [*Shadows on the Rock* (1931)]. It pans it, which gives me a little feeling of joy for no reason at all except that I'm just that malicious. She's been getting too much of this goddess stuff just because she wrote one good book—My Antonia.' William Lyons Phelps saw similarities between Ferber and Cather's critical receptions during the late 1920s and early 1930s. 'These distinguished artists seem fated to misunderstanding or at any rate misrepresentation,' he wrote of them. 'Thus Edna Ferber and Willa Cather have been condemned for precisely the opposite reasons; the former, because she has thrills and the latter because she hasn't.' Ferber and Phelps quoted in Gilbert, *Edna Ferber and Her Circle*, pp. 351-352.
[127] Willa Cather, *O Pioneers!* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1913), p. 65.
[128] Ferber, *So Big*, p. 121.
[129] Wilson, *The Able McLaughlins*, p. 172.
[130] William Handley, *Marriage, Violence, and the Nation in the American Literary West* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), p. 138.

land. While Selina 'sensed something of the meaning behind these toiling, patient figures, […] bent double in the fields,' the men are 'unconscious of meaning.' 'As cabbages had been cabbages, and no more, to Klaas Pool, or, to Pervus, these carrots, beets, onions, turnips, and radishes were just so much produce,' Ferber writes, echoing Wilson's and Suckow's dismissal of farmers who only see the land as a means to profit.[131] As her niece and biographer Julie Goldsmith Gilbert notes, Ferber was a feminist who depicted 'every single one of her fictional heroines as progressive originals who doggedly paved large inroads for themselves and their "race."' Ferber's men, on the other hand 'were usually felled by their colorful but ultimately ineffectual machismo.'[132]

This gender division is certainly evident in *So Big*. Pervus, originally a handsome, sturdy figure who becomes close to Selina when he asks her to tutor him, is eventually revealed to be plodding and resistant to change, refusing to take Selina's advice about the failing farm.[133] Selina is determined to raise her son Dirk differently, with an appreciation of beauty, but they too end up diverging when Dirk gives up his goal of being an architect for the faster, easier money he could earn as a bond salesman.[134] In exposing the failures of both of these men—one who is defined by his rigidity and one who succumbs to material and social temptation—Ferber questions the 'Americanization' narrative that would traditionally represent both Pervus's farming and Dirk's material drive as paths towards their Americanization.

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[131] Ferber, *So Big*, p. 121.
[132] Gilbert, *Edna Ferber and Her Circle,* p. 12.
[133] Another borrowing from *O, Pioneers!* lies in the echo of Alexandra's brothers, who 'did not mind hard work,' but 'hated experiments, 'could never see the use of taking pains,' and 'disliked to do anything different from their neighbors.' Cather, *O, Pioneers!*, p. 45.
[134] Nick Carraway moved East from the Midwest to become a bond salesman in *The Great Gatsby*: 'Instead of being the warm center of the world the middle-west now seemed like the ragged edge of the universe—so I decided to go east and learn the bond business.' Fitzgerald, *The Great Gatsby,* pp. 3-4.

In contrast to these failed masculine examples, Ferber develops a vision of 'Americanness' in her novel that centers on Selina's appreciation for native beauty. But there are other foils, too. One is Mattie Schwengauer, an Iowan woman from a German-American farming family and one of the first friends Dirk makes at the University of Chicago. Mattie, who had worked for years in order to go to college, sees her time in Chicago as a 'dream,' in stark contrast to Dirk and his other friends, and Dirk eventually shuns her after the more popular students tell him that his own social status is being damaged through this association. It is Dallas O'Mara, an artist he meets in Chicago, who finally causes Dirk to question his behavior and begin to recognize his own shortcomings. Watching Selina one afternoon during a visit to the farm, Dallas tells Dirk that she does not want to do 'portraits of ladies with a string of pearls and one lily hand half hidden in the folds of a satin skirt,' but 'character portraits of men and women who are really distinguished looking—distinguishedly American, for example—like your mother.'"[135]

Dallas is embedded in Chicago society and is paid handsomely for her art, which is used to advertise products, something which Heywood Broun mentioned in his critique of the tension he saw between Ferber's argument for 'beauty' and the commercial success of her novel. 'No man or woman is an artist merely by virtue of his calling,' Broun wrote. 'Perhaps Selina should not be expected to realize that, but at least Miss Ferber ought to know. I don't think she does, for in *So Big* the young bond salesman first comes to the devastating conviction that Philistinism and Babbittry have captured him when he meets a young woman artist who gets $1,500 for each

[135] Ferber, *So Big*, pp. 355-356.

advertising poster which she draws.'[136] For Ferber, however, Dallas's artistry and her capacity to earn money are *not* at odds, something she addressed directly in her 1920 article 'No Apologies Needed for American Art.' Expressing her frustration that Americans defer to European styles and modes of artistic production, she laments that while she thinks *Miss Lulu Bett* 'is a finer book' than a 1917 novel by an English author, 'it probably hadn't nearly so good a sale in America as did the Englishman's book,' equating native appreciation for American art with the artist's potential to earn money.[137] Russell Doubleday, in reporting *So Big*'s sales figures back to Ferber, made a similar association between idealism and money when he said that her royalty check 'is proof positive that your book reaches the hearts of its readers, for no book sells over 20,000 copies that does not get to the very core of the public.'[138] In the context of the novel, Ferber makes the important distinction not between those who have money and those who do not, but between those who live to make money, as Dirk does, and those for whom money is a pleasant consequence of intellectual and spiritual success. More generally, she makes a case for the value of popular 'middlebrow' novels, such as hers, which make money as bestsellers—something Ferber does not see as antithetical to artistic value.

Ferber is most explicit about what defines her version of 'Americanness' through her discussion of architecture in the novel. She was not the first to use architecture in this way; it was a frequent device in both fiction and criticism of the time. In 1911, for example, George

[136] Heywood Broun, 'It Seems to Me,' *New York World*, 7 March 1924, Box 4 Folder 8, Edna Ferber Papers, Wisconsin Historical Society Archives / Wisconsin Center for Film and Research, Madison, Wisconsin.
[137] Edna Ferber, 'No Apologies Needed for American Art,' *The Bookman*, 52.3 (1920), 219-220 (p. 220).
[138] Russell Doubleday, Letter to Edna Ferber, 15 August 1924, Box 1 Folder 1, Edna Ferber Papers, Wisconsin Historical Society Archives / Wisconsin Center for Film and Research, Madison, Wisconsin.

Santayana turned to architecture to explain the 'divide' he saw in American culture between 'the genteel tradition' (gendered female) and 'aggressive enterprise' (gendered male); the former was encapsulated in 'a neat reproduction of the colonial mansion,' the latter in 'the sky-scraper.'[139] In Meredith Nicholson's *The House of a Thousand Candles* (1905), the fundamental difference between the main character and his grandfather is represented through his decision to go into engineering instead of architecture, which had been his grandfather's passion, a divide between progress and preservation that also figured in many early twentieth-century Indiana novels such as Nicholson's.[140] As a new bride, Selina subscribes to *House and Garden,* and cannot decide whether she prefers 'an English cottage with timbered porch, bay window, stone flagging,' or 'an Italian villa with a broad terrace.'[141] Later in the novel, however, her tastes seem to have evolved from these 'genteel' styles, as she comes to believe that architecture should more closely reflect the native Midwestern environment. When Dirk tells his mother than one of his friends wants her family to move out of their current home, which is one of those 'hideous south-side and north-side Chicago houses with their stoops, and their bay windows, and their terrible turrets,' and into an Italian villa or French chateau built to the north of the city, Selina defends the old-style homes. 'I suppose I'm wrong, but to me they seem sort of natural and solid and unpretentious,' she tells her son, using language that suggests the homes that best suit the city have sprung directly from the land.[142] 'Those houses look dignified to me, and fitting. […] They're Chicago.

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[139] George Santayana, 'The Genteel Tradition in American Philosophy,' in *The Genteel Tradition: Nine Essays,* ed. by Douglas L. Wilson (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1967), pp. 37-64 (p. 40).
[140] Meredith Nicholson, *The House of a Thousand Candles* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1905), pp. 130-131.
[141] Ferber, *So Big,* p. 117.
[142] Ferber would return to architecture in *American Beauty* (1931) a novel that Elyse Vigiletti describes as being fixated on 'one particular patch of land,' and 'the house that gets built on it.' The house at the center of the novel is described as taking 'some account of American climate,

Those French and Italian gimmicky things—they're incongruous.'[143] When Dirk protests that there isn't any native architecture, Selina argues that she supposes 'a native architecture is evolved from building for the local climate and the needs of the community, keeping beauty in mind as you go,' and that in her view, this would mean that Chicago should be populated with houses built compactly against the winter cold with large porches—'a grand American institution'—to catch the breeze in the summer.[144]

Like many writers and artists of the period, Ferber was adamant that 'No Apologies [were] Needed for American Art': 'Why do we imitate when we can create?' she asked, 'Why use a substitute when the original is at hand?'[145] Booth Tarkington, in *The Magnificent Ambersons,* had also used architecture to track the changes taking place in the small Indiana city where it is set. There, the dissolution of the European-inspired Amberson Addition (the family home) signifies the emergence of a new 'American' culture. Amberson Addition is characterized by large replicas of classical statues with titles such as Minerva, Hercules and Gladiator. At the

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American soil, American needs' as Selina advocates for in *So Big*. Elyse Vigiletti, 'Edna Ferber and the Problems of the Middlebrow,' *Studies in the Novel*, 48.1 (2016), 65-85 (p. 76); Edna Ferber, *American Beauty* (Thorndike, ME: G.K. Hall & Co., 1997), p. 49.

[143] Ferber, *So Big*, p. 223.

[144] Ibid., 223, 224. Selina's views align her with the early twentieth century Prairie School of architecture associated with Frank Lloyd Wright, which is often credited for developing the first distinctly American style of architecture. For Wright, buildings should emerge organically from the prairie so that they could not be 'intelligently studied apart from their environment.' Robert C. Twombly, *Frank Lloyd Wright: His Life and Architecture* (New York: John Wiley, 1991), p. 136.

[145] Edna Ferber, 'No Apologies Needed for American Art,' p. 220. Although these anxieties about American imitativeness were particularly prevalent during the early twentieth century, Americans had felt them for decades: Ralph Waldo Emerson, for example, had cautioned against 'over-influence' from 'another mind' in 1837, adding that Americans had 'listened too long to the courtly muses of Europe.' Casanova notes that this 'condemnation' of imitation is found among 'many literary founders.' Ralph Waldo Emerson, 'The American Scholar,' in *Selections from Ralph Waldo Emerson,* ed. by Stephen E. Whicher (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1960), pp. 63-80 (pp. 68, 79); Casanova, *The World Republic of Letters,* p. 221.

time of the Addition's construction, in the late 1800s, these classical touches charm and impress the town's residents: they 'had not seen Versailles, but, standing before the Fountain of Neptune in Amberson Addition' they 'declared Versailles outdone.'[146]

George Amberson Minafer sees this fountain, the most prominent of the classical statues adorning the Addition, as a way of protecting the old social order, even as its descent into disrepair signals the Ambersons' waning influence. The roads in Amberson Addition were built around the fountain, which 'was no great inconvenience for horse-drawn vehicles, but a nuisance to speeding automobiles,' and a car, 'coming too fast, saved itself only by a dangerous skid as it rounded the fountain' as George watches halfway through the novel. 'This skid was to George's liking, […] for he was wishing grief and destruction, just then, upon all the automobiles in the world.'[147] In a city that is becoming increasingly mechanized and where the pace of life is picking up, the fountain and the danger it poses to speeding automobile drivers stands, in George's mind, as a bulwark against the encroachment of this new way of life. By the end of the novel, however, the fountain is gone, as is the Amberson Addition, torn down 'to make room for the great tenement already shaped in unending lines of foundation,' and by this point even George is glad to be rid of this physical manifestation of the Ambersons' decline and the changing social order.[148]

If, as Marilyn R. Chandler argues, 'the parallel histories' of literature and architecture 'can be roughly characterized as having moved from emulation of European models to the development of indigenous forms,' Ferber is still aware that the journey towards the 'color, and

[146] Booth Tarkington, *The Magnificent Ambersons* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, Page & Company, 1919), p. 17.
[147] Ibid., pp. 311-312.
[148] Ibid., p. 471.

romance, and glow, and vivacity, and depth' native to the United States is not guaranteed.[149] As the debate between Dirk and Selina indicates, a regression to European models always threatened. In making this distinction between native art and foreign imitations, Ferber challenges the accepted view of what success means in the United States. 'You would have thought she should have been satisfied when, in later years, he was the Dirk DeJong whose name you saw (engraved) at the top of heavy cream linen paper, […]; whose clothes were made by Peter Peele, the English tailor; whose roadster ran on a French chassis; whose cabinet held mellow Italian vermouth and Spanish sherry; […] whose life, in short, was that of a successful citizen of the Republic,' the narrator notes. It is interesting to compare Dirk to Jay Gatsby in Fitzgerald's 1925 novel: Gatsby's 'colossal' house is an 'imitation of some Hôtel de Ville in Normandy' and is filled with English-made shirts.[150] It is clear, however, that Selina (and Ferber) do not believe such things—identified by their European origins—constitute authentically American success.

So Big itself became caught up in the debate about how value is determined and assigned when the Novel Prize jury began discussing which novel would win that year's Pulitzer. *So Big* had significant momentum going into 1925, having been serialized in newspapers across the country in the early months of the year. The introduction to this serialized version had even used

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[149] Marilyn R. Chandler, *Dwelling in the Text: Houses in American Fiction* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991), p. 6; Ferber, 'No Apologies Needed for American Art,' p. 220. Ferber criticizes this adherence to European forms linguistically as well. When Dirk meets the Emerys—a couple who were 'preferred England' and 'rode to hounds in pink coats along Chicago's prim and startled suburban prairies'—Mrs. Emry expresses her opinion on the standard of pronunciation she has noticed in the city. '"It's terrible," she said. "I think there ought to be a Movement for the proper pronunciation. The people ought to be taught […]. They call Goethe Street 'Gerty'; and pronounce all the s's in Des Plaines. Even Illinois they call Illi*noise*."' Ferber immediately mocks this complain by noting that Mrs. Emry 'was very much in earnest.' Ferber, *So Big*, p. 248.

[150] Ferber, *So Big*, pp. 3-4; Fitzgerald, *The Great Gatsby*, p. 6.

that elusive word, 'wholesome,' to describe the novel, writing that all of Ferber's stories and novels 'are worth while [sic], clever in plot, well-written, clean, wholesome, glimpses of real life,' a description that seemed to be pitching directly at the Prize committee.[151] Readers writing to Ferber seemed to agree with this characterization. Many made a distinction between *So Big* and other critically acclaimed novels of the time. As one reader put it, Ferber's book was 'real realism in distinction from the bogus, so called, realism which sets forth merely the seamy side of life'; another fan commented that 'In these days of slush and slime and muck, it is particularly gratifying to find a story so full of fine ideals and so beautifully told.'[152] 'It is such a relief to read a Book like that, after so much of the truck that is published now,' Hannah Sinton wrote Ferber in 1925 as the Prize was being debated. 'Why, when there is so much beauty in the world, people will write the things they do, I cannot understand,' she concluded.[153]

But despite its reputation as offering 'clean' and 'wholesome' Midwestern values, *So Big* was far from a unanimous choice for the Prize. The 1925 Novel jury was comprised of Jury Chairman Jefferson B. Fletcher and Oscar W. Firkins, both professors of comparative literature, and William Allen White, a native Kansan and an outspoken supporter of the Midwest and of small-town America.[154] It was White, a close personal friend of Ferber's for over a decade, who

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[151] 'So Big' excerpted in *The Midland Journal,* 6 February 1925, p. 3.

[152] Lyman Beecher Stowe, Letter to Edna Ferber, 10 March 1924, Box 1 Folder 1, Edna Ferber Papers, Wisconsin Historical Society Archives / Wisconsin Center for Film and Research, Madison, Wisconsin; L. Patterson, Letter to Edna Ferber, 13 August 1925, Box 4 Folder 7, Edna Ferber Papers, Wisconsin Historical Society Archives / Wisconsin Center for Film and Research, Madison, Wisconsin.

[153] Hannah Sinton, Letter to Enda Ferber, 6 April 1925, Box 4 Folder 7, Edna Ferber Papers, Wisconsin Historical Society Archives / Wisconsin Center for Film and Research, Madison, Wisconsin.

[154] White's importance as an advocate for the Midwest was well-understood by 1925. White sent Lewis a letter praising *Main Street,* but he seems to have missed Lewis's satirical intention when he assured Lewis that he didn't 'know in where in literature you will find a better American, or more typical,' than Will Kennicott. Nevertheless, Lewis suggested to his publisher that the letter

propelled *So Big* to the nation's highest literary award.[155] When White noticed that the novel was not on the list of nominees, he wrote Ferber's publisher and Fackenthal to urge its entry into the competition and then advocated powerfully on its behalf. Firkins, however, wanted the Prize to go to Joseph Hergesheimer for *Balisand*, a historical novel of Virginia in Jeffersonian times; Fletcher, caught in the middle, was undecided, although he leaned towards Firkins.[156] With White and Firkins both refusing to yield any ground, the jury could not come to a unanimous conclusion. Reporting to the Advisory Board, Fletcher presented the case for both books. White, as he reported, believed 'that Miss Ferber presented a needed lesson and that moreover the book sustains powerfully to the end its human interest' and that, while *Balisand* demonstrated Hergesheimer's artistic skill, the novel's motive was 'trivial.' Firkins stressed 'very highly indeed the distinguished style and the thoughtfulness' of *Balisand* and only commented upon *So*

be sent to the Pulitzer Prize committee, since 'the comment was especially useful for its publicity value because of White's position as an acknowledged spokesperson for the Midwest.' Weber, *The Midwestern Ascendency in American Writing*, p. 159.

[155] Ferber and White had met in 1912 and had remained close in the years since, with Ferber even dedicating her second novel, *Fanny Herself* (1917), to White. Ferber regularly visited White and his wife at their house in Emporia, Kansas, a town which she believed contained 'a cross section of America.' For more on their initial meeting, see Ferber, *A Peculiar Treasure*, pp. 193-202, 228.

[156] By this time, Hergesheimer was even more well-regarded among the American literary community than he had been at the time *Java Head* had been passed over for the 1920 Pulitzer Prize. In 1921, a *Publisher's Weekly* poll of over 200 booksellers named Hergesheimer third on the list of 'Leading Names in Contemporary Literature' (first and second were Booth Tarkington and Edith Wharton). When the *Literary Digest* polled 36 magazine editors and literary advisors to publishing houses on 'America's Literary Stars' the following year, Hergesheimer came in first with 22 votes. Sherwood Anderson received 13 votes, Willa Cather 12, Sinclair Lewis 6, and John Dos Passos 3. (The judges were asked to name 'the five leading American literary stars that have risen above the horizon in the past ten years,' perhaps accounting for the absence of as the likes of Tarkington and Wharton.) Jay B. Hubbell, '1922: A Turning Point in American Literary History,' *Texas Studies in Literature and Language*, 12.3 (1970), 481-492 (p. 488).

Big to count it 'as a poor third.' Bearing all of these arguments in mind, Fletcher recommended that the Prize be divided between the two novels.[157]

White sent his own letter to the Advisory Board, with the assurance that it was 'in no sense, a protest' but he barely stopped short of asking the committee to go against the jury's recommendation. Suggesting that 'if the Pulitzer judges feel that an unanimous decision of our Committee on Award is obtained for "Balisand" somewhat by reason of my dislike for a minority report,' they should 'remember what I have said of "So Big" and if the matter is opened, will give it consideration,' White directly appealed to the conservative instincts of the Board.[158] Ferber's thesis—that 'America needs creative spirit in something beside finance; that we should express ourselves in beautiful things, beautiful architecture, beautiful lines'—was, he insisted, a lesson 'badly needed in America.'[159] He agreed with his fellow jurors that 'in the matter of style and technique "Balisand" was superior to either of the other two novels' (the third in contention was *Plumes* by Laurence Stallings, an autobiographical novel about a soldier's struggle to reassimilate after World War I).[160] But even as he apologized for his 'devilish lust for propaganda,' White's letter makes it clear that whatever the merits of the other two books, Ferber's theme was more urgent and necessary.[161] White's use of 'propaganda' in this closing

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[157] Erika J. Fischer and Heinz-D. Fischer, *Complete Historical Handbook of the Pulitzer Prize System 1917-2000,* (Berlin: De Gruyter 2003), p. 373.
[158] William Allen White, 'Letter to Mr. Fackenthal,' repr. in Heinz Deitrich Fischer and Erika J. Fischer, *Chronicle of the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction: Discussions, Decisions and Documents* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2007), pp. 73-74 (p. 74).
[159] Ibid.
[160] Both White and Firkins agreed on Lawrence Stalling's *Plumes,* an autobiographical novel about a soldier's struggle to reassimilate after his experience during World War I, as their second choice. There is no record of Fletcher's second choice, but it seems likely that it was not *Plumes,* as White wrote in a later letter to the jury that 'I believe a third member of the committee very strenuously objected to "Plumes" and it was impossible to unite on that as our committee's recommendation.' White, 'Letter to Mr. Fackenthal,' pp. 73, 74.
[161] Ibid., p. 74.

paragraph, a word tinged with a sense of disingenuousness and ulterior motives, somewhat undermines his insistence that Ferber's novel contained a much needed 'lesson' against American acquisitiveness (what, after all, was the Pulitzer but a cash prize?). But this discrepancy did not seem to bother the Advisory Board. In any case, whether or not White's letter was the final tipping point, the Board was persuaded of *So Big*'s merits. Disregarding Fletcher's suggestion that the Prize be split between Hergesheimer and Ferber, it decided to award the Prize solely to *So Big,* once again overturning the majority opinion of the jury and giving the award to the novel that was ranked as low as third by two of the three jury members.

Like Sherman and Lovett had been in 1921, Firkins was furious when he found out what had happened, but Ferber's loyal fans were delighted.[162] Accounts of that year's Prize results had generally positive things to say about Ferber's win. 'Probably no one novel could fill all the specifications laid down by the great American publisher, but "So Big" fills very many of them,' the article announcing the 1925 Prizes stated, concluding, 'The award is meritorious.'[163] 'Small Town Talk' writer Bess M. Wilson announced the news somewhat more jocularly in *The Redwood Gazette,* a Minnesota paper, commenting, 'Edna Ferber's novel "So Big" won the Pulitzer prize—showing once again that it takes a woman to do things properly.'[164] Laurence Stallings, whose novel lost out in the process, nevertheless praised *So Big,* linking Ferber to a female authorial tradition including Cather and Gale and declaring that 'Our women are better novelists and better poets than our men.' He credited Ferber with an 'observing wit and a gusto

[162] Firkins wrote a letter of 'emphatic protest' to the president of the Advisory Board in which he stated that he would 'not soil my fingers with pay for any share that I may have had even in the innocent preliminaries that have issued in this iniquitous decision' and returned the $100 check he had already been given. Oscar W. Firkins, 'Letter to the President of the Advisory Board,' repr. in Fischer, *Chronicle of the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction,* p. 76.
[163] 'Best 1924 Novel,' *The Bismarck Tribune,* 29 April 1925, p. 4.
[164] Bess M. Wilson, 'Small Town Talk,' *The Redwood Gazette,* 6 May 1925, p. 2.

for the American scene that is the best characteristic of the mid-Western writer,' drawing particular attention to her Midwesternness as well as her gender.[165]

Yet this was not the end of the debate about Ferber's Prize-worthiness. Five years later, in 1930, White published 'A Friend's Story of Edna Ferber,' which warmly praised Ferber's critical insight into the American character and her knack of portraying a multitude of characters sympathetically, echoing his earlier praise for *So Big* as a novel that could appeal to the readers' feelings while still conveying an important 'lesson' about American culture. In this overview of Ferber's career, however, White is most concerned to emphasize that she is one of the 'authentic reporters of American life' whose work displays 'a deep understanding of the significance of the American scene.' He concludes: 'Her contribution to the literature of the country and her time will be this: she has set down the picture of her environment, the America of the first third of the new century, in meticulous detail, with more than photographic accuracy, with an artist's convinced belief in the beauty and the worth of the things she sees.'[166]

White's article was published in *The English Journal* in February 1930; five months later, in June, another article relating to Ferber appeared in its pages as a response to White, entitled 'A

[165] Stallings adds that Ferber was writing 'the best of American language' and describes her language as having the 'driving and graphic power of native speech.' Laurence Stallings, 'The First Reader,' unmarked press clipping, 22 February 1924, Box 4 Folder 7, Edna Ferber Papers, Wisconsin Historical Society Archives / Wisconsin Center for Film and Research, Madison, Wisconsin. Edward Wagenknecht would also comment on Ferber's gender in his *Cavalcade of the American Novel* (1952), but his commentary took on a negative tone. Describing Ferber as exemplifying 'the popular novelists of twentieth-century America whose books are usually best-sellers,' he summarizes this group dismissively by saying, 'All of these women have aimed at mass circulation and have consequently concerned themselves with themes which interest the average reader and handled them in a manner which the average reader can comprehend.' Edward Wagenknecht, *Cavalcade of the American Novel from the Birth of the Nation to the Middle of the Twentieth Century* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1952), p. 425.

[166] William Allen White, 'A Friend's Story of Edna Ferber,' *The English Journal,* 19.2 (1930), 101-106 (p. 101).

Stranger's Story of Edna Ferber.' Its author, William R. Parker, agrees with much of White's assessment and draws particular attention to her 'sense of proportion,' a term which White also uses and which echoes William Dean Howells's earlier directive to writers to portray American life 'in the most exact terms possible with an absolute and clear sense of proportion,' with neither excessive melodrama or pessimism.[167] In the end, however, he dismisses Ferber as herself an imitative writer: 'With some exceptions, her stories are only stories that one might find in any good magazine. They are capably made—too capably made, like the imitation antiques that come from Grand Rapids. One feels that she might multiply them indefinitely without producing either a mediocre story or a work of genius.'[168] Ferber's prize-winning Midwestern 'readability' is, for Parker, her most significant weakness.

Ultimately, however, Parker is less interested in Ferber's writing itself than in the fact that it is being assessed by her 'friend.' This was of no benefit to anyone, he argues: 'I would almost say that our Edna Ferbers will not become George Eliots chiefly because too much of our modern "criticism" consists of "friends' stories"—usually, let me hasten to add, without that honest title.'[169] This is just another example of the tension that was building in the mid-1920s around the qualifications of America's literary gatekeepers. Change was inevitable, and in 1926 the Pulitzer Novel jury decided to award the Prize to *Arrowsmith*, written by Sinclair Lewis, the man who had challenged many of their decisions over the years. A different kind of novelist from either Ferber or Wilson, Lewis did, however, share one important thing with them both: he was a Midwesterner.

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[167] Stephen Crane, 'Howells Fears the Realists Must Wait,' in *Stephen Crane: Prose and Poetry* (New York: Viking Press, 1984), pp. 615-618 (p. 616).
[168] William R. Parker, 'A Stranger's Story of Edna Ferber,' *The English Journal,* 19.6 (1930), 447-449 (p. 448).
[169] Ibid., p. 447.

SINCLAIR LEWIS'S *ARROWSMITH* AND THE END OF THE MIDWESTERN ERA

Arrowsmith opens with a scene of a wagon 'swaying through forest and swamp of the Ohio wilderness' driven by a fourteen-year-old girl.[170] Illness has already brought tragedy for the family during their journey, foreshadowing the novel's preoccupation with disease and healing. After burying her mother, and with her father sick in the back of the wagon, the driver, Emmy, is left alone to choose her family's path, but instead of making the more conservative decision to go to Cincinnati to stay with her relatives, she insists on following their journey to completion. '"We're going on jus' as long as we can,"' Emmy proclaims. '"Going West! They's a whole lot of new things I aim to be seeing."'[171] It soon emerges that Emmy is the great-grandmother of the novel's modern-day protagonist Martin Arrowsmith, and she plays a key role in establishing his pioneer heritage. In this short passage, Lewis plants the seeds for many of the qualities—individualism, single-mindedness, and idealism—that Martin will display over the course of the novel, and primes readers to consider Martin's journey—which will take him across the United States—as its own kind of pioneer story.

Emmy is a character drawn precisely along the lines of Isobel McLaughlin in Wilson's 1924 Pulitzer Prize novel and Selina Peake in Ferber's *So Big.* And in *Arrowsmith*'s later pages, she is reincarnated not in Martin, her descendant, but in Leora, Martin's first wife. From Wheatsylvania, a town that she proudly calls 'the most enterprising town—three hundred and sixty-two inhabitants—in the entire state of North Dakota,' Leora is a steady presence in her husband's life for most of his early career. It is her dream to go to France, but she is content to live meagerly to support his aspirations, adapting to each new place he takes her while retaining

[170] Sinclair Lewis, *Arrowsmith* (New York: The Modern Library, 1925), p. 3.
[171] Ibid.

her Western attitude.[172] But after Leora dies of the plague while accompanying her husband to the Caribbean on a scientific trip, Martin loses her centering Wheatsylvanian influence. Soon he finds himself drawn into the fashionable set of New York, compromising his research in order to keep his wealthy second wife Joyce happy.

Arrowsmith is not a rural story, but the jury's decision to award it the Pulitzer follows the trend of rewarding Midwestern novels. The 1926 Prize *should* have been the most competitive of the period. While the previous two years had not produced many novels with longevity, 1925 had seen the publication of several novels which have come to be recognized as the major works of the period, including F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby,* John Dos Passos's *Manhattan Transfer,* and Theodore Dreiser's *An American Tragedy.* Yet none of these novels appeared on the jury's shortlist for that year's Prize. Instead, Lewis's *Arrowsmith,* his seventh novel, beat *The Smiths* by Janet Fairbanks and *Porgy* by DuBose Heyward to win the Prize.[173] *Arrowsmith* had sold well upon its publication in March 1925, and it was seventh overall on that year's bestsellers list, reaching number one for a short time immediately after its publication.[174] This was Lewis's first novel after his two runaway successes *Main Street* and *Babbitt,* and although it did not make quite their impact, it received positive reviews. Importantly, perhaps, reviewers generally seemed to be relieved that, compared to its predecessors, *Arrowsmith* was less openly satirical about Midwestern values—perhaps because it was partially inspired by Lewis's father, who was a doctor in Sauk Centre, Minnesota. But unlike Lewis's own father, who had interests beyond

[172] Samuel Harkness, recounting a visit Lewis made to Kansas, emphasized Lewis's own persistent Midwesternness: 'There is something Lincolnesque about Lewis […]. Yale and Europe cannot erase Sauk Centre.' Samuel Harkness, 'Sinclair Lewis Conducts Unusual Sunday School Class,' *The Sauk Centre Herald,* 5 August 1926, p. 6.
[173] Fischer, *Chronicle of the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction*, p. 6.
[174] Lingeman, *Sinclair Lewis,* p. 255.

medicine, and Will Kennicott, the small-town doctor who brings Carol to Gopher Prairie in *Main Street* and who, though dedicated to his patients, is content with his conventional role as local doctor, Martin is single-mindedly devoted to his medical career. Moving beyond Midwestern considerations, Lewis uses Martin's idealism to expose the widespread fraud of the American medical establishment.[175] But his aim is not purely muckraking or satire. In 1921, when he was finishing the manuscript of *Babbitt* and already thinking about his next novel, Lewis had written to his publisher, Alfred Harcourt, that perhaps he needed a change of direction. The new book would be 'rebellious as ever, […] but the central character *heroic*.'[176] That heroic Midwesternness clearly appealed to the Prize jury.

Although the novel takes Martin from the fictional Midwestern state of Winnemac to North Dakota, Iowa, Chicago, New York, the Caribbean, and finally to Vermont, it is still, fundamentally, a Midwestern novel. 'The places that give background to the action, save for one tropical out-faring in "Arrowsmith," are all of Midwest substance and color,' wrote a reviewer in Washington, D.C.'s *Evening Star*; 'The people are Main streeters, every one.'[177] In fact, much of the novel takes place in the Midwest—Martin's earliest jobs as a medical professional are in Wheatsylvania, North Dakota, Iowa, and Chicago—but, more than this, his pioneer background, and the spirit and idealism of both Martin and Leora, seem linked to the Midwest in a way that transcends mere setting. Kazin identifies a pioneer influence in Lewis's language, pointing out

[175] Robert Morss Lovett of *The Dial*, one of the two Pulitzer Prize judges who had recommended *Main Street* for the 1921 Novel Prize, wrote that Lewis had sacrificed 'the reality of fiction […] in the interest of the reality of a public cause.' This was a decision that Lovett ultimately decides is justified given that the cause 'gives largeness of view and significance.' Lingeman, *Sinclair Lewis,* p. 256.
[176] Sinclair Lewis, Letter to Alfred Harcourt, 13 December 1921, in *From Main Street to Stockholm: Letters of Sinclair Lewis, 1919-1930,* ed. by Harrison Smith (New York: Harcourt, Brace, and Co., 1952), p. 90.
[177] I. G. M., 'New Books at Random,' *Evening Star*, 17 March 1925, p. 6.

that it 'was significant that in his sharp attention to American speech—did anyone before him ever catch the American "uh"?—he brought back the comic and affectionate mimicry of the old frontier humor,' adding that 'There had been nothing of that humor in Dreiser, Crane, and Norris.'[178] Walter D. Hickman's extremely positive review of the novel in *The Indianapolis Times* draws frequent connections between the Main Street of Lewis's first major novel and the medical themes of his current one, beginning, 'When science hits Main Street, something is bound to happen,' noting that 'inhabitants of the Broadway of inland cities generally become so interested' in science and medicine 'that they decide to have everything from "Better Baby Week" to "Sanitary Garbage Week,"' a reference to the mania for self-improvement 'Weeks' and organized 'wholesomeness' that strikes the citizens of Nautilus, Iowa during Martin's time working in the public health department there. Martin's journey from West to East is presented as a kind of reverse pioneer journey, as he searches for the place where he can do his research to the best of his ability. 'He was essentially an adventurer in the laboratory,' says Hickman.[179]

Martin's 'heroism' places him in opposition to many of the 'types' who populated *Main Street* and *Babbitt,* characters who had forgotten their pioneer heritage in their quest for middle class commercial and consumerist values.[180] 'Knowledge is the greatest thing in the medical world but it's no good whatever unless you can sell it,' one of Martin's professors tells his students. This insistence on salesmanship and profit is in stark contrast to Martin's hero, Max

[178] Kazin, *On Native Grounds,* p. 165.
[179] Walter D. Hickman, 'Old Main [?] Takes to Science Like a Duck to Water,' *The Indianapolis Times,* 5 August 1925, p. 8.
[180] 'Zenith's pioneer past is all the more conspicuous because of its absence in the present,' James Lea writes of *Babbitt,* set in a city that had 'exorcised' its past in order to make way for a 'booming' commercial present. James Lea, 'Sinclair Lewis and the Implied America,' in *American Fiction Between the Wars,* ed. by Harold Bloom (Philadelphia: Chelsea House Publishers, 2005), pp. 77-89 (p. 82).

Gottlieb, who finds himself penniless after being driven out of the University of Winnemac for refusing to patent the medical technique he discovers before he can complete proper testing.[181] Martin's friend Clif, who is kicked out of medical school and takes a lucrative job as a car salesman, serves as an early counterpoint to Martin's own professional idealism. A brief cameo by George Babbitt, over ten years younger than he was in Lewis's 1922 novel, also appears to emphasize the gap between Martin and his friend.[182] Telling Martin and Clif that the real pleasure in life is in 'Ideas and Service and a Public Career,' Babbitt lets the two younger men in on the fact that he is planning to get into politics and hopes to be governor of Winnemac on his way to representing the state in Washington, D. C. 'in ten or twelve years, say in 1918 or 1920.'[183] The fact that Babbitt has accomplished none of this by the time his own novel begins years later reminds Lewis's loyal readers of the stagnation that Babbitt's type of middle class complacency brings, and reaffirms the value of Martin's own more idealistic path.

As the novel that Lewis would use as his platform for rejecting the Pulitzer and criticizing the corrupting influence of American prize-giving bodies, *Arrowsmith* could not have been more thematically appropriate. The main conflict in the novel is between Martin's professional idealism and the temptations that threaten to lead him away from what he sees as honest science. Joyce (his non-Midwestern second wife) does not understand Martin's research, but she is eager for him to gain the accolades that come along with scientific success. After seeing how 'Nobel-prize winners received her husband' on their European honeymoon trip, she

[181] Lewis, *Arrowsmith,* p. 87.
[182] Also making an appearance: Chum Frink, the writer who lives next door to Babbitt. Almus Pickerbaugh, Martin's boss in Nautilus, brags to Martin that Chum wrote a poem about him, saying that Chum 'ranks with Eddie Guest and Walt Mason as the greatest, as they certainly are the most popular, of all our poets, showing that you can bank every time on the literary taste of the American Public.' Ibid., p. 205.
[183] Ibid., p. 97.

immediately thinks what 'a pity he could not have a knighthood, like one or two of the British scientists they met,' and then, 'even in America there were honorary degrees…'[184] Even the other scientists Martin works with seem to value prizes and monetary success over the science itself, much to Martin's constant frustration—and occasional temptation. 'If this work really pans out, there's no limit to the honors that'll come to you […]. Acclaim by scientific societies, any professorship you might happen to want, prizes, the biggest men begging to consult you, a ripping place in society,' an enthusiastic fellow scientist, Holabird, tells Martin when it appears as if one of his discoveries was going to be groundbreaking. Martin is alarmed by 'the shrieking bawdy thing called Success' that Holabird's prophecies expose to him, but when he finds out that another scientist has beat him to publication, he is nevertheless slightly disappointed by the loss of the money and recognition that would have come his way.[185] After Martin returns from his mission to test his plague vaccine in the Caribbean, 'the papers were able to announce that America, which was always rescuing the world from something or other, had gone and done it again'—regardless of the fact Martin had not been able to prove the usefulness of his vaccine at all.[186] There is a satisfying irony in the fact that Lewis's attack on the corrupting influence of prizes itself earned it a prize from a jury that was widely thought to be corrupt. Lewis's rejection of the Pulitzer, and the money that went along with it, was a reflection of the themes he had written into and celebrated within the novel itself.[187]

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[184] Lewis, *Arrowsmith,* pp. 427-428.
[185] Ibid., pp. 333, 334.
[186] Ibid., p. 416.
[187] Harcourt recognized a reflection of Lewis himself in the novel as well. 'I think you said once that your distinguishing personal characteristic is a hatred of bunk,' he wrote to Lewis in 1923. 'The hero of this new book is perhaps the only hero you picked so far that feels as you do, and that ought to warm up the book a good deal.' Alfred Harcourt, Letter to Sinclair Lewis, 1 February 1923, in *From Main Street to Stockholm,* p. 124.

But whether the Pulitzer was seen as 'a sanctified tradition' or a prize that 'regularly stopped at the wrong station,' one thing is certain: in its first dozen years, the Prize demonstrated its adherence to a particular version of American values through its dependence on 'wholesome' Midwestern novels about rural life and pioneer folk.[188]

[188] Lewis, 'Letter Refusing the Pulitzer Prize for *Arrowsmith,*' p. 233; Gass, 'Prizes, Surprises, and Consolation Prizes,' p. 7.

Conclusion

In 1915, Theodore Dreiser returned to his native Indiana after an absence of over twenty years. Although train journeys were a dominant trope of Midwestern fiction of this period, Dreiser undertook his own return trip to the region by car, making his 1916 travelogue *A Hoosier Holiday* an early example of the American road trip story. This would become a major genre in American fiction a few decades later, but in the 1910s, road travel was still relatively new in the United States, which was just beginning to establish a national road system.[1] The slogan encouraging Americans to travel domestically along the newly-created Lincoln Highway—'See America First'—framed domestic road travel as a patriotic duty, exhorting travelers to explore their own country rather than Europe.[2] In 1920, Dreiser would argue that a 'curiosity of American character' was 'its adoration of all things foreign,' which made 'everything abroad […] excellent, priceless, beyond all praise or blame' and 'anything native […] more or less

[1] In 1919, Sinclair Lewis published *Free Air,* another early road trip story, about an upper-class New Yorker's romance with a Midwestern mechanic she meets while on a cross-country road trip with her father.

[2] The idea for the Lincoln Highway—the first cross-continental highway in the United States—was conceived by Indianan Carl Fisher. Dreiser's chauffeur on the trip, Speed, is proud of having been a driver in the cross-country pathfinding trip undertaken by Fisher and the Indianapolis Auto Club in 1913 (although the final route for the highway ended up following the path of a different trip undertaken by Henry Joy, the president of the Lincoln Highway Association). For more detailed connections between *A Hoosier Holiday* and American road travel, see Andrew Vogel, '"Change in fixity": Theodore Dreiser's *A Hoosier Holiday* and the commitment to American automobility,' *Studies in Travel Writing*, 17.2 (2013), 145-159.

worthless or inconsiderable.'[3] National campaigns encouraging American road trips sought to change that impression, complementing similar initiatives in literature.

Dreiser's slow, winding return along the 'Scenic Route' to the native state he had left years before provided him with 'a means of sizing up the middle west and interpreting American character.'[4] The resulting book, which Gary Totten calls 'a vision of the American scene from the road,' opens with a romantic view of both going 'on the road' and the places of Dreiser's childhood.[5] Admitting that his youthful memories of Indiana had cast a 'celestial light' over the Midwest, Dreiser acknowledges the 'illusions' that he had 'built up in connection with [his] native state' during his time away.[6] And at first, Dreiser's adult experience of the state seems to match the high expectations he has for it. As the group approaches the Indiana border, Dreiser exclaims, 'How good it all tasted after New York! And what a spell it cast. I can scarcely make you understand, I fear. Indiana is a world unto itself.'[7]

In differentiating Indiana from the many other states—New Jersey, Pennsylvania, Ohio—that he and his friend and illustrator Franklin Booth had passed through on their trip, Dreiser initially presents it as an oasis of tranquility and wholesomeness in the midst of a changing country. While other states are caught up in various types of progress—Dreiser complains, for example, that newly industrialized and urbanized Ohio 'hasn't the rural innocence and un-

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[3] Theodore Dreiser, 'Some Aspects of Our National Character,' in *Hey Rub-A-Dub-Dub: A Book of the Mystery and Wonder and Terror of Life* (New York: Boni and Liveright, 1920), pp. 24-59 (p. 49).
[4] Theodore Dreiser, Letter to H. L. Mencken, February 1916, in *Letters of Theodore Dreiser: A Selection,* Vol. I, ed. by Robert H. Elias (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1959), p. 206 (p. 206).
[5] Gary Totten, '"American Seen": The Road and the Look of American Culture in Dreiser's "A Hoosier Holiday,"' *American Literary Realism,* 39.1 (2006), 24-47 (p. 24).
[6] Theodore Dreiser, *A Hoosier Holiday,* ill. by Franklin Booth (New York: John Lane Company, 1916), p. 16.
[7] Ibid, p. 261.

sophistication which Indiana seems still to retain'—Indiana seems to have stayed relatively fixed.[8] 'The centre of Indiana is a region of calm and simplicity, untroubled to a large extent, as I have often felt, by the stormy emotions and distresses which so often affect other parts of America and the world,' he notes, presenting a view of the state as a site of rural rejuvenation in a manner common to many late nineteenth and early twentieth century local color novels.[9] 'It is a region of smooth and fertile soil, small, but comfortable homes, large grey or red barns, the American type of windmill, the American silo, the American motor car—a happy land of churches, Sunday schools, public schools and a general faith in God and humanity.'[10] In Dreiser's view of the returning native, Indiana is its own distinct place, but it is also quintessentially American, home to distinctively native windmills, silos, cars—and attitudes. In short, Indiana is presented as at once an alternative to the rest of the country and as its most representative place—two ideas that seem contradictory, but that here, as well as in much Midwestern fiction of this period, are presented in conjunction with each other.

Ultimately, however, Dreiser's experience of returning to Indiana comes to be characterized by another disparity, but this time one that he struggles to reconcile. On the one hand is his romanticized, nostalgic view of Indiana; on the other, the reality he finds there. Dreiser discovers that the towns he had once thought so vibrant and exciting—'sacred ground' in his memory—now, from the perspective of a 'middle-aged automobile tourist,' seemed 'rather dull,' using the same term of critique that Carl Van Doren would in 1921, when he described

[8] After spending more time in Indiana, however, Dreiser is struck by the industrialization taking place there as well. Describing a motorworks in Kokomo, Dreiser says, 'I never imagined there were so many processes through which all parts of a machine have to be put to perfect them, or that literally thousands of men do some one little thing to every machine.' Dreiser, *A Hoosier Holiday*, pp. 176, 353.
[9] Ibid, p. 335.
[10] Ibid.

Lewis's 'principle accusation' against villages as 'that of being dull.'[11] Although there are many moments when the idealized Indiana of his youth shines through, in the end, Dreiser concludes that 'it takes a certain slow-moving type of intellect to enjoy or endure life in a small country town.'[12] When he claims that 'ninetynine per cent.' of Indiana residents 'end in the most humdrum fashion' and that 'small jobs, smaller ideas claim the majority of them,' it is clear that he is counting himself fortunate to be among the minority to have escaped.[13] Only in the final pages does Dreiser return to the same realm of dreamy nostalgia in which he started. 'If, therefore, one country, one state, dares to dream the impossible, why cast it down before its ultimate hour? Why not dream with it?' he asks, leaving his readers with an impression of Indiana as the state that illustrates the country's best values and impulses.[14]

A similar tension between realism, for which Dreiser was known, and romanticism informs his contribution to *The Nation*'s 1922-1923 series 'These United States,' a collection of essays which was 'intended to demonstrate […] a "gratifying divergence" among the states' against the dominant trend towards 'centralization.'[15] Many of the writers discussed in this thesis contributed pieces: Sinclair Lewis wrote on Minnesota, Willa Cather on Nebraska, Zona Gale on Wisconsin, Sherwood Anderson on Ohio, and H. L. Mencken on Maryland. Dreiser's contribution was entitled 'Indiana: Her Soil and Light,' and it opens in much the same vein as *A Hoosier Holiday*. 'There is about it a charm which I shall not be able to express, I know, but

[11] Dreiser, *A Hoosier Holiday*, p. 274; Carl Van Doren, 'Contemporary American Novelists: The Revolt from the Village: 1920,' *The Nation,* 113.2936 (1921), 407-412 (p. 410).
[12] Dreiser, *A Hoosier Holiday*, p. 372.
[13] Ibid., p. 262.
[14] Ibid., p. 512.
[15] Daniel H. Borus, 'The Unexplored Twenties: "These Unites States" and the Quest for Diversity,' in *'These United States': Portraits of America From the 1920s*, ed. by Daniel H. Borus (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1992), pp. 1-25 (p. 2).

which is of the soil and sky and water—those bucolic streams and lakes which so charm those who see them,' he begins, emphasizing the 'fuzziness' that still plagues those trying to define the region as well as the state.[16] 'There is something in the very air' of Indiana towns and cities 'that is of the substance of charm,' but what that 'something' exactly is, Dreiser 'cannot say.' Instead, he suggests that readers can find an articulation of that nameless quality of Indiana air and soil 'suggested in the poems of Riley and the stories of Tarkington,' whose works, he says, have 'locally at least, and until recently' been stamped 'as the effusions of genius.'[17] He admits that 'the State may well be proud of George Ade and Booth Tarkington […] to say nothing of those distinguished elders James Whitcomb Riley and General Lew Wallace,' but, notably, in presenting this earlier generation of Indiana authors as representative of the state, Dreiser seems to write himself out of Indiana literary history.[18] Although Dreiser describes himself as a native of the state, he never includes himself among the list of writers Indiana has produced, largely, I would suggest, to disassociate himself from the romantic and sentimental vein of their work. In fact, the second half of Dreiser's essay, which recounts a conversation he had with a friend while on a trip through the state—presumably the trip he took with Franklin Booth— represents a concerted attempt to distance himself from an 'Indiana' mode of 'homey,' 'folksy' literature that pays the 'grocer's bills.'[19] And here, Dreiser's account is not tempered by the nostalgia of *A Hoosier Holiday*. Pointing out in some detail the things that 'rather irritated' him about the state—'its social devotion to dogmatic religion,' its 'pharisaical restfulness,' and 'its political somnolence'—he leaves it to his friend, a 'fellow Hoosier,' to make a case for the distinctive

[16] Theodore Dreiser, 'Indiana: Her Soil and Light,' *The Nation* (1923), repr. in *'These United States,'* ed. by Borus, pp. 120-127 (p. 120).
[17] Ibid., p. 120.
[18] Ibid., p. 122.
[19] Ibid, pp. 121, 122.

qualities of the state.[20] The Indianan, the friend insists, is 'softer, less sophisticated, more poetic and romantic' than the 'average American,' and 'not as grasping'; 'in a crude way, perhaps, he has the temperament of the artist.'[21] Dreiser does not allow himself much space to counter this, but the key question—which I explored in some detail in Chapter 1—is clearly implied: what sort of artist does Indiana produce? Two kinds, it seems: those happy to use romantic conventions to gain 'current popularity,' and those, like Dreiser, whose realism is designed to undercut those conventions and who believe they will be rewarded by 'posterity.'[22]

In the early 1920s, as I've argued throughout, debates about the nature of Midwestern writing were also considered to be debates about American writing more generally. In 1922, the year before Dreiser's *Nation* piece, *The Midland* magazine editor John T. Frederick addressed travelers to the region who might be inclined to take Dreiser's more critical view of the 'slow-moving' intellect of Midwesterners, urging them to look beyond their glimpse through the train window of 'hundreds of farms so much alike and the scores of little towns' which show 'no evidence of that vision without which people perish.'[23] This description, perhaps deliberately, echoes Tarkington's *The Gentleman from Indiana* (1899), which opened with the train-window perspective of 'the persistent tourist' looking out at local Midwestern farmers who were 'incurious, patient, and slow.'[24] As I have demonstrated, the ending of that novel took the

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[20] Dreiser, 'Indiana: Her Soil and Light,' p. 123.
[21] Ibid., p. 126.
[22] Ibid., p. 122.
[23] John T. Frederick, 'In 1922,' *The Midland,* 8.1 (1922), 40 (p. 40).
[24] Booth Tarkington, *The Gentleman from Indiana* (New York: Doubleday & McClure, 1900), p. 1. Ruth Suckow also addressed train travelers' common perception of the Midwest in notes for her unpublished essay 'Few Words About Iowa': 'Some of you Iowans—others not. Those not probably came out on train—Iowa notoriously poor state to see from train—From going there on train (and tourists always went there, East or West)—Rose familiar statement that "Iowa is all flat country." […] Have to drive thru Iowa to appreciate it – live in Iowa to like it.' Ruth

opposite view of those farmers, but twenty years after its publication, and only a year after Carl Van Doren announced 'the revolt from the village' as the only topic worthy of Midwestern literature, Frederick still believed that 'some who have lived among us have made books which deny we have souls.'[25] In this editorial and in *The Midland* more generally, Frederick seemed to be launching a counter-offensive: 'Those who love the middle west know that its people have their dreams,' he asserted. 'In the end we shall have beauty. We shall have splendor. Give us time.'[26]

By the end of the decade, Frederick's view of the Midwest's coming of age seems to have been borne out. Introducing the 1930 edition of *The Best American Short Stories,* Edward J. O'Brien noted that anyone who 'sought to discover what the significant American note of the new generation was like, would do well to turn his attention' to three Midwestern magazines: *The Midland* (of which he had long been a supporter), *The Prairie Schooner,* and *The Frontier*.[27] What was important about these magazines for O'Brien was not that they offered local color, but

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Suckow, 'Few Words About Iowa,' Ruth Suckow Papers, MsC0706, Box 28, University of Iowa Special Collections, Iowa City, Iowa.

[25] Sherwood Anderson would use the same 'dream' language in his own August 1922 contribution to *The Nation* to suggest that dreams and modern, industrialized Ohio were incompatible. Describing his youth in Ohio, he writes that for years he 'knew as much about hustling and pushing myself forward and advertising and not getting dreamy or visionary as any American there is.' He characterizes his home state as an industrialized place with no time for romantic ideas: 'A poet coming [to Cincinnati] might have gone into the neighboring hills and looked down on the site of the great city […]. And that city might, you understand, have crept off into the green hills, that the poet might have compared to the breasts of goddesses, […] But pshaw, let's cut that bunk. We Ohioans tackled the job and we put the kibosh on that poet tribe for keeps.' Sherwood Anderson, 'Ohio: I'll Say We've Done Well,' *The Nation* (1922), repr. in *'These United States,'* ed. by Borus, pp. 292-297 (pp. 295, 293).

[26] Frederick, 'In 1922,' p. 40.

[27] Edward J. O'Brien, 'Introduction,' in *The Best American Short Stories of 1930 and the Yearbook of the American Short Story*, ed. by Edward J. O' Brien (New York: Dodd, Meade and Company, 1930), pp. ix-xiii (p. x). Tom Lutz attributes much of the magazine's success to O'Brien's (and Mencken's) early advocacy. Tom Lutz, 'The Cosmopolitan Midland,' *American Periodicals,* 15.1 (2005), 74-85 (p. 76).

that they helped launch a truly national literature.[28] In describing the ten stories published by *The Midland* in its first year, for example, O'Brien claimed to have found 'the most vital interpretation in fiction of our national life that many years have been able to show.'[29] In order to further promote this source of national representation, O'Brien suggested that the three Western magazines join forces, with perhaps a few other regional periodicals, in order to establish 'a new national monthly in the Middle West.' This new magazine would, he argued, replace the existing East Coast magazines because it would be 'nearer the present centre of population' and of American literary life, which he believed 'to-day is Iowa City.'[30]

But if this suggests that the westward shift in literary power from Boston and New York that first Hamlin Garland and then John T. Frederick had advocated for had finally come to pass, the story is more complicated. For a start, shortly after O'Brien issued his plea, Frederick abandoned Iowa City, largely for financial reasons, and moved *The Midland*'s headquarters to Chicago, changing its subtitle from *A Magazine of the Middle West* to *A National Literary Magazine*.[31] By claiming that Chicago was 'the logical permanent axis for a literary and cultural development of the United States as a whole,' Frederick tried to frame his magazine's move as

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[28] See Kasia Boddy, '*Edward J. O'Brien's Prize Stories of the "National Soul,"' Critical Quarterly*, 52.2 (2010), 14–28.
[29] Edward. J. O'Brien, 'Introduction,' in *The Best American Short Stories of 1915 and the Yearbook of the American Short Story*, ed. by Edward J. O' Brien (Boston: Small, Maynard & Company, 1916), pp. 3-11 (p. 9).
[30] O'Brien, 'Introduction,' in *The Best American Short Stories of 1930,* p. xi.
[31] Jeffrey C. Swenson, 'Middling Modernism and the Midwestern Little Magazine,' in *The Oxford Critical and Cultural History of Modernist Magazines: Volume II: North America 1894-1960,* ed. by Peter Brooker and Andrew Thacker (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), pp. 558-75 (pp. 569-70). Frederick had long seen commercialism as antithetical to his magazine's mission—in the same 1922 edition, an editorial 'To the New Reader' explained that his magazine's two aims are to encourage 'sincere artistic achievement in contemporary American life' ('especially in the middle west') and to remain 'not commercial.' He pledged: 'No one will ever "make money" from The Midland.' John T. Frederick, 'To the New Reader,' *The Midland,* 8.1 (1922), 37-38 (p. 37).

the logical next step in attaining national importance for the region.[32] Yet the move was in many ways a belated one. As Ronald Weber points out, Frederick 'could not entirely avoid the irony that the *Midland* had come to Chicago long after its literary renaissance was over,' and the shift seemed to try to recapture some of the experimental energy that had pervaded the city during the 1890s.[33] Ultimately, Frederick's financial woes were not alleviated by the magazine's transplantation, and *The Midland* published its final edition after only three years in Chicago.[34]

Frederick's move to the city was part of a larger demographic shift in the Midwest, and elsewhere, at this time. During the 1920s, just as urbanization 'greatly diminished the centrality of rural life in Midwestern culture,' novels set on Midwestern farms became hugely popular, and, as I have shown, extremely successful with the jury of the Pulitzer Prize for the Novel.[35] These novels depicted the Midwest as the center of not only a rural Americanism, but of a white, Anglo-Saxon English-speaking one that gained particular traction at a time of anti-immigrant hysteria. As I argued in Chapter 2, some Midwestern authors, such as Ruth Suckow, challenged the view of 'standard' Americanness by integrating immigrants and their speech into their understanding of both the Midwest and 'American' language. But not all writers—or readers—were so open to immigrant voices. At the end of *The Magnificent Ambersons*, Tarkington describes the ways in which the 'new city' had changed geographically and demographically: 'There was a German quarter; there was a Jewish quarter; there was a negro quarter […]; there were many Irish neighborhoods.'[36] The list of new, racially delineated neighborhoods that make

[32] John T. Frederick, 'Introduction,' *The Midland,* 16 (1930), 370-71 (p. 370).
[33] Weber, *The Midwestern Ascendancy in American Writing,* p. 190.
[34] Swenson, 'Middling Modernism and the Midwestern Little Magazine,' pp. 569-70.
[35] Jon K. Lauck, *From Warm Center to Ragged Edge: The Erosion of Midwestern Literary and Historical Regionalism, 1920-1965* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2017), p. 52.
[36] Booth Tarkington, *The Magnificent Ambersons* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, Page & Company, 1919), p. 388.

up the city serves to demonstrate how much it has changed since the days of the Amberson Addition, but on the whole it was the old world of the 'old guard,' represented by the Ambersons, that Eastern publishers wanted to sell and that many American readers wanted to consume, leaving the stories of other types of Midwesterners largely untold.

For many Midwestern writers in the late 20s and 30s, more fertile literary territory lay not just in the East, as it had for Howells, Garland, Edna Ferber, and a young Zona Gale, but in Europe. The so-called 'lost generation' of American artists who left the United States for Europe in the 1920s was 'lost,' according to Malcolm Cowley, because 'it was uprooted, schooled away and almost wrenched away from its attachment to any region or tradition.'[37] But the echoes of their original regional connections continued to have an impact. While abroad 'in Paris or Pamplona,' writers such as Illinois-born Ernest Hemingway and Minnesotan F. Scott Fitzgerald, Cowley suggests, 'continued to desire a Kentucky hills cabin, a farmhouse in Iowa or Wisconsin, the Michigan woods,' but these were all places 'to which they couldn't go back.'[38] For these writers, going back to what Fitzgerald called 'Feel of the Soil' novels was retreading well-tilled ground—something he and Hemingway both believed Glenway Wescott, for example, was guilty of when he returned to Wisconsin for his 1927 Harper Prize-winning novel *The Grandmothers*.[39]

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[37] Malcolm Cowley, *Exile's Return: A Literary Odyssey of the 1920s* (New York: Viking Press, 1951), p. 9.
[38] Ibid.
[39] In a letter to Max Perkins, Fitzgerald summarizes what he sees as the 'History of the Simple Inarticulate Farmer.' He says that Hamlin Garland 'finds him in the Middle West,' Sherwood Anderson 'discovers him in Ohio,' and Willa Cather 'turns him Swede.' He places Ruth Suckow, who he says 'gets in before the door closes,' at the end of this period, before, he argues, 'the cheapskates discover him.' Amongst this latter group of writers is Edna Ferber (and her 'strong silent earthy carrot grower') and Margaret Wilson ('*The Able McLaughlins* wins $10,000 prize and is forgotten the following week'). F. Scott Fitzgerald, Letter to Max Perkins, circa 1 June

Those writers who stayed in the Midwest, meanwhile, faced pressure to repudiate their small-town roots. Ruth Suckow addresses this directly in her 1930 novel *The Kramer Girls.* Contrasting her college friend Jane's view that 'little towns were all dreadful' with her own ideas, Rose Kramer reflects on all she loves about small-town life in Valley Junction, Iowa, such as 'having everybody she met on the street speak to her.' Fearing that this might be construed as a stereotypical reaction, Rose is ashamed to admit how much she loves her home town: 'She hid away her enjoyment in that secret and silent stubbornness, because she supposed it must prove that she was very inferior—inferior because she wasn't unhappy in Valley Junction, didn't hate it, and want to get back to the city.'[40] Rose thinks there must be something wrong with her for not wanting to 'revolt from the village.'

As Chapter 3 demonstrated, for much of the 1920s, the rural Midwest was associated with what the Pulitzer Prize enshrined as 'wholesomeness.' But in 1927, perhaps in response to Sinclair Lewis's strongly-worded refusal to accept the 1926 Prize, things began to change, signaled by the Advisory Board's decision to return to the Prize's original wording and quietly replace 'wholesome' with the original 'whole.'[41] A 1931 letter from Frank Fackenthal to Nicholas Murray Butler —the only record of the change—frames the original change from 'whole' to 'wholesome' as merely a temporary 'typographical error' that had little impact on the

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1925, in *The Letters of F. Scott Fitzgerald,* ed. by Andrew Turnbull (New York: Dell Publishing Company, 1966), pp. 204-211 (pp. 208- 207).

[40] Ruth Suckow, *The Kramer Girls* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1930), pp. 124-125.

[41] Erika J. Fischer and Heinz-D. Fischer, *Complete Historical Handbook of the Pulitzer Prize System 1917-2000* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2003), p. 374. J. W. Stuckey points out the ambiguity present even in the new version of the specifications. 'What was meant by *the* American novel? And by *whole,* did the authorities mean that to qualify for a Pulitzer prize a novel had to get *all* of American life into one novel. Or did *whole* simply mean that the prize-winning novel might include the sordid as well as the wholesome aspects of American life—whatever these might be?' J. W. Stuckey, *The Pulitzer Prize Novels: A Critical Backward Look* (University of Oklahoma Press, 1981), p. 9.

Prize, but even a cursory glance at the list of winners suggests that this had not been the case. And for all that Frederick and O'Brien hoped that the state of the national literature could be judged from Iowa City, it was New York that decided which novels should be rewarded. Despite the participation of well-known Midwesterners such as William Allen White in the decision making, the Pulitzer Prize ultimately remained the gift of the kind of East Coast-based critics and editors that Garland, Frederick and many others had objected to for decades. In a 1926 review of Wilson's third novel, *The Painted Room, The New York Times* critic worried that she had been 'laid under an unhandy compulsion to gratify an external demand, that of a fiction "audience," rather than impelled from within to organic expression.' [42] It could be argued that Midwestern writers more generally were influenced by a similar 'gratifying' impulse. Caroline B. Sherman certainly thought so. In a 1931 article on the 'maturing' of 'farm life fiction,' she argued that 'an extrinsic but probably potent factor in the heightened interest in rural novels and in the increase of their number was the discovery of their prize-winning propensities': 'Small wonder that the closest well wishers of farm-life fiction […] felt gratification change to something very like apprehension as one prize after another was widely heralded for this work. A multitude of imitators and a satiated public would be a high price to pay for such glory.'[43] Weare Holbrook had made this same point even more bluntly as early as 1924: 'The chief characteristic of the mass of fiction emanating from the central States is its solid sincerity. It is honest, it is earnest—and it is rather tiresome. The reader feels impelled to cry, "How true!" and again, "How dull!"'[44] The story that emerges, then, is not so much about the power of Midwestern publishers and

[42] 'Margaret Wilson Pursues the Fortunes of the Kenworthy Family,' *The New York Times Book Review,* 29 August 1926, p. 7.
[43] Caroline B. Sherman, 'Farm Life Fiction Reaches Maturity,' *The Sewanee Review,* 39.4 (1931), 472-483.
[44] Weare Holbrook, 'The Corn Belt Renaissance,' *The Forum,* 72 (1924), 118-120 (p. 118).

writers to create a new American fiction (as O'Brien would have it) but of Eastern publishers and critics continuing to shape the form and content of Midwestern writing.

By the late 20s, those critics and publishers seem to have grown tired of 'earnest' Midwestern fiction and their tastes shifted towards the writing being produced by other regions. Gordon Hutner points out that 'nearly every Pulitzer Prize novel of the thirties was more or less a regional novel,' but the emphasis moved from the Midwest towards the South (although novels from the region never established the same stranglehold on the Prize that the Midwest did in the 1920s).[45] T. S. Stribling's 1933 win for Alabama novel *The Store,* Caroline Miller's 1934 Prize for her antebellum Georgia novel *Lamb in His Bosom,* Marjorie Rawlings's 1939 win for her Florida novel *The Yearling,* and, perhaps most importantly, Margaret Mitchell's 1937 Prize for her Southern historical epic *Gone with the Wind*—a novel which Hutner says 'so completely dominated the discussion of fiction in the second half of 1936' that few other novels were able to make any impact at all—in many ways followed the trend for bestselling, nationally-popular historical novels that had brought Midwestern novels so much prize-winning success in the 20s, but also offered something new.[46] Southern fiction appealed in the 1930s not because it was nationally representative, as was the case with the Midwest, but because it was exotic, a feeling that Suckow attributes to Marjorie in *The Odyssey of a Nice Girl.* 'Marjorie had thought that there must be some mysterious, romantic superiority in "real Southerners"—something connected with Southern speech, and the sound of banjo strains, and the smell of jasmine in the moonlight,' Suckow writes, evoking a romanticized view of Southern life vastly different from

[45] Gordon Hutner, *What America Read: Taste, Class, and the Novel 1920-1960* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2009), p. 120.
[46] Ibid., p. 173.

either Marjorie's Midwestern hometown or Boston.[47] As David Marion Holman argues, the 'South is a particular *place*; the Midwest is "the Heartland,"' and during the 1930s, the 'heartland' was losing its hold on the popular imagination.[48]

In light of this national shift in literary tastes, Midwestern writers were left wondering where to take their own writing. Iowan painter Grant Wood's 1935 essay 'Revolt Against the City' articulated a return to Midwestern conservatism of the type that produced the Indiana romancers of the early twentieth century, describing the region as the one that 'has always stood as the great conservative section of the country.'[49] Weber describes this agrarian philosophy as 'a back-to-the-land mentality of a Depression-battered and suspicious rural America,' one that resulted in a resurgence of sentimental fiction of the type produced in Indiana at the turn of the century.[50] 'A Rip Van Winkle, fallen asleep in 1925 while addressing the Rotary or the Central Labor Union, could have awakened in 1935 and gone right on with his uninterrupted address to the same people with much the same ideas,' the Lynds declared when their second study of *Middletown* was published in 1937, arguing that the many social, economic, and cultural changes that had taken place in the United States between 1925 and 1935 had barely altered the Midwestern town at the center of their study.[51] Midwestern writers participating in what Henry

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[47] Ruth Suckow, *The Odyssey of a Nice Girl* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1925), p. 191.
[48] David Marion Holman, *A Certain Slant of Light: Regionalism and the Form of Southern and Midwestern Fiction* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1995), p. 17.
[49] Grant Wood, 'Revolt Against the City,' repr. in James M. Dennis, *Grant Wood: A Study in American Art and Culture* (New York: Viking Press, 1975), pp. 229-235 (p. 232). The pamphlet was published by former co-editor of *The Midland* Frank Luther Mott, and Wanda M. Corn argues that Mott also co-wrote it in *Grant Wood: The Regionalist Vision* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1983).
[50] Weber, *The Midwestern Ascendancy in American Writing*, p. 191.
[51] Robert S. Lynd and Helen Merrell Lynd, *Middletown in Transition: A Study in Cultural Conflicts* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, and Company, 1937), p. 490. The Lynds were more openly critical of Middletown in this book, but for others, the unchangeable nature of the town was a source of comfort, with many reviewers praising 'the modal American found in the Lynds'

S. Canby in *The Saturday Review of Literature* called the 'Boom in Regionalism' questioned whether there was any alternative to nostalgia. As Michael Steiner summarized, writers in the 1930s were left wondering: 'Is western regionalism essentially a backward-looking impulse [..]? Or can a progressive, even left-leaning, regionalism thrive in the West and elsewhere'?[52]

A 'backward-looking impulse' with a racialized, anti-urban rhetoric certainly thrived during the 1930s, but at the same time the Midwest was also home to a counter push towards radical thinking and writing—what Michael Denning calls a 'proletarian regionalism'—which found voice in a new swath of progressive magazines based in the region.[53] Meridel Le Sueur, editor of one such magazine, *Midwest,* was a writer whose 'rootedness in the midwestern landscape,' Julia Mickenberg argues, was integral to her more well-known identity as a 'feminist with radical political leanings.'[54] Le Sueur directly addressed Midwestern 'rootedness' herself in her 1935 speech to the League of American Writers. 'Nothing has ever been rooted here,' she began, attributing that rootlessness to 'the greed for lumber, coal, iron, railroads, and wheat' that

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pages.' For a summary of reviews reflecting this view, see Sarah E. Igo, *The Averaged American: Surveys, Citizens, and the Making of a Mass Public* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007), pp. 90-91.

[52] Michael C. Steiner, 'Varieties of American Regionalism,' in *Regionalists on the Left: Radical Voices from the American West,* ed. by Michael C. Steiner (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 2013), pp. 1-20 (p. 1).

[53] Steiner, 'Varieties of American Regionalism,' p. 8; Michael Denning, *The Cultural Front: The Laboring of American Culture in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Verso, 1997), p. 219. For more on Missouri-based magazine *The Anvil* (1933-1935), which Michael Rozendal says 'initiated the period of the classic "proletarian magazines,"' see Michael Rozendal, 'Rebel Poets and Critics,' in *The Oxford Critical and Cultural History of Modernist Magazines: Vol II: North America 1894-1960,* ed. by Brooker and Thacker, pp. 903-922 (p. 906).

[54] Julia Mickenberg, 'Writing the Midwest: Meridel Le Sueur and the Making of a Radical Regional Tradition,' in *Breaking Boundaries: New Perspectives on Women's Regional Writing*, ed. by Sherrie A. Inness and Diana Royer (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1997), pp. 143-161 (pp. 143-144).

she sees as having stripped the Midwest.[55] But while 'rootlessness' becomes a symbol for working-class and environmental exploitation, it is also a symbol of the region's independence: 'We have never been burdened with the old tradition in literature from the old world. Every writer in the Middle West has had to work alone as far as connection with other writers is concerned, therefore he has been in closer contact with the American experience.' As I argued in relation to Mencken, Gale, and Suckow in Chapter 2, Le Sueur sees the Midwestern 'American experience' as generating a new type of national language. But her focus is quite different from theirs. 'It is from the working class that the use and function of native language is slowly being built,' she argues, going on to say that the members of the IWW she encountered in Kansas City 'spoke an American language, not an English.' For Le Sueur, in other words, the working-class roots of Midwestern speech are what makes it 'American.'[56] Drawing on much of the same rhetoric that Midwestern writers and critics had used over the previous three decades, Le Sueur reframes these old tropes to suggest they indicate not the region's unchanging nature—as Woods and the Lynds believed—but rather its potential for rebellion.[57] 'Now we know where to put down our roots, that have never been put down, that have been waiting through a bad season,' she concludes, framing this symbol of immobility as one of strength and resistance. 'Revolution can spring up from the windy prairie as naturally as the wheat.'[58]

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[55] Meridel Le Sueur, 'Proletarian Literature and the Middle West,' in *American Writers' Congress*, ed. by Henry Hart (New York: International Publishers, 1935), pp. 135-138 (p. 135).
[56] Ibid., pp. 136, 137.
[57] Le Sueur uses almost the same terms here as Sinclair Lewis had over ten years earlier in his 1923 essay on Minnesota for *The Nation*, when he characterized Midwestern authors as 'rough fellows but virtuous, ignorant of the classics and of Burgundy, yet close to the heart of humanity' before going on to list eight native Minnesotan authors, including himself and F. Scott Fitzgerald, who contradict this stereotypical view. Sinclair Lewis, 'Minnesota: The Norse State,' *The Nation* (1923), repr. in *'These United States,'* ed. by Borus, pp. 188-195 (p. 194).
[58] Le Sueur, 'Proletarian Literature and the Middle West,' p. 138.

In her use of this kind of language, we can identify a 'common aesthetic' between Le Sueur and earlier Midwestern women writers such as Mary Austin, Willa Cather, and Zona Gale, all of whom, argues Michael Denning, composed 'narratives that combine a domestic realism in their depiction of women's labor with an intense lyricism regarding the land.'[59] Back in 1935, James T. Farrell, in his own speech to the League of American Writers, similarly connected the new Midwestern radicalism to the earlier 'revolt' tradition of Dreiser, Anderson and Lardner which, he says, opened 'the flood gates' to a new kind of American writing. Midwestern writing, in other words, proved a model for how 'American writing' in general could '[upset] and [overturn] familiar patterns in American social thought and literature.'[60]

It is a mistake, however, to view Midwestern fiction wholly in terms of revolts or continuities. The story is always much more nuanced. Contrary to the idea that a 'revolt from the village' meant that Midwestern fiction peaked around 1920 and then declined, I have demonstrated how much of an impact authors from the Midwest made in the years leading up to Sinclair Lewis's 1930 Nobel Prize win. That was partly because, as Lewis declared in 1923, 'To understand America, it is merely necessary to understand Minnesota.' But the 'merely' is deliberately disingenuous for, he goes on, 'to understand Minnesota you must be an historian, an ethnologist, a poet, a cynic, and a graduate prophet all in one.'[61] There is, in other words, nothing simple about Minnesota, the Midwest, or America. By looking at a range of now largely unknown novels by popular writers of the early nineteenth century—Tarkington, Gale, Suckow, Wilson, and Ferber, as well as Lewis himself —I have made a case for the multifaceted nature of

[59] Denning, *The Cultural Front,* p. 220.
[60] James. T. Farrell, 'The Short Story,' in *American Writers' Congress,* ed. by Hart, pp. 103-114 (pp. 106-107).
[61] Lewis, 'Minnesota: The Norse State,' p. 195.

Midwestern fiction. The novels I have explored in this dissertation are unlikely to unseat the canonical novels of expatriate Midwesterners, such as Hemingway's *The Sun Also Rises*, or 'revolt' classics such as Anderson's *Winesburg, Ohio*. Nevertheless, collectively they shed new light on both the social concerns of the time and the literary culture. A full understanding of just how important these books were in the bestseller and prize lists of the 1900s, 1910s, and 1920s, and of how they were critiqued, not only by the *New York Times* but also by the reviewers of the *Omaha Sunday Bee* and *The Des Moines Register*, can only contribute to a deeper appreciation of the place of the Midwest in the national literary culture of the period.

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