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The village revolt in American literature

Gerald Kerr Wells

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THE VILLAGE REVOLT IN AMERICAN LITERATURE

BY

GERALD KERR WELLS

**A THESIS
SUBMITTED TO THE GRADUATE SCHOOL
OF THE UNIVERSITY OF RICHMOND
IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT
FOR THE DEGREE OF
MASTER OF ARTS**

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TO MY PARENTS

whose assistance and encouragement
made this year's graduate study possible

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PREFACE

American literature concerning small towns and small town people has been voluminous. These works have centered on community life in all sections of the country. The New England town is depicted in the works of Sarah Orne Jewett, Dorothy Canfield Fisher, Thornton Wilder and Mary E. Wilkins Freeman, to mention a few. The Southern town is portrayed by Ellen Glasgow, William Gilmore Simms and Hamilton Basso. The most analytical handling of the subject has been centered in the Western towns, principally by Sherwood Anderson, Sinclair Lewis, and Edgar Lee Masters.

Most of these towns have shown individual characteristics. In the society of New England there is the settled, traditional atmosphere, where family ancestry and Puritan culture are evident. The Southern town, with its inequalities among families and races, pictures a warm aristocratic manner. The most significant characteristic of the Western town is its pioneer spirit as the population struggled for existence under difficult natural conditions. Individual traits are important in these works representing each particular area.

Although each community has its individual characteristics, there are certain traits which apply to the small town regardless of its location. Sinclair Lewis states in his introduction to Main Street:

The town is, in our tale, called Gopher Prairie, Minnesota. But its Main Street is a continuation of Main Streets everywhere. The story would be

the same in Ohio or Montana, in Kansas or Kentucky or Illinois, and not very differently would it be told Up York State or in the Carolina hills.¹

Grace Metalious reiterates the similarities in small towns:

"Listen, is Peyton Place at all like the town in the book?"

"Yes. Why?"

"Oh, nothing. Except that it must be one hell of a snake pit."

"Peyton Place is no different from any other small town, Brad, and neither is the town in the book. They're all alike."²

This thesis will concern three facets of small town life: (1) The communities in their development have assumed certain general characteristics which apply to the small town regardless of its location and which are unique to a small town. (2) Within the community certain members have obtained social prominence because of their professional position. Their training in most instances was taken outside the town, and their status was assured by the needs of the community. Among these are the minister, the teacher, the doctor, the newspaper editor, and the town magnate. (3) In small-town literature certain "characters" often appear. They are not necessary to the functioning of the community, but somehow they are associated with the communal life. Among these are the drunk and the town skeptic.

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1

Sinclair Lewis, Main Street (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1920), p. 1.

2

Grace Metalious, Return to Peyton Place (New York: Dell Publishing Co., Inc.), p. 33.

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CHAPTER ONE
THE SMALL TOWN

What is a small town? The authors of small town literature give the reader little satisfaction for in few cases do they attempt to define their subject. More often they expect the reader to know this town as it appears in the story itself. Floyd Dell in his novel Moon Calf fails to let you know that you have been in a small town until you have left it, and he compares the city to Maple, the town of his childhood. Zona Gale's Friendship Village is never fully described and her only concern is with a dozen or so people who form a small-town social set. Yet despite this neglect of description there is little doubt that the communities which are the settings of these novels are small towns. The people, their interests, and their activities are clearly defined in the small-town tradition.

It is even more difficult to make a clear distinction because of the confusion of terminology. None of the authors in the study attempt to separate the words "village" and "town." In fact, in many instances the terms are used interchangeably. Sinclair Lewis in Main Street and Sherwood Anderson in Winesburg, Ohio use both terms to describe their towns. Mary E. Wilkins Freeman in her introductory sketch to Pembroke uses both terms in the same paragraph, probably trying to avoid redundancy:

Pembroke is intended to portray a typical New England village of some sixty years ago, as many of the characters flourished at that

time, but villages of a similar description have existed in New England at a much later date, and they exist today in a very considerable degree. There are at the present time many little towns in New England whose pleasant elm or maple shaded streets are scattered characters as pronounced as any in Pembroke.¹

Ima Herron in the study of the town suggests that "Village is a term which is outmoded and small town a more modern term."² Certainly this would be consistent with the above quotation, but for the purpose of exactness a more careful distinction should be made. As an arbitrary criterion we might state that the village is little more than a group of farmers engaged in farming on small holdings, and that the town exists as a definite political, religious, and social unit. Such a definition focuses our attention on a definite subject rather than just stating that "Somewhere between the country and the city lies that which partakes on a petty scale the nature of both."³

Often we do not realize the value of a possession until it has been lost. Although villages and towns are as old as civilized man, it was not until this community life began to dissolve that writers turned their attention to it. Oliver Goldsmith as he traveled through the countryside in England in the middle of the eighteenth century was deeply moved by the rapid migration of people from small villages

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¹ Mary E. Wilkins Freeman, Pembroke (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1899), p. v.

² Ima Honaker Herron, The Small Town in American Literature (Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 1939), p. 5.

³ Ibid., p. 4.

to the cities or the New World. Remembering his own experiences as a youth in his village of Lissosy, he wrote in "The Deserted Village":

Sweet Auburn! lovliest village of the plain,
 Where health and plenty cheer'd the laboring
 swain,
 Where smiling spring its earliest visit paid,
 And parting summer's lingering blooms delay'd;
 Dear lovely bowers of innocence and ease,
 Seats of my youth, when every sport could
 please,
 How often have I loiter'd o'er thy green,
 Where humble happiness endear'd each scene!
 How often have I paus'd on every charm,
 The shelter'd cot, the cultivated farm,
 The never-failing brook, the busy mill,
 The decent church that topp'd the neighboring
 hill,
 The hawthorne bush, with seats beneath the
 shade,
 For talking age and whispering lovers made!
 How oft have I blest the coming day,
 When toil remitting lent its turn to play,
 And all the village train, from labor free,
 Led up their sports beneath the spreading
 tree;⁴

The English poet George Crabbe created a more realistic picture in "The Village," pointing out the difficulties under which the farmers toiled, but Goldsmith's poem was accepted as characteristic of village life. "The Deserted Village" set a precedent in small town literature which lasted until after World War I.

The idyllic picture of the small town readily found a place in the colonial writings of America. Then writers, in imitation of the English, applied the theme to American small towns, which at the time included Boston,

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Lines 1-16.

New York, and Charleston. Philip Franeau, one of America's earliest poets, consciously copies Goldsmith in his work "The American Village":

Where yonder stream divides the fertile plain,
 Made fertile by the labours of the swain;
 And hills and woods high tow'ring o'er the
 rest,
 Behold a village with fair plenty blest:
 Each year tall harvest crown the happy field;
 Each year the meads their stores of fragrance
 yield,
 And ev'ry joy and ev'ry bliss is there,
 And healthful labour crowns the flowing year.
 Though Goldsmith weeps in melancholy strains,
 Deserted Auburn and forsaken plains,
 And mourns his village with a patriot sigh,
 And in that village sees Britannia die:
 Yet shall this land with rising pomp divine,
 In its own splendour and Britannia's shine.
 O Muse, forget to paint her ancient woes,
 Her Indian battles, or her Gaelic foes;
 Resume the pleasures of the rural scene,
 Describe the village rising in the green,
 It's harmless people, born to small command,
 Lost in the bosom of this western land.⁵

Timothy Dwight even more closely follows "The Deserted Village." Taking the example set by the English poem, he easily applies the lavish description and romantic small town picture to a Connecticut landscape in his poem "Greenfield Hill":

Fair Vernal! loveliest village of the west;
 Of every joy, and every charm possess'd;
 How pleas'd amid thy varied walks I rove,
 Sweet, cheerful walks of innocence, and love,
 And o'er thy smiling prospects cast my eyes,
 And see the seats of peace, and pleasures,
 rise,
 And hear the voice of industry resound,
 And mark the smile of competence around!
 Hail, happy village! O'er thy cheerful lawns,
 With earliest beauty, spring delighted dawns;

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The northward sun begins his vernal smile;
 The spring-bird carols o'er the cressy rill;
 The shower, that patters in the ruffled stream,
 The ploughboy's voice, that chides the linger-
 ing team,

The bee, industrious, with his busy song,
 The woodman's axe, the distant groves among,
 The wagon, rattling down the rugged steep,
 The light wind, lulling every care to sleep,
 All these, with mingled music from below,
 Deceive intruding sorrow, as I go.⁶

These early writers accepted Goldsmith's example and generally observed a "hands off" policy toward the town. Few writers glorified the small town in the manner of the poets, but most accepted their example in feeling that these towns were less sinful than other places. "The village seemed too cozy a microcosm to be disturbed. There it lay in the mind's eye, neat, compact, organized, traditional."⁷

Society in these literary towns was considered by most to be a picture of contentment. The world was changing, revolting, waging wars, but with little effect on the apathetic people of these small boroughs. Their lives passed without feeling the effects of world events, and in most cases they were not at all concerned with them. These people were so self-satisfied that they viewed others as somewhat less fortunate than themselves.

Even the commonest fishermen felt a satisfaction, and seemed to realize their privilege in being residents of Deephaven; but among the

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Lines 1-20.

7

Carl Van Doren, Contemporary American Novelists (1900-1920) (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1922), p. 147.

nobility and gentry there lingered a fierce pride in their family and town records, and a hardly concealed contempt and pity for people who were obliged to live in other parts of the world.⁸

It was this selfish pride which first caused writers to question the "godliness" of the small town.

The first harsh criticism of this attitude was "The Man that Corrupted Hadleyburg," by Mark Twain. Hadleyburg was famous for one virtue--honesty. Throughout the land the name of the town and virtue were synonymous. Honesty was instilled in the children, and they grew up with the attitude that of the world's sins, dishonesty was the greatest. So outstanding were the townspeople in daily accomplishment of their task that they developed a calculated self-righteous attitude. They were honest, but not friendly. The short story relates how one man destroyed the idol of the town and its attitudes as well. The reader is left with the opinion that the man who corrupted the town did it a great service and restored some of its lost humility.

This aloofness and pride are the same attitudes which Carol Kennicott experienced in Gopher Prairie. As she listened to her prospective husband discuss the progressiveness of the town, she visualized her life as a meaningful part of an important movement.

Of course, I may be prejudiced, but I've seen an awful lot of towns--one time I went to

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Atlantic City for the American Medical Association meeting, and I spent practically a week in New York! But I never saw a town that had such up-and-coming people as Gopher Prairie. Bresnahan--you know--the famous auto manufacturer--he came from Gopher Prairie. Born and brought up there! And its a darn pretty town. Lots of fine maples and box-elders, and there's two of the dandiest lakes you ever saw, right near town! And we've got seven miles of cement walks already, and building more every day! Course a lot of these towns still put up with plank walks, but not for us, you bet!⁹

Will Kennicott knows little of life beyond the narrow reaches of Gopher Prairie. Will, unlike George Babbitt of his later novel, is not a hypocrite. The impossible thing about him is that he actually believes it. Such an uncritical mind is characteristic of small-town people. He has been indoctrinated with small-town ideas, and is unable to see its faults. Carol, however, has been reared in the Twin Cities, and is unable to close her eyes like her husband. Although it may be acknowledged that she is over-critical, she does point out some obvious faults. One of these is the town's complacent pride or, as she terms it, "smugness."

It is an unimaginatively standardized background, a sluggishness of speech and manners, a rigid ruling of the spirit by the desire to appear respectable. It is contentment . . . the contentment of the quiet dead, who are scornful of the living for their restless walking. It is negation canonized as the one positive virtue. It is the prohibition of happiness. It is slavery self-sought and self-defended. It is dullness made God.

A savorless people gulping tasteless

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food, and sitting afterward, careless and thoughtless, in rocking chairs prickly with inane things about the excellence of Ford automobiles, and viewing themselves as the greatest race in the world.¹⁰

Human pride which had overcome Hadleyburg was not unlike that in Gopher Prairie. Both communities had become so engrossed in their own affairs that they had overlooked more important values. Lewis explains that he was not attacking the town as such, but that he expected more of its inhabitants. He wanted them to look beyond their little realm of daily existence and seek to know the world and the true meaning of their own life.

Lewis was not waging a war with the small town, nor was he outlandish in his criticism. He did not wish to see it destroyed; his main desire was that the town take the example of the book and correct itself. "What he asked of the Kennicotts, he said, was merely that 'they should know a little more history; that they should better understand the difference between Irish stew in America and fried mushrooms at Schaener's in Venice; and that they should talk of the quest of God oftener than of the quest for the best contractor.'"¹¹

Edgar Lee Masters recognized the failure of Spoon River to understand itself. Griffy the Cooper compares the townspeople to a tub, stating that those who assumed a limited viewpoint of life were only "looking around the interior of the tub."

GRIFFY THE COOPER

The cooper should know about tubs.

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10

Ibid., p. 265.

11

Lewis Gannett, "Sinclair Lewis: Main Street," The Saturday Review, August 6, 1949, p. 32.

But I learned about life as well,
 And you who loiter around these graves
 Think you know life.
 You think your eye sweeps about a wide
 horizon, perhaps,
 In truth you are only looking around the
 interior of your tub.
 You cannot life yourself to its rim
 And see the outer world of things,
 And at the same time see yourself.
 You are submerged in the tub of yourself -
 Taboos and rules and appearances,
 Are the staves of your tub.
 Break them and dispel the witchcraft
 Of thinking your tub is life!
 And that you know life!¹²

Main Street and Spoon River Anthology are masterpieces in small-town writings, and are easily separated from many later sensational works on the subject. They avoided the obscene which is so evident in novels such as Peyton Place. Norman Cousins illustrates the difference in his article, "Main Street Comes into the Home":

Mr. Lewis apparently realized that he could make an impact on his readers without demoralizing an adult with familiarity and with the obscene. Nor did he feel that he could give a reader his money's worth only by making a stage set out of the conjugal bed and by offering literary aphrodisia for encore. His purpose was not to cheapen nor brutalize life but to scrutinize it.¹³

The town had long been represented as the one place a person could feel that his life was appreciated. These people cared--your sorrow was theirs and your happiness could be shared with people who felt that another's success was important to their lives also. Carol Kennicott felt,

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12

Edgar Lee Masters, Spoon River Anthology (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1930), p. 222.

13

Norman Cousins, "Main Street Comes Into the Home," The Saturday Review, December 17, 1955, p. 22.

upon entering the society of Cophar Prairie, that she immediately became a part of the town, and made friends quickly. It was not long after that she realized such friendships were available to only a part of the people of the town. She had been accepted at face value because she was the wife of a highly respected doctor. For her friend, Miles Bjornstam, the same social status was impossible; partly because of his earlier condemnation of the town, but more particularly because of his nationality, Swedish, he was rejected by the fashionable set. Miles, before his marriage, had been a cynical man who recognized the town's faults and was outspoken about them. After marrying Carol's maid, Bea, he had made a success of his life and hoped to be included in the town's social set. The Bjornstams found that friendship with the elite was impossible. Finally as his wife and child were dying, these same people, with whom they had wanted badly to become a part, came to visit. Miles could not resist the impulse to be rude.

At ten, while Carol was preparing an ice-bag in the kitchen, Miles answered a knock. At the door she saw Vida Sherwin, Maude Dyer and Mrs. Zitteral, wife of the Baptist pastor. They were carrying grapes, and women's magazines, magazines with high-colored pictures and optimistic fiction.

"We just heard your wife was sick. We've come to see if there isn't something we can do," chirruped Vida.

Miles looked steadily at the three women. "You're too late. You can't do nothing now. Bea's always kind of hoped that you folks would come see her. She wanted to have a chance to be friends. She used to sit waiting for somebody to knock.

I've seen her sitting here, waiting. Now-- Oh, you ain't worth God-damning." He shut the door.¹⁴

The women left, feeling that they had been treated cruelly by Bjornstam and never realizing they had injured the wife of the big Swede.

Thornton Wilder, whose treatment of the town is anything but critical, pointed out that social inequality existed in Grover's Corners as well, and in a gentle way showed the town's apathetic attitude toward the situation.

Tall man. Is there no one in town aware of social injustice and industrial inequality?

Mr. Webb. Oh, yes, everybody is--somethin' terrible. Seems like they spend most of their time talking about who's rich and who's poor.

Tall man. Then why don't they do something about it?

Mr. Webb. Well, we're ready to listen to everybody's suggestion as to how you can see that the diligent and sensible'll rise to the top and the lazy and quarrelsome sink to the bottom. We'll listen to anybody. Meantime, until that's settled, we try to take care of those that can't help themselves, and those that can we leave alone.¹⁵

Mr. Webb's argument was sound. Not all groups and individuals can be wealthy and satisfied; inequalities exist at all levels of organized society. However, there was a section of the little town called "Polish Town" which was spoken of as though it was an entirely different unit. The doctor served the medical needs of these people, but no

14

Main Street, pp. 321-322.

15

Thornton Wilder, "Our Town" in Adventures in American Literature, ed. by Rowley Belle Inglis (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1952), p. 366.

mention is made of their being a part of the town society. They were probably considered much as the Swedish people of Main Street.

In Peyton Place the employment of Mr. Rossi as the school principal caused a considerable stir among the people. His Italian descent inevitably stood in the way of general acceptance of his school policies. His ideas were sound and logical, but the fact that he was a foreigner was seldom forgotten. Only by his physical manliness and his authoritative manner was he able to overcome this social drawback.

The coldness and isolation experienced by these people were not a result of acts which they had committed, but rather class distinction. Morally these people were no worse than others in society, but because of national or racial differences they were considered the lower class of the community. In the Western town there was often the problem of foreigners, but other sections had their prejudices also. The Negroes in the South and the Jews of many Northern settlements formed a second-class citizenship.

In Pompey's Head the Negroes had held practically no status, and divisions were made to separate this class of people from the whites.

Here it was again--the grimy station with its waiting room of yellow brick; the rows of wooden benches divided by the brass rail demanded by Jim Crow; the two ticket windows,

one on either side of the rail.¹⁶

This is not a characteristic of the small town since segregation of the two races is common to all parts of the South. More typical is the attitude of Pompey's Head toward the Irish descendents, or as the people referred to them--the Channel people.

The Channel was hard to explain. "What you mean," Meg said once, "is that it's the other side of the railroad tracks. What's so unusual about that? Why do you have to insist on its being something special simply because it's in Pompey's Head?" Meg, however, was wrong--the Channel was special. It was impossible to grow up in Pompey's Head without its becoming part of your consciousness, and it was difficult to believe that it would have acquired its particular meaning anywhere else. Unlike the old lower East Side in New York City during the years of the great immigrations, it was not a ghetto, nor, like the French Quarter in New Orleans or Chinatown in San Francisco, had it ever been a city within a city, separate to itself. The Channel could not be called the poor part of town, since the section south of the depot was considerably poorer (Meg's other side of the railroad tracks), and it was not even exclusively Irish--not unless the Scotch-Irish migrants who drifted down from the hill country to work in the thread factory and the four or five industries that provided employment in Pompey's Head, most of whom also lived in the Channel, were given an identification which they themselves would have denied.¹⁷

The Irish immigrants had come to Pompey's Head before the Civil War. As there was no employment in the gentle trades, they were forced to do work with their hands, which was considered beneath the white man's dignity. By accepting

16

Hamilton Basso, The View from Pompey's Head, (New York: Doubleday and Company), p. 75.

17

Ibid., p. 161.

the work, they had "earned the mark of Cain."

The town proposed to build a channel, and these people were hired to do the work. Negroes were not used as slaves cost over \$1,000. This placed the value of an Irish life beneath that of a slave. When yellow fever set in, the section in which they lived and worked was blocked off, and thus Channel was created.

Channel had burned in 1872 but the people still were branded by the reputation of their forefathers. Anson Page, the protagonist of the novel, wished to date a girl from the "other side of the tracks" and was reminded that many people still regarded the Channel people in the same manner they had before the Civil War. His father was liberal in his approach to town prejudice, but even he hesitated to allow Anson to become associated with these people.

This conversation had taken place a short time before and Anson could remember every word of it. He knew better than to imagine, however, that his father would be altogether happy if he knew about his date with Midge. The generosity of his view would have made it hard for him to disapprove (a view undoubtedly conditioned by those whips and bags of New Orleans coffee that young David Page once hawked through the streets of Pompey's Head, Anson had come to realize) and certainly he would never go so far as to forbid him to see Midge. But still, if he knew about the date, he would not be altogether happy. He would say that with a boy of eighteen there was always the danger of some entangling alliance and that it had to be recognized, for the sake of everyone concerned, that the danger was probably a

little greater if the young lady in question happened to be a Channel girl.¹⁸

In the rigid caste system of Pompey's Head, it was practically impossible to rise above the environmental standards imposed upon all members. The Irish, though neither poor nor without high human standards, were the same regardless of their location. Mico Higgins, who owned the largest mansion in town and whose money supported the town, was unable to become a member of the exclusive Light Infantry Club, because of his descent. He felt that his marriage into one of the foremost families would assure him of complete social acceptance, but even this was not enough. His Irish background still kept him out.

There was little anyone could do to belong to the most exclusive group in Pompey's Head. It just happened by inheritance, or it never happened. It was achieved only by having an ancestral relation to the members of the Revolutionary battalion from Pompey's Head which had fought under General Carvel. Anson's father called the practice of enlistment Shintoism because it was based on ancestor worship. Those who belonged felt little of its importance, but those who were excluded tried desperately to erase this prerequisite. "What it offered was a ready-made identity, something that could be slipped into as one slipped into a coat."

The Robbins family, newcomers to the town and very

social-conscious, tried in every way to overstep this boundary, - they entertained lavishly and decorated their home to make it one of the most fashionable in town. These were not enough, however, and the family suffered great unhappiness.

All because Kit didn't have ancestors. It sounded silly when said aloud, but it was nonetheless true. Kit's being the prettiest girl her age was not enough. Truly to dazzle, her radiance had to be looked down upon by portraits from the wall. Joe Ann Williams could afford to jest, that bright, cheerful, happy-go-lucky girl--it became part of her legend of laughter when she said, "We're just like the Japanese. All we do is worship our ancestors and eat rice." And it was granted to little Dinah Blackford, Wyeth's thirteen-year-old sister, also to question the incense and the altars. "What's so important about ancestors?" she demanded of a gathering of the immediate clan around the dinner table one Sunday afternoon, and then, in the midst of the astonished pause, "I think they're dull!" So Joe Ann and so Dinah. But not Kit. She had only that distant cousinship to sustain her; no matter how close she came to the inner circle, she could not step within that final, guarded ring--unless she married into it, of course.¹⁹

The code of acceptance also applied to the poor who were held in servitude because of their economic status, and to the nonconforming individuals within the community whose ideas and habits conflicted with the approved practices.

In the graveyard of Spoon River there were many socially isolated people who were unable throughout their lives to satisfy a deep need to be accepted. Mabel Osborne

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compares her life to the geranium which needed water. People would pass and notice the wilting flower, but they never observed the starved life that needed their love when it was among them. Her life was waiting to be given to the town she loved, but it was not wanted:

Your red blossoms amid green leaves
 Are drooping, beautiful geranium!
 But you do not ask for water.
 You cannot speak! You do not need to speak--
 Everyone knows that you are dying of thirst,
 Yet they do not bring water!
 They pass on saying:
 "The geranium wants water."
 And I, who had happiness to share
 And longed to share your happiness;
 I, who loved you, Spoon River,
 And craved your love,
 Withered before your eyes, Spoon River--
 Thirsting, thirsting
 Voiceless from chasteness of soul to ask for love,
 You who knew and saw me perish before you,
 Like this geranium which someone has planted
 over me,
 And left to die.²⁰

Walter Britt was never a part of the town and its people although people later remembered his importance.

Many of you pass now on Sunday afternoons
 And say: "I wish he were here."
 "I'd like to talk to him to-day."
 Yet for years I walked the streets of Spoon River,
 And found but few who had time for a word;
 Or I stayed at home, and no one called.
 And when I took to my bed at last
 You didn't come much, and there I lay
 Lonely and longing for friendly hands.
 Your time is past, fellow citizens;
 Your day of grace with me is sinned away--
 I have departed!²¹

20

Spoon River Anthology, p. 222.

21

Edgar Lee Masters, The New Spoon River, (New York: Boni and Liveright, 1924), p. 161.

Ida Frickey relates her experiences upon entering the community, "a penniless girl from Summun." She found none of the doors open to her because of her financial standing.

Nothing in life is alien to you;
I was a penniless girl from Summun
Who stepped from the morning train in
Spoon River.
All the houses stood before me with
closed doors,
And drawn shades--I was barred out;
I had no place or part in any of them.²²

The "Shack Dwellers," as the author of Seyton Place referred to the people of lower-income groups, were considered little better than common beasts of burden, capable of any moral or social corruption. The homes of these were condemned as unfit living quarters and fire hazards, but little was ever done to aid them, for there was a general attitude that the poor lived on the other side of the world, away from "Main Street" and were to be left alone--as long as they paid their bills. None of these were accepted by the social set of the town, and association with them was discouraged. Both Allison Mackinsey and Ted Carter were in frequent arguments with their parents because of their association with the beautiful but impoverished Selena Cross.

Those people whose activities did not conform to accepted practices were shown the same cold indifference as

the foreigners and the poor. The tailor, Erik Valborg, who worked for a time at the Bon Ton Shop on Main Street, was an aggressive but sensitive young man whose only shortcoming was creativeness. The men regarded him as queer because of his interest in women's fineries--an occupation reserved for women. He struggled in vain to overcome this handicap, but few could accept either his Swedish nationality or his unusual occupation. He tried in vain to find acceptance. Along with Carol Kennicott he formed a tennis tournament, but the tennis "enthusiasts" of the town played elsewhere and excluded him. As he had no other to turn to he became too familiar with Carol. Finally gossip forced him to leave Gopher Prairie.

Harvey Merrick, in Willa Cather's "The Sculptor's Funeral," was another man who was artistic and created great beauty, but by the standards of the town he was a failure.

"It's too bad the old man's son didn't turn out better," Banker Phelps remarked with reflective authority. "They never hung together. He spent enough money on Harve to stock a cattle ranch, and he might as well have poured it into Sand Creek. If Harve had stayed at home and helped nurse what little they had, and gone into stock on the old man's bottom farm, they might all have been well fixed."²³

The sculptor had become world-famous and was the only man to bring recognition to the town by its association

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23

Willa Cather, "The Sculptor's Funeral" (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1937), pp. 231-232.

with his name: But he did not practice one of the accepted occupations by which the town measured success, and he was therefore considered a failure.

Ibbetson found the same situation existed in Spoon River. The people could admire a skilled craftsman, but art was a waste of his time. He became a plumber to clean the town of its sewage when actually he wished to drain it of its ignorance:

I failed as a painter of meadows and hills
About Spoon River:
For they hated art, and believed in work;
And they left a soul in pain alone,
But hunted a man who was happy.
And the end of it was they starved me out.
So I set to work to drain Spoon River
Of all its deadly refuse,
With pipes and sewers and porcelain tubs
And the boon of running water:
But, Oh, Spoon River, where is the plumber
To make you clean of ignorance,
And cruelty, and the money lust,
That colors its yellow bacterial plots
With pulpit spewed morality?
And who can mend the sewers of hate
That keep you sick, Spoon River?²⁴

In addition to social exclusion for many of the town's inhabitants, there was a suspicious atmosphere from which no one could escape. Each expression of individuality was carefully weighed before a person dared exert himself for fear of having his name "displayed on the courthouse door."

There were few people in the town whose reputation was not at one time or another jeopardized by town gossip.

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24

The New Spoon River, p. 38.

Red Vestlock in The Story of a Country Town, expressed the attitudes of small-town people in his description of Twin Towns:

I never formed a good opinion of a man there that I was not finally told something to his discredit by another citizen, causing me to regard him with great suspicion, and if I said a good word for any of them, it was proved beyond question immediately that he was very unscrupulous, a very ridiculous, a very weak, and a very worthless man. There were no friendships among them, and they all hated each other in secret, there being much gulf satisfaction when one of them failed.²⁵

E. V. Howe's recollection of Twin Towns may have been a little harsh, but he clearly illuminated the social pressures of the small town. No one has a stainless life, but in the small town every action is observed by the people, discussed in their daily associations, and twisted out of all recognizable proportions. In most instances small-town talk is harmless and forgotten after it has been circulated, but sometimes the results are so severe that it causes permanent damage to a person's reputation.

Allison MacKenney, when asked by a newspaper columnist the source of her information to write her novel, pointed out that every life in the town is open for inspection:

...only drained his glass and another was waiting. "Well, to get back to my first question. I used the wrong word, so I'll rephrase. Where did a girl your age learn so much about sex and smugness and

perversion?"

"If you come from a small town you don't have to ask me that, Mr. Brody," said Allison.

"There are no secrets in a small town."²⁶

The small town cannot be altogether condemned for its gossiping ways, as few people carry tales with a deliberate desire to injure. Most of these people felt themselves a part of the town, and something which concerned a particular member of the group was the concern of all. "We all know all about everybody and everything, you know. If you live in the country you're really married to humanity, for better or for worse, not just on speaking terms with it, as you are in the city."²⁷

Allison Mackenzie had heard that a publisher had accepted her book and planned to release it in the spring. Certain alterations were necessary, and she was asked to come to New York and work with the publisher. Before she had a chance to tell the exciting news, the town had already heard, and figured the necessary details for her.

"Clear through to New York, eh?" asked Mr. Rhodes.

"Round trip?"

"Nops," said Mike. "One way."

"Gave money, buyin' the round trip," said

Mr. Rhodes.

"How long she gonna be gone?"

"Who?" asked Mike.

"Why, Allison, of course," said Mr. Rhodes.

"She's the one goin', ain't she?"

"Yep."

26

Return to Peyton Place, p. 94.

27

Dorothy Canfield Fisher, The Brimming Cup (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1921), p. 27.

"Goin' down to get that book of hers sold, ain't she?"

"Yep."

"Well, it don't take forever to sell somethin' like that. Saves to buy the round trip."

"But she may decide to fly back, or drive, or walk, for that matter."

"Don't make no difference. She can cash in the ticket, if she don't use it."

"All right," said Mike, resignedly. "One round-trip ticket for New York."

"That man had me running around in circles when I first came here," said Mike when they were outside, "and I've never managed to get the best of him yet. And how the hell does he know why Allison is going to New York?"

"Everybody in town knows," said Constance.

"Does that surprise you?"

"No," Mike admitted. "But I've never been able to figure out how it happens."²³

Sinclair Lewis took a different view toward town gossip. He felt that people were so bored in their dull little town that a juicy piece of gossip was a way of breaking the monotony of the everyday routine. This is evident in the detailed criticisms of Carol Kennicott. Most of the faults which people found with the young doctor's wife were very trivial and had no lasting importance; criticisms of a particular nature to support their general dissatisfaction with Carol's attitude and revolutionary innovations to the settled disposition of the town.

I'll tell you the whole story: They think you're showing off when you say "American" instead of "Amurrican"! They think you're too frivolous. Life's so serious to them that they can't imagine any kind of laughter except Juanita's snorting. Ethel Villets was sure you were patronizing her when . . .

"Oh, I was not!"

"... you talked about encouraging reading; and Mrs. Elder thought you were patronizing when you said she had 'such a pretty little car!' She thinks it's an enormous car! And some of the merchants say you're too flip when you talk to them in the store and ..."

"Poor me, when I was trying to be friendly."

"... every housewife in town is doubtful about your being so chummy with your Bea. All right to be kind, but they say you act as though she were your cousin. (Wait now! There's plenty more.) And they think you were eccentric in furnishing this room-- they think the broad couch and that Japanese dingus are absurd. And I guess I've heard a dozen criticize you because you don't go to church oftener and ..."²⁹

When Anson Page was completing his senior year in the high school of Pompey's Head, he was faced with the silent pressures exerted by the town's familiarity. He had been attracted to the girl from Channel town since the eighth grade, but he now realized the dangers involved in dating her.

Although all the girls in Pompey's Head were frequently identified by their family names-- "the Blackford girl," "the Williams girl," "the Carpenter girl"--whenever Midge was called "the Higgins girl" it had a different sound. Anson was reminded of the colored placards the Board of Health used to tack up on the doorway of a house in which somebody had an infectious illness--pink for measles, blue for diphtheria, red for scarlet fever, and yellow for mumps. "Why don't you mind your own business?" he said to Marion. "I'm not rushing Midge Higgins or anybody. Besides, if I want to, it's my own affair."

Anson realized that nothing is entirely a private affair.

The trouble, of course, was that it wasn't. Nothing was ever entirely your own affair in Pompey's Head. If it had reached Marion's ears that he had been dancing with Midge at the Oasis, it was bound to be all over town, just as it had been all over town when Ian Garrick was meeting her secretly at the Bijou Theater. He knew what Marion was thinking, that it didn't "look right" for him to be seen at the Oasis, and it was easy to surmise from his mother's troubled expression, which she could not conceal, that she was already beginning to worry about his getting "serious" over Midge. "My God!" he thought. "Doesn't this town have anything to do but gossip?"³⁰

It is interesting to note how differently the subject of town gossip is treated by different authors. Those who hold the romanticized view of the small town consider gossip a necessary and innocent pastime which brought the town closer together. Mrs. Tatton in Deephaven was considered the town's messenger who knew her people and related simple and harmless stories about their behavior.

Mrs. Tatton knew everybody's secrets, but she told them judiciously if at all. She chattered all day to you as a sparrow twitters, and you did not tire of her; and Kate and I were never more agreeably entertained than when she told us of old times and of Kate's ancestors and their contemporaries: For her memory was wonderful, and she had either seen everything that had happened in Deephaven for a long time, or had received the particulars from reliable witnesses.³¹

Even in the innocent treatment of gossip, it is easily recognized that people did not like to be the subject

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Masso, p. 158.

31

Deephaven, p. 56.

of town gossip. It is doubtful whether all the stories Mrs. Patton "judiciously" told were quite as innocent as their author would have you believe.

Edith Bell in Spoon River also gathered the information about the town. She was the switchboard operator, and she gained access to the most intimate conversations. To the stories she heard she applied her own judgment, and she, no doubt, became the originator of much town gossip.

Miss Middleton opened her door a little
To get the secrets of people passing.
And Mrs. Kessler, the washer woman,
Read the cartouches on pillows and napkins
But I with receivers clamped to my ears,
In a back room over Trainor's drug store
In a back room over Trainor's drug store
Learned all the secrets of Spoon River
While plugging wires and snapping switches:
Who was happy, and who was wretched;
And who was in love, and who was out of it;
And who was to wed, or have a baby;
And who was meeting who in Chicago;
And who was kind and who was cruel;
And who was friend, and who a foe;
And who was plotting, hiding, lying,
Making money, or losing the game.
And I say the commandment not to judge
Went out with the telephone!

In the novel Hembroke the subject is dealt with realistically. Mary E. Wilkins Freeman recognized the fact that town gossip was not completely innocent, but her method of presentation is objective without including either obscene or sensational elements.

But that whisper which had shocked her
ear had already begun to be repeated all
over the village by furtive matrons behind
their hands when the children had been

sent out of the room; by girls, blushing beneath each others' eyes as they whispered, by the lounging men in the village stores; it was sent like an evil strain through the consciousness of the village, until everybody except Rebecca's own family had heard of it.²³

Rebecca Thayer had been seen with William Perry that summer and everyone except her parents knew it. In the fall Rebecca's mother realized that she was pregnant. The two young people were married shortly afterwards and lived quietly in Pembroke. Even after the incident was no longer discussed by the town, the two continued to bear the shame of their mistake.

Hardly anyone who lived very long in the small town escaped the perpetual talk of the wireless information bureau. However, not everyone was subjected to scandalous talk. Some were just suspected of having a "skeleton in their closet." Grace Metalious points out this distinction between scandal and a family skeleton: "The difference between a closet skeleton and a scandal in a small town is that the former is examined behind barns by small groups who converse over it in whispers, while the latter is looked upon by everyone on the main street and discussed in shouts from the roof tops."

While Mrs. Freeman dealt with the small-town scandal objectively, later writers made this one of their principal criticisms. They recognized the fact that gossip made an

already bad situation worse, and many times ruined people's lives. In Main Street the young schoolteacher, Fern Mullin, lost her position because one old lady, seeking to protect her son, spread a false rumor about the girl. Most of the school board felt that the girl's behavior was not as bad as the woman, Mrs. Foggart, had related; but the pressure of the rumor was too great, and they were forced to remove Fern from her position.

Miss Emay would have been the last person in Pompey's Head to destroy someone, but with her observations and distorted conclusions she brought about one of the tragic moments in the town.

It was characteristic of Pompey's Head that they knew even the titles of the books that Jay read to his mother--trust his aunt, Miss Emay, to see to that. Miss Emay was Mrs. Lockhart's older sister, a white-haired, birdlike woman whose life was dedicated to God and gossip. What made her interesting was that she gossiped about God. It was Miss Emay's notion that she and God were on speaking terms and she was always talking, in her chatty, innocent way, about their last conversation. "Just as though she rang him up on the telephone with Minnie Sims putting through the call," Mrs. Blackford once said.

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What Miss Emay did not tell God, which could not have been such, she told her cousin, Miss Nellie Frothingham, who lived in the Marlborough Hotel. From that pulsing nerve center it spread all over town, as eventually it spread that Jay had at last told his mother that he intended to ask Joe Ann Williams to marry him.³⁴

The large home where Jay Lockhart had grown up with his invalid mother and his prying Aunt Emmy did not provide a congenial atmosphere for his new wife. The older women watched the girl's every move and it was not long before their waiting was rewarded. Jo Ann became friendly with the neighborhood butcher, who played part-time in a jazz band. The acquaintance was only because of a common interest the two shared in music, but with added interpretation, Aunt Emmy was able to make it an affair which was humiliating one of the best families.

If it had been anyone else it would have been bad enough, John Vincent or Clay Wendover or any of the men in the Yacht Club crowd that Jay and Joe Ann were going with, but a butcher, a common, ordinary butcher who cut meat--that was humiliating her darling Jay in public;³⁵

Joe Ann stopped trading at the store to quiet the suspicion, but complete avoidance of the man was impossible in the small town. "And one day when she was in Gregory's bookstore, the butcher came in. It was during the lunch hour. Joe Ann couldn't just run away from him--why should she, anyway?--and while they were talking, Miss Hedda arrived. She'd come to return some books to the lending library Mr. Gregory used to run."³⁶

That was the final evidence needed to destroy the girl's reputation. "Miss Hedda told Miss Emmy, and Miss

35

Ibid., p. 312.

36

Ibid.

Samy told Mrs. Lockhart, and Mrs. Lockhart told Jay, and by the time the telling was over it was no longer a chance meeting but an assignation."³⁷ Instead of discussing this with his wife, the less courageous Jay committed suicide. Joe Ann moved from Pompey's Head to the Midwest, and never returned to the town in which she had grown up.

In Winesburg, Ohio, the first tale is of a young schoolteacher who had been driven from a town in Pennsylvania because of town gossip. He was very talented and had a way with his students. His hands were especially artistic, but it was these hands that caused his downfall. He was suspected of homosexuality.

And then the tragedy. A half-witted boy of the school became enamored of the young master. In his bed at night he imagined unspeakable things and in the morning went forth to tell his dreams as fact. Strange, hideous accusations fell from his loose-hung lips. Through the Pennsylvania town went a shiver. Hidden, shadowy doubts that had been in men's minds concerning Adolph Hyer were galvanized into beliefs.³⁸

From that point on the teacher was a broken man, often gazing at the hands which had once been so expressive, but now were idle. He settled in Winesburg, where he spent an uneventful life.

Aner Glute had worked in the large cities--Chicago, Denver, San Francisco, and New York--as a prostitute. When

37

Ibid.

38

Sherwood Anderson, Winesburg, Ohio (New York: Random House, 1919), p. 14.

she was asked the reason she undertook such a life, she pointed to a broken promise of marriage, but that was only part of her story. She had made a mistake and Spoon River had branded her.

Over and over they used to ask me,
While buying the wine or the beer,
In Peoria first, and later in Chicago,
Denver, Frisco, New York, wherever I lived,
How I happened to lead the life,
And what was the start of it.
Well, I told them a silk dress,
And a promise of marriage from a rich man--
(It was Lucius Atherton).
But that was not really it at all.
Suppose a boy steals an apple
From the tray at the grocery store,
And they all begin to call him a thief,
The editor, minister, judge, and all the people--
"A thief," "a thief," "a thief," wherever he goes.
And he can't get work, and he can't get bread
Without stealing it, why the boy will steal.
It's the way the people regard the theft of
the apple
That makes the boy what he is.³⁹

Writers who wished to emphasize the sensational in their works found town scandal an excellent subject through which they could illuminate each detail. Lexton Ilse does this particularly with regard to sex. Instead of subtly handling a mistake, leaving the results to the readers' imagination, Grace Metcalous gives the intimate details. In one incident Betty Anderson, the daughter of a mill worker, discovered that she was pregnant. The father of the expected child was the son of the mill owner, Leslie Harrington. Leslie offered Betty's father a sum of

money to conceal the affair, but by that time the office workers had heard about it.

It fell on the ears of Pauline Bryant, who was secretary to Leslie Harrington. Pauline, who worked as a clerk in Mudgett's Hardware Store, telephoned to Esther and Esther, proud of being the only one who was really in the know, as she put it, gladly related the true story about Betty Anderson. That evening, the true story about Betty Anderson was served, along with the meat and potatoes, at every supper table in Peyton Place.⁴⁰

The author of Peyton Place is more critical of town gossip than most others. She felt the people anxiously waited for someone to make a mistake. "But it was the humiliation to Roberta and Harmon that Peyton Place loved. To see young Carter take up with a shack girl, after his people had worked so hard to escape the same environment that had spawned Selena, had a certain beauty, a poetic justice."⁴¹

The people were very conscious of the town's opinion regarding their lives and habits. Each member wished to be accepted and was very careful to preserve his public image. In order to do this it sometimes required a choice of alternatives. To maintain their reputation, they might be forced to sacrifice a principal or even the reputation of another.

In Miss Lulu Bett, after Lulu had returned to her

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Peyton Place (New York: Dell Publishing Company, Incorporated, 1957), p. 236.

41

Ibid., pp. 236-237.

home town and the family to whom she meant so much, there arose the question of her marriage. Her husband had lived with her only a short time when he told her he was already married. However, he was certain his first wife was dead, and he felt that a trip to Oregon would verify this assumption. Lulu's husband, Winian was the brother of Dwight Herbert, the head of the household where Lulu returned to live. When the town began to question the strange disappearance of Lulu's husband, Dwight thought it better to feed her to the wolves than to let it be known that there was a bigamist in the family.

"It's nothing to you that we have a brother who's a bigamist?"

"But it's me, Dwight, it's me!"

"You! You're completely out of it. Just let it rest as it is and it'll drop."

"I want the people to know the truth," Lulu said.

"But it's nobody's business but our business! I take it you don't intend to sue Winian?"

"Sue him? Oh no!"

"Then for all our sakes let's drop this matter."⁴²

In Fenbrooke Charlotte Bernard and Barnabas were engaged, but one night Barnabas was involved in an argument with Charlotte's father, Cephas, over a political question. Cephas ordered the boy from his home, and the engagement was broken. This was not good enough for Barney's mother. She felt that it was better for the marriage plans to continue in spite of the obstacle, rather

than let the town's people know about the separation.

I don't care anything about Cephas Bernard, and if I'd had my way in the first place I wouldn't have had anything to do with him or his folks either; but now you've got to do what's right if you've gone as far as this, and Charlotte's all ready to be married. You go right along, Barnabas Thayer.⁴³

Some authors may have overemphasized the invisible pressure of gossip, but there is no doubt that the town kept a watchful eye on the actions of its inhabitants. The people, especially those who were accepted into the select group, were always conscious of this. As E. V. Howe says of Twin Mounds, "The people watched each other so closely that there was no opportunity to be other than honest and circumspect in this particular, even if they had been differently inclined."⁴⁴

These people naturally wish to maintain a creditable reputation. This is true of people everywhere. They wish to be accepted by their friends and neighbors. It is not natural, however, to live in constant anxiety, knowing that one mistake may destroy a reputation which took a lifetime to build. Such an atmosphere stifles human originality and forces people to live a lifetime of dullness and routine, afraid that any new idea may separate them from their neighbors.

The fear of town gossip was not unwarranted, for

43

Pembroke, p. 103.

44

The Story of a Country Town, p. 213.

the stories which were circulated about were not quickly forgotten. Hester Prynne in The Scarlet Letter found this to be true. She had borne an illegitimate child in the strict Puritan community of Salem and was branded with the letter "A" signifying her adulterous act. After the birth of the child she gave her life in service to the community. Years afterward when most of the people had ceased to condemn her, the act was still remembered.

The rulers, and the wise and learned men of the community, were longer in acknowledging the influence of Hester's good qualities than the people. The prejudices which they shared in common with the latter were fortified in themselves by an iron framework of reasoning, that made it a far tougher labor to expel them. Day by day, nevertheless, their sour and rigid wrinkles were relaxing into something which, in the due course of years, might grow to be an expression of almost benevolence.... "Do you see that woman with the embroidered badge?" They would say to strangers, "It is our Hester--who is so kind to the poor, so helpful to the sick, so comforting to the afflicted!" Then, it is true, the propensity of human nature to tell the very worst of itself, when it's embodied in the person of another, would constrain them to whisper the black scandal of bygone years.⁴⁵

While Hester Prynne wore the red badge, the community was constantly reminded of her past, but even after she was allowed to stop wearing it, the reader wonders whether the people were able to forget. The impression is that she was forgiven, but it is doubtful that Salem

ever ceased to remember.

Matthew Maule in The House of The Seven Gables carried on his family trade under a considerable handicap because people still recalled his ancestral relation to Old Maule, who had uttered the curse on the Pyncheon House before he was executed.

This young Matthew Maule, the carpenter, it must be observed, was a person little understood, and not very generally liked, in the town where he resided, not that anything could be alleged against his integrity, or his skill and diligence in the handicraft which he exercised. The aversion (as it might justly be called) with which many people regarded him, was partly the result of his own character and deportment, and partly an inheritance.⁴⁶

The long memory of small-town inhabitants is shown in later novels. In Friendship Village, a middle-aged spinster returned to the town after a long absence. Her past, in spite of the lapse of time, was vividly remembered by the townspeople.

Who in Friendship had not heard the name, and who, save one who keeps her own thoughts and forgets to give back greetings, would not in an instant have remembered it? Delia Kane's stepcousin, Jenny Cropwell, had been betrothed to a carpenter of Friendship, and he was at work on this house when a month before the wedding day, Delia had "run away." Who in Friendship could not tell that story?"⁴⁷

46

Nathaniel Hawthorne, The House of The Seven Gables (New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1853), p. 225.

47

Zona Gale, Friendship Village (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1922), p. 60.

Anson Page related a well-known story in Pompey's Head which involved one of the oldest families. Even with the passage of almost two centuries, the town still remembered the events in vivid detail.

Well, Anson said, this Indian girl, Mary, who was supposed to be quite beautiful--there was an old painting in the Pompey's Head Historical Museum that was supposed to be a portrait of her, and for an Indian girl she was really quite attractive--this girl Mary, as he was saying, picked up English so readily that she became Sir Samuel Alwyn's interpreter. This didn't keep her from being a real Indian girl, though. The young men of the colony used to have foot races, and Mary always raced with them. With just a single outside garment and nothing underneath. She used to wrestle that way too. You would think that after all these years it would have stopped being a scandal, but it had not. Mary finally married one of the colonists, a man named Christian Bottomley. There were no longer any Bottomleys in Pompey's Head, but there was a family named Carpenter that was descended from them, and he knew a girl, Gaby Carpenter, who to this day had to sort of apologize because of the way Mary used to race and wrestle.⁴³

The law firm for whom Anson worked in New York received its main business from publishing houses. When an incident involving the writer, Garvin Wales, arose, Anson was given the case. He attempted to gather all information he could before leaving the city and was directed to an employee in the company named Jan Euren Bliss who knew the writer. Bliss recognized the pressures

of small-town society and the restrictions these pressures created.

"The hell I don't," Bliss replied, biting on his pipe. "Did I ever tell you the name of the place I came from? It's Blackwing, Minnesota. Both my grandfathers were from the East. One was born in upper New York State and the other in Pennsylvania. They couldn't make it where they were--not well enough to suit them, anyway--and when the big migration came along they went West with it. They were both doctors. One was a good doctor and the other was a drunk. A real one; an honest-to-God holler from way back. And you know what?" He bit on his pipe again. "There was a girl in the Blackwing High School I thought I was in love with. Thought? I've never loved anyone half so much in my life. I was in my senior year then, and I nearly went crazy because her family wouldn't let her go out with me--in my day, and in Blackwing, Minnesota, families had that power. And why wouldn't they? Because of my grandfather Bliss. They still remembered his bouts with the bottle and were afraid that the taint had been passed on to me. So don't tell me I don't know small towns!"⁴⁹

Although the town seldom forgot the information it had learned by the back door news agency, the enthusiasm for telling it rapidly diminished. This process occurred more rapidly when there was new material to replace it. "Of course, there were those who remembered and talked, but with every passing year the story grew less and less interesting and there were always new people in new situations to be gossiped about."⁵⁰

49

Ibid., p. 100.

50

Return to Peyton Place, p. 214.

The critics of small towns recognized the detrimental results of town gossip. Many of the people were forced to live cramped lives, never being able to release their human emotions. They found that stepping too far out of line could be a risk to their reputations, which in many cases were more valuable than life itself.

No matter how scandalous the behavior of certain people in the community, gossip about them was kept tightly within. These were not events for the outside world. The last thing they wanted was bad publicity outside the town. The Return to Leyton Place is devoted to the difficulties which Allison MacKenzie experienced after the publication of her book, Samuel's Castle. In the novel she had thinly disguised her characters, and within a short time there were no more secrets. The town reacted by refusing to renew her father's contract as school principal. They tried by every peaceful means to drive the family away.

Selena Cross in Leyton Place had murdered her father as he attempted to rape her. The events of the trial reached most of the newspapers in the country. Gerry Gage, an outsider, was one of the leading witnesses for the prosecution, and his efforts had helped to expose the crime. The town was horrified by the incident, but its main concern was the notoriety. When Gage returned to the town as a salesman, he probably expected the people to be

friendly and grateful, but they met him with cold stares and silent indifference.

The front door of the store opened suddenly, letting in a sweep of cold air that immediately stifled all conversation around the stove. Clayton Frazier looked up at the stranger who had entered, and the only way that anyone could have known that Clayton was upset was that he kept his pipe out of his mouth when everyone around the stove could tell that he hadn't drawn on his pipe anywhere near long enough to be satisfied with its glow. "Ephraim!" said the stranger.

Ephraim Tuttle looked up slowly.

"Ayeh," he said. "What can I do for you?"

"Ephraim," said the stranger and laughed.

"For God's sake, don't you remember me?"

Everyone around the stove knew who the stranger was, but not a man moved to make an acknowledging gesture.

"I'm Gerry Gage," said the stranger, still laughing and now clapping Ephraim Tuttle on the shoulder. "G. S. Pierce Co., out of Boston. Don't you remember? It was me that remembered about bringing that Navy fellow back to town, the fellow that was murdered by his own daughter. Remember me now?"

"Stepdaughter," said Clayton Frazier, and put his pipe into his mouth.

"Well, whatever she was," said Gerry Gage.

"Anyway, it was me that remembered."

"Ayeh," said Clayton.

There was a silence, and the stranger rubbed one of his gloved hands over the edge of his briefcase.

"Well," he said at last. "What do you need, Ephraim? I've got your usual list here, and I could go by that."

"The usual," said Ephraim.

Gerry Gage was suddenly angry. "Listen here," he said, "I only did what I thought was right. I never meant to do anything in the first place. I just happened to mention something about a fellow I let off here in Peyton Place. A hitchhiker. How did I know I was talking to the sheriff? It was him that started everything. All I did was what

I thought was right. That's all."
 Sheriff Buck McCracken glanced at Gerry Gage.
 "Whyn't you do the business you come for,"
 he said, and he did not ask it as a question.
 Gerry began to make check marks next to the
 items listed on a slip of paper in his hand.
 "No need for any of you guys to hold a
 grudge against me," he said. "A man doing
 what he thought was right."
 "Ain't nobody in Peyton Place holdin' a
 grudge against you that I know of, Mr. Gage,"
 said Clayton Frazier. "It's just that some
 people talk a God-awful lot, and that does
 get tirin'." 51

Town gossip was not the only criticism on which
 the writers were in general agreement. They also found
 that while the people of the town were deeply concerned
 about their lives and the lives of others in the com-
 munity, there was a general indifference toward outsiders,
 whom they pitied only because they did not have the good
 fortune to live among the "children of God."

Day after day, year after year they performed
 the same tasks, visited the same people, and discussed
 the same subjects. New members were born among them,
 older ones died, and a few outsiders would come to reside
 in the town, but the same face was presented to the world
 generation after generation. It is no wonder that the
 active Carol Kennicott felt the town was "dullness made
 God."

In Deephaven, Sarah Orne Jewett found a state of
 total stagnation. The small fishing village had once

been a flourishing community, but now it was isolated and the people were spending their insignificant lives apart from the rest of the world.

It seemed as if all clocks in Deephaven and all the people with them, had stopped years ago, and the people had been doing over and over what they had been busy about during the last week of their unambitious progress.⁵²

Deephaven was in a somewhat different situation, for this village had seen its ports abandoned by commercial ships, but the indifferent attitudes of its people toward the outside world was characteristic of many other towns. The situation existed for Hawthorne in Boston, which was little more than a town at the time of his writing. He saw the ineffectual efforts of the people when weighed against the problems of the world, and he apparently felt that their petrified existence fell far short of his expectations.

In all their variety of occupation--the cobbler, the blacksmith, the soldier--the lady with her fan, the toper with his bottle, the milkmaid sitting by her cow--this fortunate little society might truly be said to enjoy harmonious existence and to make life literally a dance. . . . Possibly some cynic, at once merry and bitter, had desired to signify whatever our business or amusement--however serious, however trifling--all dance at one identical tune, and, in spite of our ridiculous activities, bring nothing finally to pass. For the most remarkable aspect of the affair

was that, at the cessation of the music, everybody was petrified, at once, from the most extravagant life into a dead torpor. Neither was the cobbler's shoes finished, nor the blacksmith's iron shaped out. . . . All were precisely in the same condition as before they made themselves so ridiculous by their haste to toil, to enjoy, to accumulate gold, and to be wise.⁵³

The town of Twin Mounds was also a "cozy micro-cosm" set apart and oblivious of the outside world.

E. W. Howe felt that indifference was characteristic of all towns.

There was one thing I noticed of Twin Mounds which is probably true of every other country town--it was constantly threatened either with great prosperity or great danger, but whether the event threatened the prosperity or the danger came to pass, the town progresses about the same.⁵⁴

Sinclair Lewis focused his attention on the town's apathy by aligning himself with the maladjusted Carol Kennicott. In a discussion with her husband Carol asked why the town was completely out of circulation and would not correct itself.

"Isn't there any way of waking them up? What would happen if they understood scientific agriculture?" she begged of Kennicott, her hand groping for his. . . .

His hand swallowed hers as he started from thoughts of the practice to which he was returning. "These people? Wake them up? What for? They're happy."⁵⁵

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53

The House of the Seven Gables, pp. 196-197.

54

The Story of a Country Town, p. 209.

55

Main Street, p. 26.

Will Kennicott could see nothing lacking in his little society. He was relaxed in its presence and perfectly contented. He did not wish to leave, even if were for only a vacation, and he did not do so until he was forced to by his restless wife. Taking care of the people he loved and being a part of their trifling activities was his life's desire. He had studied in another part of the country, and Carol expected him to share in her desire to improve his own life and that of others in Gopher Prairie. Instead he had come back to this town, set up his practice, and desired nothing more than to live in contentment. This attitude Sinclair Lewis labeled the "Village Virus."

The Village Virus infected everyone who lived in the small town. This creeping malignancy particularly worked on the energetic reformer and the restless until they resisted no longer.

"You, why do you stay here?"

"I have the village virus."

"It sounds dangerous."

"It is. More dangerous than the cancer that will certainly get me at fifty unless I stop this smoking. The Village Virus is the germ which is extraordinarily like the hook-worm--it infects ambitious people who stay too long in the provinces. You'll find it epidemic among lawyers and doctors and ministers and college-bred merchants--all these people who have had a glimpse of the world that thinks and laughs, but have returned to the swamp. I'm a perfect example.

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When I first came here I swore I'd keep up my interests. Very lofty! I read Browning and went to Minneapolis for the theaters. I thought I was 'keeping up'. But I was reading four copies of cheap fiction-magazines to one poem. I'd put off the Minneapolis trips till I had to go there on a lot of legal matters.

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I decided to leave here. Stern resolution! Grasp the world. Then I found that the Village Virus had me, absolute! I didn't want to face new streets and younger men--real competition. It was too easy to go on making out conveyances and arguing ditching cases. So--that's all of the biography of a living dead man.⁵⁶

Champ Perry explained to Carol the consequences of remaining in the small town. It destroyed the initiative of the people, even professional men like Will Kennicott. It made them shun opportunity and shrink from "real competition."

George Gray in Spoon River was affected by the same disease. The opportunity to give his life meaning and purpose was offered to him, but he would not respond because he either feared failure or was unwilling to take the necessary risks. As a result he lost the chance to remove the hunger for meaning in his life.

I have studied many times
The marble which was chiseled for me--
A boat with a furled sail at rest in a harbor.
In truth it pictures not my destination
But my life.

For love was offered me and I shrank from
 its disillusionment;
 Sorrow knocked at my door, but I was afraid;
 Ambition called to me, but I dreaded the chances.
 Yet all the while I hungered for meaning in
 my life.

And now I know that we must lift the sail
 And catch the winds of destiny
 Wherever they drive the boat.
 To put meaning into one's life may end in
 madness,
 But life without meaning is the torture
 Of restlessness and vague desire--
 It is a boat longing for the sea and yet afraid.⁵⁷

The Reverend Mr. Fitzgerald in Ixeyton Place, after
 a lifetime of study in theology, gave his sympathies to
 the Catholic cause, but would not make a change because
 he was unwilling to relinquish his meager gains. As a
 result he remained a frustrated Episcopal minister whose
 religious influence was lost.

The spinster in "A Symphony in Lavender" had an
 opportunity to be happy but shrank from it because of her
 indecision. She had a dream in which she saw the man
 she was later to love. This man appeared, they courted,
 and he asked her to marry him. She hesitated, "I don't
 know what I said, but it must have expressed my repulsion
 very strongly; for after a few bitter words, he left me,
 and I went into the house. I never saw him again."⁵⁸

The Village Virus carried over into other areas
 of town social life. The towns had many clubs under such

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57

Spoon River Anthology, p. 65.

58

Mary E. Wilkins Freeman, "A Symphony in Lavender,"
 in A Humble Romance (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1887),
 p. 47.

distinguished names as "Social Purity Club, Married Women's Cemetery Improvement Sodality, and the Thanatopsis Club, but their activities were seldom carried farther than a social gossip session. They generally had a very high purpose, but in actuality they did very little for the improvement of the town and its people.

Carol Kennicott was invited to join the Thanatopsis Club, which was designed as a women's study club. It had been defined by a friend, Vida Sherwin, as "such a cozy group, and yet it puts you in touch with all the intellectual thoughts everywhere."⁵⁹ Carol briefly associated with the Club, but after finding that the group seldom undertook cultural activities, she drifted away. One afternoon she became very excited by the discovery that the Club was going to study English poetry.

"What poet do you take up today?" demanded Carol, in her library tone of, "What book do you wish to take out?"

"Why the English ones."

"Not all of them?"

"N-why yes, we're learning all of European literature this year. The Club gets such a nice magazine, 'Culture Kints', and we follow its programs. Last year our subject was Men and Women in the Bible, and next year we'll probably take up furnishings and China. My, it does make a body hustle to keep up with all these new culture subjects, but it is improving."⁶⁰

59

Main Street, p. 124.

60

Ibid., pp. 124-125.

It took Carol only a short time to realize that these people were either far out of touch with cultural events or had never known what they were. Brief reports on "Shakespeare and Milton," "Byron Moore and Binne," and "Tennyson and Browning" were one afternoon's program; and even worse, the next week's study would concern "English Fiction and Essays." Only Carol was able to see the absurdity of this study. The other participants were satisfied that their afternoon had been well spent in cultural exchange.

In Spoon River, Archibald Higbie found no culture and left to seek enrichment in the art centers of the world. Although he possessed talent, his background stood in his way and he was unable to develop the technique for which he strived. He could not separate true art from the "western soil."

I loathed you, Spoon River. I tried to
 rise above you,
 I was ashamed of you. I despised you
 As the place of my nativity.
 And there in Rome, among the artists,
 Speaking Italian, speaking French,
 I seemed to myself at times to be free
 Of every trace of my origin.
 I seemed to be reaching the heights of art
 And to breathe the air that the masters
 breathed,
 And to see the world with their eyes.
 But still they'd pass my work and say:
 "What are you driving at, my friend?
 Sometimes the face looks like Apollo's"
 There was no culture, you know, in Spoon River,
 And I burned with shame and held my peace.
 And what could I do, all covered over
 And weighted down with western soil,

Except aspire, and pray for another
 Birth in the world with all of Spoon River
 Rooted out of my soul?⁶¹

The small town is not fully the "promised land" that the Goldsmith tradition pictured, nor is it the center of the sex and corruption that Grace Metalious splashes over the pages of her novels. The town is an association of people who depend upon each other for all their daily needs. It is natural that frequently certain members will fall short of the standards which the town has imposed upon them, and when they do, they are exposed to criticism by the community. The intentions of individuals are often distorted and they suffer because of human error or malicious gossip, but in most cases the criticism is an everyday process and shows that the town is interested in each individual.

The town possesses a certain attractiveness or invisible force which draws people to it. In spite of the corruption that Allison MacKensie found in Peyton Place, she was always glad to return. "Why is it always such a relief to me when I come back?" wondered Allison. "Peyton Place is small-town America at its worst. Narrow, provincial, gossipy. Yet, I never feel really safe anywhere else, nor contented."⁶²

Anson Page, after returning to Pompey's Head

 61

Spoon River Anthology, p. 194.

62

Return to Peyton Place, p. 197.

with its gossip, prejudice and snobishness, realized that this was still his home. Dinah Blackford asked him why he left. "He wondered if he should have. He knew all the faults of Pompey's Head and the things it could do to people, and yet, since he knew, he might have been able to work out his own solution. Pompey's Head was the only place he ever belonged, and not once since he left had he felt that he belonged anywhere."⁶³

CHAPTER TWO

THE PROFESSIONAL PEOPLE

Every town has certain members who are indispensable to the functioning of the community. If the small town is an independent unit, it is these people who make it possible. In most instances, they live in the best section of town and usually on the same street. In Peyton Place, it was Chestnut Street, but in each town it is about the same.

Chestnut Street was a wide, tree-shaded avenue which ran parallel to Elm Street, one block South of the main thoroughfare. Chestnut Street had always been, and still was, considered to be the "best" street in Peyton Place. Every town has its Chestnut Street. On the hottest summer day, the Chestnut Streets are cooler than all the others. The houses that line these streets always indicate, unmistakably, that they were built at a time when servants were cheap and plentiful, and that the owners could afford them. To the people who live on the other streets, these houses are always mysterious. One thinks of secret rooms and hidden staircases.

These people were the backbone of the town.

The residents of Chestnut Street regarded themselves as the backbone of Peyton Place. They were of the old families, people whose ancestors remembered when the town had been nothing but wilderness, with Samuel Peyton's castle the only building for miles around. Between them, the men who lived on Chestnut Street provided jobs for Peyton Place. They took care of its aches and pains, straightened out its legal affairs, formed its thinking and

spent its money. Between themselves, these men knew more about the town and its people than anyone else.²

The people who live there are the life's blood of the community. They are the men with money, position, and influence, and in a real way control the town. In addition, the distinctive characteristic which each town possesses are given it largely by these men and women. The professional people include the minister, the teacher, the doctor, the newspaper editor, and the financial magnate.

The minister, the doctor, and the teacher are generally people who were trained outside the community and have come there to live. In traditional towns of New England and many parts of the South, they may not possess equal social status with those of local ancestral connection, but their importance in the everyday shaping of the community cannot be underestimated.

The newspaper editor is generally a product of the town itself. As a schoolboy he probably began his training doing odd jobs and local reporting, and later worked himself into the position of editor. His knowledge and understanding of the town and its people is unsurpassed.

The financial magnate usually rose from the town's inhabitants. Through heredity or good luck or a certain financial genius, he has been able to rise above his competitors. Because he controls the livelihood of so many, his

prestige and authority are great.

The study of these characters shows a definite development in literature. The writings which appeared before the First World War concerned mainly the external human behavior--their daily accomplishments, their association with others, and their involvement in the plot. After this period, the emphasis shifted to the psychological approach. The actions of the individuals became subordinate to their thoughts and the motivating forces behind their behavior.

The Minister

The country preacher was highly respected in his community. In most instances he was a Protestant, and he was one of the few people who could boast of possessing anything above a secondary education.

Goldsmith's recollection of the country preacher was most sympathetic. He was respected as a man whose education and authority exceeded that of the other men in the community.

While words of learned length and thundering
 sound
 Amaz'd the gazing rustics rang'd around;
 And still they gaz'd, and still the wonder
 grew
 That one small head could carry all he knew.³

The description of the preacher in "The Deserted

Village" is reminiscent of the parson in Chaucer's "Canterbury Tales." He was a shepherd to his people, always extending his hand to lead the flock in the paths of righteousness. The door of his home was open to all his parishioners and the homeless poor. His ministry was simple and direct, but the power of his message touched even the most skeptical.

The village preacher's modest mansion rose.
A man he was to all the country dear,
And passing rich with forty pounds a year;
Remote from towns he ran his godly race,
Nor e'er had chang'd, nor wish'd to change
his place;

Unpractic'd he to fawn, or seek for power,
By doctrines fashion'd to the varying hour;
Far other aims his heart had learned to prize,
More skill'd to raise the wretched than to
rise.

His house was known to all the vagrant train,
He chid their wanderings, but relieved their
pain;

The long-remember'd beggar was his guest,
Whose beard descending swept his aged breast;
The ruin'd spendthrift, now no longer proud,
Claim'd kindred there, and had his claims
allow'd;

The broken soldier, kindly bade to stay,
Sat by his fire, and talk'd the night away;
Wept o'er his wounds, or, tales of sorrow done,
Shoulder'd his crutch, and show'd how fields
were won.

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At church, with meek and unaffected grace,
His looks adorn'd the venerable place;
Truth from his lips prevail'd with double sway,
And fools who came to scoff remain'd to pray.
The service past, around the pious man,
With steady zeal, each honest rustic ran;
E'en children follow'd, with endearing wile,
And plucked his gown, to share the good man's
smile.

His ready smile a parent's warmth express'd
 Their welfare press'd him, and their cares
 distress'd;
 To them his heart, his love, his griefs were
 given,
 But all his serious thoughts had rest in heaven.⁴

The religious influence of the Protestant Church was just as strong in American small-town literature, but the minister as a public figure failed to acquire the prominence or sanctity of the minister in Goldsmith's poem. Will Rose in "The Big Stick of the Small Town" points out the authority exerted by the church over the community life.

Keeping carefully in the background, the church is, nevertheless, a dominant influence in the small town. It is bigger than the bank, than the clubs, than the schools, than the homes, than the politics. Money and land fear to grapple with it. It overshadows every historical tradition. Yet, rarely does it issue an ultimatum, never in-so-far as my personal experience with it extends.⁵

The strength of the church cannot be underestimated, but its force was less apparent in the lives of the people. They attended regular services on Sunday and observed the ordinances with dutiful care, but they lacked the enthusiasm which is such an important part of the Christian religion. Their practices were not hypocritical in the usual sense because they did not live contrary to their beliefs. A more accurate appraisal is that their faith lacked the depth

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Lines 140-153, 177-188.

5

Will Rose, "The Big Stick of the Small Town," Scribner's, December 1927, p. 665.

necessary for a religious life. It was a practical religion with particular emphasis on how they lived their lives in the everyday material world, rather than their degree of faith in God.

There was thus a distinct difference between the message the minister delivered and the understanding of the apathetic members. He emphasized faith as the guiding principle in life, and the congregation applied this only to their daily life. They could not comprehend the two aspects at once.

Although George Masterman was not a minister, he clearly illustrated the distorted views of the people toward religion. The people of Spoon River could accept the ease and comfort which electric lights gave them, but when lights were proposed for the streets, a community project involving expense, they turned to their "dusty" Bibles for a forbidding answer.

Stranger! I saw electric lights come to
 Spoon River without a protest.
 But when I inaugurated kerosene lamps for
 the streets
 You opposed me,
 Saying it was an interference with the divine
 plan,
 Which had ordained darkness for the night;
 And that lighted streets would cause people
 To remain out late,
 Producing rheumatism and immorality;
 And that thieves would be emboldened,
 And horses frightened.
 You were wrong about all these things,
 But you never learn anything.
 You are still obstructing

The lighting of the streets of thought and life
 With your ideas about the divine plan,
 And your ideas about morale!⁶

The unifying theme of the Spoon River ministers is that each was misunderstood in some phase of his work or life. Freemont Deadman tried every method he could to bring his congregation to church. He first toned down his message and dealt with human problems, but this was not enough to fill the pews or the collection plate. He tried church suppers and even dances, but only he was willing to compromise. Finally, he was forced to leave the ministry for lack of financial support.

I tried them with sermons:
 "Temptation," "Choosing a Character,"
 "The Unmarried Mother," All no good!
 I gave them theology, God-head demonstrations,
 The sacraments and scheme of salvation--
 Empty pews and the church in debt!
 I gave them a travelogue: Yellowstone Park
 with Views--
 Quite a crowd: the movie was closed for
 repairs that night.
 The Rev. Althoff Hilge and I
 Joined hands to save the churches:
 We got up suppers at the Pekin Tea Gardens.
 Allowed the young to dance square dances
 To saxophones, served ginger-ale!
 It wouldn't do, for it wasn't real;
 We couldn't compete with the children of darkness.
 I quit at last and began to lecture--
 You see I needed money!⁷

William Shipley was dedicated to the ministry. He gave his entire life serving the needs of the people, and now he lies forgotten in the graveyard of Spoon River. His

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 6

The New Spoon River, p. 44.

7

Ibid., p. 71.

chief regret is that his life has been spent in vain, for the lives he wished to influence do not have a clear understanding of his message.

Do you know who I was, O riotous generation,
 How when thoughts and beliefs arrange themselves
 in no order of beauty,
 But are pieces of broken mirror scattered upon
 a transient floor,
 Reflecting no heaven, nor even the room of life?
 Have you thought of me, a weary messenger of peace,
 A servant in the house of God,
 A heart dissolved in gospel love?
 How I lived in poverty, upon the bounty of friends?
 Visiting the sick, comforting the oppressed,
 Counseling love, forgiveness, charity, the
 blameless life,
 A shepherd of men to the fold of heaven?
 Then brought to this humble grave and forgotten,
 Lost in the weeds and sunken earth of fifty years--
 Do you know what I was?⁸

The church was considered by some as a social agency, a place for people to meet and discuss the events of the past week. "We are an old-fashioned folk in Sweet Auburn--we go to church. We think we ought to--besides, we can't help it. . . . To obey the insistent behest of the church bell is perchance to learn that Jim Asa meditates shingling his barn, or that Ichabod Alderney is stricken with the gout, or that Deacon Adams has slain his fatted Chester Whites."⁹

The critics of the small town were careful in dealing with the religious aspects of the town. They made few

8

Ibid., p. 206.

9

Rollin Lynde Hartt, "A New England Hill Town," The Atlantic Monthly, May 1899, p. 561.

accusations, but their attitudes were obvious. Sinclair Lewis, for instance, has little to say about the religious practices of Gopher Prairie, but as he aligns himself with the rebellious Carol Kennicott, he stands against religion as it was practiced in the town. Carol seldom attended the services of the church and was sharply criticized. The people whom Lewis satirizes in the novel were regular in attendance.

In The Scarlet Letter The Reverend Mr. Dimmesdale became involved with one of his parishioners, Hester Prynne. Pregnancy resulted, and the girl bore the child in shame. She accepted full responsibility for the moral failure and would not reveal the father of the child, even after a public denunciation. The young minister was freed from certain destruction and was able to acquire high esteem in the community by his enthusiastic preaching. Inwardly, however, he was a broken man. The passions of the minister are not revealed, but each time he appears he is more withered and old. Finally, this burden of guilt was too great, and he died, confessing his sins to the people publicly.

Hawthorne's works show the actions of the characters and how they are affected by the circumstances revealed, but little attention is given to their emotions. The characters appear very human, even without a psychological approach.

The Reverend Mr. Dimmesdale is represented as a cowardly man who will not face the responsibility for his moral failure. He had many opportunities to lessen Hester's humiliation, but he always shrunk from it. The author does not condemn him for his weakness; the man is to be pitied rather than judged, for his judgment of himself is more harsh than any which society could place upon him.

John Westlock, in The Story of a Country Town, tells of another minister who fell into evil ways and was forced to bear the burden of his iniquities. Westlock was a lay preacher of Fairview and was honored and respected by the people of the community. He held a position of authority in the town, and most of the people looked to him for guidance. He alone knew the secret passions which grew daily in his heart. He left the town and became a printer, giving up his position in the church. This happened quite suddenly and the reason is not revealed until much later. He fought with his conscience and was finally overcome and forced to yield to his temptation. In the note he left for his son, the reason for his actions is revealed.

Whether you knew it or not is not important to the purpose of this letter, but for seven years I have been infatuated with the woman who is my companion in this wicked business, and she has been the temptation against which I have fought and prayed, but in spite of my efforts and prayers it has grown on me, until I am no longer a man.¹⁰

The confession of John Westlock was as much a shock to the reader as to his son, who received the note. H. W. Howe, like Hawthorne in The Scarlet Letter, dealt only with the outward appearances of the struggling man. No one knew of his inner torture--his lust for Mrs. Tremaine, a member of his congregation. He was simply portrayed as a farmer working hard to make a success of his small holdings. When his day's work was done, he would spend long hours reading his Bible and meditating. Seldom did he speak to anyone; and when he did, he spoke in short mumbled sentences. We see the man only through the eyes of his son:

During this time, too, I first noticed that my father was not like other men who came to our house, for he was always grave and quiet, and had little to say at any time. It was a relief to me to have him ask the blessing at the table and pray morning and evening, for I seldom heard his voice at any other time. I believe I regarded his quiet manner only as an evidence that he was more pious than others of his class for I could make nothing else out of it, but often regretted that his religion did not permit him to notice me more, or to take me with him when he went away in the wagon.¹¹

Ned Westlock's observation of his father would apply to the minister in most small-town literature. In many instances the country preacher stands in direct contrast to the lively activities of the town, and appears only when

11

Ibid., p. 10.

some religious observance is required. They are not a real part of the society that so badly needs their leadership.

The Reverend Goode Shepherd, who replaced Westlock as the minister, was a kind man, but never was able to win much esteem. He was liked, but few would have sought his guidance in solving their problems. "When his tall form and pale face appeared above the pulpit at Fairview for the first time, the impression was general among the people that he was older than they expected."¹² He remained insignificant, though he performed his duties faithfully. When the marriage of his daughter ended in separation, he accepted the tragedy with stoical silence.

Mr. Paysweather of The Brimming Cup was the patriarch of the town. He knew the history of Vermont and often looked down his nose at anyone who did not. He "put the Sunday school rubber stamp on everything he talked about."

These ministers, like the church, may have been a hidden force controlling the conduct of the people, but they were not a part of their everyday life. They were not the vigorous Christian examples of the fighting martyrs about whose lives they preached. They seemed to have been victims of the Village Virus also. They carried out their duties faithfully, but never exerted themselves to win men to their cause.

12

Ibid., p. 59.

Curtis Hartman, the Presbyterian minister of Winesburg, is very different from most of the country preachers in the small towns. He possessed real Christian enthusiasm, and it is quite possible that he exerted great influence in the community which he served. Sherwood Anderson does not relate this to the reader, but his meaning is apparent.

This man had been reared very austere. His formal education had been closely supervised, and he was married under strict social conventions. In all his life he had not known real temptation, but there was no doubt that he preached frequently on this subject. His ideas on the subject came from his study not his experience.

One night as he sat in his study, he saw the young schoolteacher, Kate Smith, through the window of her room next door. She was lying on her bed smoking a cigarette, her shoulders uncovered. He struggled with himself, tried to turn away, but temptation was too great. His first impulse was to blame God for letting this sin enter into his life. "Through my days as a young man and all through my life I have gone quietly about my work," he declared. "Why now should I be tempted? What have I done that this burden should be laid on me now."¹³

He next blamed his wife, who was evidently a cold individual, and who had not considered her husband as a

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man. In those condemnations there was little satisfaction, for he knew that this was his own human failure. In spite of his entanglements with his emotions, he returned several times to the room to watch for Kate, whose habit it was to lie across the bed and smoke before retiring.

On a night in January he waited for the girl to appear. She was later than usual, but when she did come she was completely nude. Instead of assuming her usual position, she knelt in prayer beside her bed. What might have been for the minister the quintessential moment of passion became a nightmare. Suddenly he felt chilled and realized he finally knew the temptation that had been the subject of his work.

The ways of God are beyond human understanding he cried, running in quickly and closing the door. He began to advance upon the young man (George Willard), his eyes glowing and his voice ringing with fervor. "I have found the light," he cried. After ten years in this town, God has manifested himself to me in the body of a woman."¹⁴

The ministry was doubtless more effective for Curtis Hartman after this incident, because he then knew from his own experience the strength of human emotions, and the sanction which his religion could afford him.

The Schoolteacher

The importance of the schoolteacher to the small town is second only to the minister. Both were educated

outside the town and assumed places of importance on the strength of their profession.

Oliver Goldsmith recognized the position of esteem held by the village master. The man who taught in the schoolhouse commanded the respect of the students both by his understanding and by the stick which he held over their heads.

The village master taught his little school,
 A man severe he was, and stern to view;
 I knew him well, and every truant knew:
 Well had the boding tremblers learn'd to
 trace
 The day's disasters in his morning face:
 Full well they laugh'd, with counterfeited
 glee,
 At all his jokes, for many a joke had he;
 Full well the busy whisper, circling round,
 Convey'd the dismal tidings when he frown'd.
 Yet he was kind, or, if severe in aught,
 The love he bore to learning was in fault.
 The village all declar'd how much he knew;
 'Twas certain he could write, and cipher too;
 Lands he could measure, tides and tides
 presage,
 And e'en the story ran--that he could gauge:¹⁵

The American teacher of the small town was frequently a woman. She also commanded much respect and was considered an intellectual authority in the community. Most of these teachers assumed a special place in the town and found that their ideals seldom conflicted with the local society. Vida Sherwin in Main Street was a regular member of the social clubs and parties of the town. Carol Kennicott found intellectual stimulation in her companionship

and trusted her as a friend. It was she who was honest enough to tell the ambitious Carol of the town talk which had jeopardized her reputation.

The teacher usually had high ideals and aspirations for his students. He realized that his was a position of importance to the maintenance of the educational standards of the school, and he felt that his influence with the students would help them to find a more secure place in the world. The teachers' ideas were not so strictly confined to the little town as were those of the children's parents. This vision enabled them to see their students in life's business far beyond even the students' expectations.

Elsie Thornton, the elementary schoolteacher in Peyton Place, pictured a few of her students in places of esteem in the world, and having influence far greater than her own. Her frustration was severe when she realized that most of them would settle in the town and accomplish nothing.

At times like these, when Miss Thornton was very tired, she felt that she fought a losing battle with ignorance and was overcome with a sense of futility and helplessness. What sense was there in nagging a boy into memorizing the dates of the rise and fall of the Roman Empire when the boy, grown, would milk cows for a living, as had his father and grandfather before him? What logic was there in pounding decimal fractions into the head of a girl who would eventually need to count only to number the months of each pregnancy?¹⁶

In the graveyard of Spoon River lay Emily Sparks, contemplating this same question. Had her student, her favorite, accomplished even a part of what she expected? She feels that if the student did not fulfill her expectations for him, her own life was meaningless.

Where is my boy, my boy--
 In what part of the world?
 The boy I loved best of all in the school?--
 I, the teacher, the old maid, the virgin
 heart,
 Who made them all my children.
 Did I know my boy aright,
 Thinking of him as spirit aflame,
 Active, ever aspiring?
 Oh, boy, boy, for whom I prayed and prayed
 In many a watchful hour at night,
 Do you remember the letter I wrote you
 Of the beautiful love of Christ?
 And whether you ever took it or not,
 My boy, wherever you are,
 Work for your soul's sake,
 That all the clay of you, all the dross
 of you,
 May yield to the fire of you,
 'Til the fire is nothing but light! . . .
 Nothing but light!¹⁷

Emily Sparks' anxiety for her pupil was rewarded, for when he was in the depths of despair, he remembered the days of his youth and the inspiration he had received under his former teacher.

Well, Emily Sparks, your prayers were not
 wasted
 Your love was not all in vain.
 I owe whatever I was in life
 To your hope that would not give me up,
 To your love that saw me still as good.
 Dear Emily Sparks, let me tell you the story.
 I pass the effect of my father and mother;

The milliner's daughter made me trouble
 And out I went in the world,
 Where I passed through every peril known
 Of wine and women and joy of life.
 One night, in a room in the Rue de Rivoli,
 I was drinking wine with a black-eyed cocotte,
 And the tears swam into my eyes.
 She thought they were amorous tears and smiled
 For thought of her conquest over me.
 But my soul was three thousand miles away,
 In the days when you taught me in Spoon River.
 And just because you no more could love me,
 Nor pray for me, nor write me letters,
 The eternal silence of you spoke instead.
 And the black-eyed cocotte took the tears for
 hers,
 As well as the deceiving kisses I gave her,
 Somehow, from that hour, I had a new vision--
 Dear Emily Sparks!¹⁸

People respected the teacher, but their admiration did not come without its responsibilities. The conduct of the teacher was expected to be a model for her students. It is no wonder that so often she was an old maid. But the teacher was human and had weaknesses which made the social restrictions difficult at times.

Kate Smith was considered a settled woman of thirty who carried out her duties in admirable fashion, but she was a passionate woman who needed love. "In reality she was the most eagerly passionate soul among them, and more than once, in the five years since she had come back from her travels to settle in Winesburg and become a schoolteacher, had been compelled to go out of the house and walk half through the night fighting out some battle raging within."¹⁹

18

Spoon River Anthology, p. 17.

19

Anderson, p. 191.

Kate needed companionship, and the object of her admiration was George Willard, the unifying character of the book. The night when she was seen nude by Curtis Hartman, she had almost lost control of her emotions. She had gone into the newspaper office and found George alone at his work. George was a former student, but now she saw him as a man who could satisfy her passionate drive. Kate forced herself upon the editor and he kissed her. She suddenly regained control of herself, slapped him, and ran home. Her sobbing and praying at least temporarily quieted her emotions.

Kate was more fortunate than Fern Mullen in Main Street, and also more guilty. The young schoolmistress in her first year at Gopher Prairie school went to a dance with the immature and irresponsible Cy Bogart. He forced her to have a drink and tried to molest her, but she resisted. She was finally able to carry the boy home although he had become drunk and rebellious. Rumors spread by his mother next day placed the blame upon the girl, and she lost her job as a result. If she had not been a teacher, it is doubtful that the opinions of the town would have affected her, but since she was supposed to be a symbol of virtue and righteous living, she was ostracized. She lost her position in Gopher Prairie, and she was unable to find another because of her first failure.

Not only was the reputation of the teacher endangered

by loose practices in the town, but also she was under observation in the classroom. Certain subjects were forbidden and she presented them to the class at great risk. Catherine Ogg in Spoon River was fired for teaching the birth process and the theory of evolution.

"Tombstone" Johnson, head of the school board,
 Ashamed that he sprang from an egg,
 And a wriggling sperm,
 But proud that man was created from dust,
 Though dust is dirtier than eggs,
 Ousted me from my place in the school
 For showing a picture to the pupils
 Of a child emerging from an egg shell,
 And telling them all the beauty and wonder
 Of evolution that makes a mind
 Out of an egg and sperm.
 So I retired and struggled along,
 And starved a little, and brooded much
 To the end of the farce!²⁰

The Doctor

Another important person in the small town was the doctor. His social position was quite different from that of the minister and the teacher, for the town was dependent upon his services: He was a self-employed professional man. This afforded him more freedom without placing his social position in jeopardy. Like the others he had been trained outside the community, and this training allowed him to be objective without social restrictions being placed upon him.

Matthew Swain had become a fixture in the town, which had one hospital, the Peyton Place Hospital, but few

considered it more than Matthew Swain's office. He diligently performed his duties and sometimes exceeded his lawful professional freedom. By performing an abortion on Selena Cross, he risked his reputation; but when the incident was discovered, no action was contemplated. The community realized how dependent it was on the doctor. "Come back in a year," he said, "to see if Matt Swain is still in business. I'll bet you a solid gold key to Peyton Place that he'll still be living on Chestnut Street and going out on night calls."²¹

Dr. Swain was not a man who could look at the town without realizing its shortcomings. He voiced his criticism freely and was willing to support any worthwhile reform. His position earned for him the esteem of the town without the responsibility of pleasing its people.

When the school board was contemplating removing Michael Rossi because of Allison's book, Matthew Swain voiced the strongest disapproval. His courageous support of the underdog persuaded one of the three-member board, but the others were immovable.

It was at that moment that Doc Swain entered the school board office and said, "As soon as the prayer meeting's over, I'd like to say a few words about the reappointment of Mike Rossi."
 "You're too late," said Roberta.
 "It's already been put to the vote," Marion told him. "The school board is now on record,

as of this date, against the renewal of the contract of Mike Rossi."

Charles Partridge shrugged his shoulders, indicating to Matt that he had tried and failed.

"Now that I'm here," Matt said, "I think I'll say my piece anyway."

"If you have anything to say, you can say it at town meeting, Matt," Roberta told him.

Matt ignored her. "Mr. Chairman," he said, and Charles quickly said, "The chair recognized Dr. Matt Swain."

Matt stood at the long board table across from Roberta and Marion. "It seems we aren't content with pillorying Allison MacKenzie because she had the courage to hold up a mirror and make us look at ourselves, we have to attack her through her stepfather and punish an innocent man because he has the courage to stand by his child."

Doc Swain put his hands in his pockets, bent his body forward and looked down at the table.

"It's a sad day for all of us," he said in a low voice. "We've come a long way from our early days in this land when our grandparents, those misguided fools, thought that courage was a virtue." He raised his voice. "I ask you this, ladies. I ask you this. Will we now reward cowardice? Since courage has become a punishable offense in your eyes, I propose we set up statues to the men who beat their wives and abandon their children."²²

Will Kennicott did not have the objectivity of Matthew Swain. He was a good doctor and served the needs of all people indiscriminately, and in his town he could find no wrong. When the shortsighted citizens described Gopher Prairie as the most advanced town in the area, he readily agreed. His dedication to the medical profession and to his people is certain, and the only noticeable shortcoming was his naivete. He could not understand his

restless wife. She needed a source of fulfillment, a goal toward which to work, a mission in life. She was unable to accept the settled life of the other women. His failure to recognize her needs almost cost him his marriage.

One characteristic shared by small-town doctors was the impartiality shown to their patients. They generally associated with the town's elite, but professionally they ignored any such restrictions. Matthew Swain cared as conscientiously for the shack dwellers, the town drunks, and foreigners as he did for his own neighbors on Chestnut Street. Will Kennicott served the Swedish laborers with equal diligence. Dr. Gibbs of "Our Town" made the people of Polish Town a real part of Grovers Corners professionally.

In general the life of the town doctor was dedicated to the people he served, and the authors of town literature acknowledged the services he performed. With few exceptions he was a trusted and sympathetic friend dedicated to the welfare of his patients.

The Editor

The editor did not require the professional training necessary to the minister, the teacher, or the physician. He often grew up in the community, and as a youth became copy boy for the town newspaper. If he possessed a talent for the business, he became an understudy to the editor, and succeeded him upon retirement.

His lack of formal education in no way lessened his importance as a town personality, and while he was greatly admired as a rule, he was often feared by the people. He stood as the strongest link in the chain of communication both for the community and the world. It was often his pen that determined the trend of town opinion.

Editor Whedon of Spoon River was aware of the power of his position. Through his eight-page paper he destroyed the reputation of many people and often perverted the truth. He became the instrument through which many rose and fell, for he was "the giant."

To be able to see every side of every
question;
To be on every side, to be everything, to
be nothing long;
To pervert truth, to ride it for a purpose,
To use great feelings and passions of the
human family
For base designs, for cunning ends,
To wear a mask like the Greek actors--
Your eight-page paper--behind which you
huddle,
Bawling through the megaphone of big type:
"this is I, the giant,"
Thereby also living the life of a sneak-thief,
Poisoned with the anonymous words
Of your clandestine soul.

To be an editor, as I was
Then to lie here close by the river over
the place
Where the sewage flows from the village,
And the empty cans and garbage are dumped,
And abortions are hidden.²³

Olaf Lindbloom was also a corrupt editor who increased the circulation of his paper by supporting popular causes while freely participating in corruption. He fought crime while "engaged in land thefts," he supported capitalists and condemned organized labor, he opposed drinking, but gathered his friends in his private cellar--"a Christian gentleman!"

Here am I, an editor of the new Spoon River,
 Son of an emigrant to America
 For liberty and opportunity--
 Always feeling my way.
 Publishing Girondist doctrines of the largest
 acceptance,
 Thereby increasing my circulation;
 Then selling advertising space
 On the basis of my circulation.
 Advocating tepid reforms,
 Like just taxation--dodging my own taxes
 the while.
 Fighting crime waves, and criminals,
 But myself engaged in land thefts,
 And forging history through the writing
 and selling of news
 By a monopoly of telegraphs.
 Against a free press, except mine and my kind.
 A leader of the unions of money,
 A foe of the unions of labor,
 Causing them to be jailed and killed.
 An advocate of slick laws.
 Against the saloons and the gambling house,
 But friend to the private cellar, the
 back room of the bank.
 Unknown and elusive,
 Insatiable as to money,
 A Christian gentleman,
 An editor of the new era! 24

Watson Stelinger recognized the ruthless and hypocritical practices of the editors, Wood and Lindbloom, but

his accusations were not heard among the graves in Spoon River.

If any garage had hired as chauffeurs
Reckless boys or murderous hoodlums,
Who had harried the streets like battle chariots
Armed with scythes . . . would you have stood it?
If aeroplanes in the hands of imps
Had skimmed the streets, and ruined the roofs,
While their secret owners laughed at terror,
Or called it fate when life was taken,
Would you have suffered this, Spoon River,
Or gone for the torch, the ax, the rope?
And yet these editors, Wood and Lindbloom,
Turned their engines of presses and paper
Over to ignorant writers, who wrecked
The names and peace of helpless people;
And you hired for critics of art and books
Venomous women and envious men,
Who soiled the truth and tortured beauty,
To please themselves and you!²⁵

The corrupt editors in Masters' poems are not characteristic of most town editors, but the estimate of the powers they possessed is possibly no exaggeration. He often guided public opinion, and his endorsement was eagerly sought after.

The editor of the small-town paper was generally a level-headed man and exercised wisdom in his judgment. This is possibly why two of the principal novels which satirized the small town were written from the editor's viewpoint. These were The Story of a Country Town, and Minesburg, Ohio. In the former, Ned Westlock was the central character, and the book was his biography. George Willard was the main character of only one story in Minesburg, Ohio, but he

unified the work as a whole.

Ned Westlock was a farmer's son who was apprenticed to the editor from whom his father bought the paper. He afterward worked with his father until John Westlock ran away with Mrs. Tremaine, his parishioner. Little is told of his activities as the editor of the Twin Mounds newspaper, except that he worked hard and used wisdom in his selection of material.

We know more of George Willard. He was not actually the editor; but the town identified him with the newspaper. The policy of his paper furnishes insight into the functioning of the small-town people:

The paper on which George worked had one policy. It strove to mention by name in each issue, as many as possible of the inhabitants of the village. Like an excited dog, George Willard ran here and there, noting on his pad of paper who had gone on business to the county seat or who had returned from a visit to a neighboring village. All day long he wrote little facts upon the pad.²⁶

Regardless of how trite the news, it was essential that most of the town's activities be recorded, for this was the basis on which sales were made. The people might read of world events, but their main interest was the town and its people.

Seth Bushwell of the Peyton Place Times was a wise and intelligent editor. He helped Allison Mackinsey in

her efforts to become a writer by allowing her to contribute articles of local interest. His judgment was sound and his authority was firmly established.

The people of northern New England were Seth's people, and he knew them well. His tolerance, his seeming indifference, succeeded with them where force and salesmanship would have failed. Everyone in Peyton Place said that Seth never used the Times as a weapon, nor even during political campaigns, and this was the truth. Seth published items of interest to the residents of his town and the surrounding towns. Whatever world news he printed came from the wires of the Associated Press, and Seth commented or enlarged upon it in his editorials. "Social items and town gossip of a watered-down nature, that's what you get in the times," other newspaper editors in other parts of the state were apt to say. Yet during the first few years which Seth had owned the paper, he had not only succeeded in getting a new high school built in his town, but also in getting Memorial Park built and funds appropriated for its care and maintenance. He had raised much of the money that went into the building of the Peyton Place Hospital, and through the pages of the Times volunteers were recruited for the building of a new fire house. For years Seth, in his tolerant, unforceful fashion, saw to it that his town grew and prospered.²⁷

Although the town editor possessed a certain indirect power over the people, the usual comment about him was that he was sound in his judgment and served the best interests of his community.

The Town Magnate

The distinctive feature of a small town is its ability to subsist as an independent unit. The village,

defined as a group of farmers living closely together, supplied its needs from the land around, but for a small town certain industry is necessary. The main population is supported by the industry and not from farming. It is often a factory, mill, or plant, centrally located, and locally owned by one man in the community.

The industrial magnate in the town exerts much influence, for he controls the lives of a large part of the population. His position gives him an authority no professional man possesses. He is the big stick in the small town.

Small-town literature does not present the financial dictator favorably. He is created as a cold and cruel man, capable of illegal transactions for his own benefit. In most instances he has risen to the position he holds either by inheritance or through a series of successful opportunities.

In Spoon River, Thomas Rhodes held his employees in servitude. He dictated the business policies, and controlled almost every aspect of their lives. His power approached the absolute, for it included not only his store and bank, but also the church. Eugene Carman, a clerk in his store, recalls his own wasted life under the feet of his boss. When his frustration is too great to bear, he drops dead from apoplexy.

RHODES' slave! Selling shoes and gingham,
 Flour and bacon, overalls, clothing, all
 day long
 For fourteen hours a day for three hundred
 and thirteen days
 For more than twenty years,
 Saying "Yes'm" and "Yes, sir" and "Thank you"
 A thousand times a day, and all for fifty
 dollars a month.
 Living in this stinking room in the rattle-
 trap "Commercial."
 And compelled to go to Sunday School, and
 to listen
 To the Rev. Abner Peet one hundred and four
 times a year
 For more than an hour at a time,
 Because Thomas Rhodes ran the church
 As well as the store and the bank.
 So while I was tying my necktie that morning
 I suddenly saw myself in the glass:
 My hair all gray, my face like a sodden pie.
 So I cursed and cursed: You damned old thing!
 You cowardly dog! You rotten pauper!
 You Rhodes slave! Till Roger Baughman
 Thought I was having a fight with someone,
 And looked through the transom just in time
 To see me fall on the floor in a heap
 From a broken vein in my head.²⁸

Ezra Pink in How Spoon River tells of his rise to
 power. On his tomb is inscribed "Blessed are the dead which
 die in the Lord." He has spent his life in achieving his
 personal ambitions, and has been successful beyond the
 wildest expectations, but what he has contributed to life
 is negligible. All his accomplishments are embodied in his
 elaborate tomb--but he left nothing to the living.

Raised in the faith of Elliott Hawkins of old,
 Making my way as a hand on the farm,
 Then teaching school, then becoming a lawyer;
 Entering politics, cultivating the good people,
 A church member too--
 (Observe my lecture on the fall of Athens,
 Due to her immoral and un-Christian life.)

Elected a judge at last of the City Court.
 Then lifted up to a law partnership in Chicago,
 Fighting the eight hour day,
 And consolidating industries.
 On and on, up and up--always busy.
 Abstemious, the husband of one wife--nothing else!
 Called at last to the presidency of the Trust,
 Master now of tens of thousands of workers,
 And hundreds of millions of gold.
 Taking over the little canning works of Spoon River;
 Building a church in Spoon River,
 Head of Spoon River's library board
 And supervising the selection of its books.
 Building myself a great tomb in Spoon River,
 For which these words are the inscription:
 "Blessed are the dead which die in the Lord."29

In The View From Pompey's Head Mico Higgins had a golden touch. Every enterprise he undertook became a good investment. Although he had once lived among the Channel people, he had achieved distinction. As a boy in the Irish settlement, he had discovered that a drink served by a local evangelist had certain medicinal value. He developed the product into a health drink and called it Peppo. The endeavor became immediately successful. Within a short time the profits made him the richest man in town.

While Mico was growing up, he suffered under the social restrictions that were so strong in Pompey's Head. When wealth came his way, he was determined to control the people and things which had always been denied him. He married into the Blackford family, one of the oldest, most aristocratic families in the community; he controlled many of the members of other families by taking them into his

business; and he purchased Mulberry, the old mansion formerly owned by the Blackfords. His one remaining ambition was to become a member of the exclusive Light Infantry Club, and he had his employees working on that.

Anson Page attended a party given in his honor at Mulberry. Mico had always looked up to Anson, but while the lawyer lived in Pompey's Head, the two were of different social strata. Anson thus represented one of the few people who were untouched by Mico's influence. As the party progressed, Mico offered Anson \$10,000 a year to represent the Pappo Company in New York. The fee was exorbitant, large enough to cause Anson to become suspicious. He suddenly was horrified when he realized Mico was trying to buy him as he had the others he wished to control.

A kind of film dropped across Mico's eyes, and it was not until then that Anson understood. It needed the mention of ten thousand dollars to drive it home. Mico was trying to buy him. He had bought Ian Garrick and all the other Ian Garricks and he had bought Mulberry and in his own mind he had bought Dinah Blackford and God knows what else he had bought, and now he was trying to buy him. To buy a person was to break him, to effect a very special kind of humiliation, and there must be a lot of people whom it had pleased Mico Higgins to break.

Anson felt that he had had a narrow escape. Having himself never wanted to break or humiliate anyone, it was momentarily unnerving to think that Mico Higgins would have liked to break and humiliate him. That ancient grudge must still rankle, or, if not that, coldly and dispassionately, Mico wanted to see what happened when he turned the screws. He must have heard that every man had his

price, and he must have wanted to see if the price in this instance could be set at ten thousand a year.³⁰

Leslie Harrington held the power in Peyton Place. He was an obnoxious person who was always conscious of his influence and would not hesitate to use it to satisfy his own ego.

It excited Leslie Harrington to know that people who hated him nevertheless felt impelled to tolerate him. To Harrington, this was the proof of his success and it renewed in him, every time it happened, a rich sense of the power he wielded. It was no secret in Peyton Place that there was not a single issue that could come to a town vote with any assurance of success unless Harrington was first in favor of it. He was not in the least ashamed of the fact that on various occasions he called his millworkers together and said, "Well, fellows, I'd feel pretty damned good if we didn't vote to put up a new grade school this year. I'd feel so goddamned good that I'd feel inclined to give everybody in this shop a five per cent bonus the week after next." Beth Buswell, in whose veins flowed the blood of a crusader, was as helpless before Harrington as was a farmer who had fallen behind in his mortgage payments.³¹

He lived on Chestnut Street with his sheltered teenage son, and gave the boy whatever he desired. Consequently the boy grew up morally corrupt and despised by practically everyone.

He became involved with Betty Anderson, the daughter of a mill clerk, and Leslie paid the girl \$250 to keep the incident quiet. Instead of seeking an abortion, as Leslie

30

Fasso, p. 332.

31

Peyton Place, pp. 36-37.

had recommended, the girl went to New York, gave birth to a son, and worked in a cafe.

The father of the child was killed shortly afterward, and the old man was left without a family. He found Betty and persuaded her to return to the town. She was able to extract many concessions from Leslie, including a house and regular allotment. Leslie wanted the mother and child to live in the house on Chestnut Street. As the episode ended, Leslie was certain that he would eventually get his way.

Leslie stopped and looked at it, stared at it as if his eyes could see right through the walls--and right into the bitter, unforgiving heart of Betty Anderson, his grandson's mother. It was not only little Rodd's love that made Leslie appear younger these days; it was also the smell of battle. He was locked with Betty in a clash of wills. Nothing made him feel younger than a good fight.

He looked at the house and thought, you've won the first battle, Betty, but the war isn't over yet. Before I die, little Roddy will be living in the big house with me.³²

The preceding characters are necessary to the functioning of the town as an individual and distinct entity. From a sociological standpoint they are the town, for without their leadership there would be little more than a mere group of people. The minister, the teacher, the doctor, the editor and the financial magnate made the town and gave it its unique characteristics.

CHAPTER THREE

THE MISFITS

The town has other personalities who are not necessary to its progress but nevertheless are characteristic. These are the skeptic and the drunk. If they had lived in the large cities, they would have gone practically unnoticed, but as they appear in the daily life of the community, they are constantly brought to the town's attention.

The authors of small-town literature treat these characters sympathetically. As they often stand in direct contrast to the town's ambitious activities, these rejected people are used to reveal the town's defects. For this reason they are important in this study.

The Town Skeptic

Many of the towns had an obstinate individual whom they called the town atheist, but the term was not always accurately applied. Some of the skeptics had no real quarrel with God; they were rebelling against what the town had established as "God." The object of their rebellion may have been the people who formed snobbish little cliques in the name of religion.

Tom Hard of Winesburg declared himself an agnostic and was ardent in his efforts to convince others. Tom had been married, but his wife died, leaving him with a daughter. The agnostic was so busy in his philosophy that he neglected the greatest blessing in his life.

Her father gave her but little attention, and her mother was dead. The father spent his time talking and thinking of religion. He proclaimed himself an agnostic, and was so absorbed in destroying the ideas of God that had crept into the minds of his neighbors that he never saw God manifesting himself in the little child that, half-forgotten, lived here and there on the bounty of her dead mother's relatives.¹

A stranger came to the town. In the city he had been an alcoholic, and he felt that life in a small community would help end his drinking problem. He needed more than a new location; he needed an object to love, and for this he envied Tom Hard. Anderson draws a contrast between the two men. The atheist owned a treasure and was unable to realize its value while the stranger who realized the value did not have the possession.

The village atheist of Masters' poem defends his search for God through the poetry of Jesus and the Upanishads as being more sincere than the formal orthodox worship of Spoon River.

Ye young debaters over the doctrine
Of the soul's immortality,
I who lie here was the village atheist,
Talkative, contentious, versed in the
arguments of the infidels.
But through a long sickness
Coughing myself to death
I read the Upanishads and the poetry of Jesus
And they lighted a torch of hope and
intuition
And desire which the shadow,
Leading me swiftly through the covers of
darkness,
Could not extinguish.

! Kinosburg, Ohio, p. 166.

Listen to me, ye who live in the senses
 And think through the senses only:
 Immortality is an achievement;
 And only those who strive mightily
 Shall possess it.²

Vincent Marsh in The Brimming Cup did not devote his criticism to religion alone. He approached all subjects and people cynically, but in his criticism there was often some truth.

Each year the people of Ashley gathered to observe the annual blooming of the cereus. Nearly everyone came to view the event, though few really cared. They praised the proud owner and willingly acknowledged their admiration for the woman through whose efforts they were able to enjoy the spectacle. Vincent Marsh, however, saw this as an escape from boredom, and as for their love for the woman, "They don't love her! They're not capable of it."³

There was some truth in Marsh's criticism, but his appraisal is bitter. A more likable man is Miles Bjornstam of Main Street. He performed odd jobs in the community and was very outspoken. He recognized the faults and falseness of Gopher Prairie and was forever reminding the people of their shortcomings. Sinclair Lewis gives this description: "The universal sign of winter was the town handyman--Miles Bjornstam, a tall, thick, red-mustached bachelor, opinionated atheist, general-store arguer, cynical Santa Claus."⁴

² Spoon River Anthology, p. 249.

³ Dorothy Canfield Fisher, The Brimming Cup (New York: Harcourt, Brace Company), p. 98.

⁴ Main Street, p. 81.

The author often chose this discontented Swede to point out many of the town's faults. His judgment, in spite of Lewis' description, was sound and revealing. Naturally he was admired by Carol Kennicott, for they had much in common. After his marriage to Bea, Carol's maid, he tried to change, to become more like other people, but he never was accepted in the town. He left the community after the death of his wife and child.

Julius Brink was regarded as a pessimist and skeptic, yet he did not condemn the town for its shortsightedness. He realized that time would change its attitude.

Most of you in Spoon River
 Were critics of each other, while I was
 a critic of life.
 And you were optimists and believers
 And I a skeptic and pessimist--Yes!
 But here was many million of years
 Building itself from mist to soil.
 And it took a half a million years
 To turn the ape man into a Greek.
 So what does it prove to show no progress
 Within the time of written records?
 If it takes as long to civilize man,
 And make his soul stand up with his body
 As it took to build the earth, what wonder?
 There's time ahead to do it in--
 And that was my faith to the last.⁵

The Town Drunk

Drinking was no real problem in most small towns. There were certain occasions when drinking was expected, and most homes kept enough liquor on hand to serve at private celebrations, but besides the town drunk, few made it a regular habit.

Thornton Wilder describes the alcoholic problem in Grovers Corners. He feels that there is no cause for alarm as alcoholics in the small towns are few, and even these are penitent during evangelistic revivals.

Woman on the balcony: Is there much drinking in Grovers Corners?

Mr. Webb: Well, ma'am, I wouldn't know what you'd call much. Saturday nights the farm hands meet down in Ellery Grenough's stable and holler some. Fourth of July I've been known to taste a drop myself--and Decoration Day, of course. We've got one or two town drunks, but they're always having remorse every time an evangelist comes to town.⁶

Drinking may not have been a general problem, but for the Grover's Corners choir director, Simon Stimson, it was a regular habit. He often attended rehearsals slightly inebriated. To some the problem was an outright disgrace, but most of the people realized it was something they must live with. As Doc Gibbs said, "Some people ain't made for small town life."

Danny Taylor of Steinbeck's The Winter of Our Discontent is more appropriately labeled the town drunk. He was the boyhood friend of Ethan Hawley, the protagonist, and it was understood that some day he would attend the United States Naval Academy. "His father sewed up the appointment every time we got a new Congressman." He was awarded honors for his first three years, but was expelled in the final year. "It killed his parents, they say, and

it killed most of Danny. All that remained was the shuffling sorrow--this wandering night sorrow oadging dimes for a pint of skull-buster."⁷

He owned a small piece of land on the outskirts of Baytown which was the only remaining portion of his family fortune. The land became valuable, as it was the only land level enough for a proposed airport. Mr. Baker, the local banker, realized this and attempted to seize it with a bottle of liquor. Ethan Hawley also recognized the value and was able to secure the remainderman's interest from his friend for \$2,000. As this was Danny's last possession, he lost his desire to live and died shortly after in an abandoned cellar. The death caused Ethan to realize his own guilt and the extent to which he had compromised his values.

Danny was still a gentleman despite his failures. He remained self-conscious and was sensitive when begging from others. "When he asks for a quarter for skull buster, his eyes beg you to forgive him because he can't forgive himself." He had not sunk to the lowest level of human decency.

Pap, the father of Huckleberry Finn, was a more hardened drunk, and never hesitated to break the law.

Twain thus describes Pap:

He was most fifty, and he looked it. His hair was long and tangled and greasy, and

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John Steinbeck, The Winter of our Discontent (New York: The Viking Press, Inc., 1961), p. 40.

hung down, and you could see his eyes shining through like he was behind vines. It was all black, no gray; so was his long, mixed-up whiskers. There warn't no color in his face, where his face showed; it was white, not like another man's white, but a white to make a body sick, a white to make a body's flesh crawl--a tree-toad white, a fish-belly white. As for his clothes--just rags, that was all. He had one ankle resting on t'other knee; the boot on that foot was busted, and two of his toes stuck through, and he worked them now and then.⁸

Fap had no scruples where money was concerned. He left St. Petersburg and deserted his son. Huckleberry Finn was taken in by the widow Douglas, and reared as a gentleman. When Huck received \$6,000 reward for helping to capture a criminal, Fap returned for the money. He could not bear to think his son was better off than he. Not only did he have no ambition himself, but he did not want his son to rise above his own position.

"Starchy clothes--very. You think you're a good deal of a big bug, don't you?"
 "Maybe I am, maybe I ain't," I says.
 "Don't you give me none o' your lip," says he.
 "You've put on considerable many frills since I been away. I'll take you down a peg before I get done with you. You're educated, too, they say--can read and write. You think you're better'n your father, now, don't you, because he can't? I'll take it out of you. Who told you you might meddle with such hifalut'n foolishness, hey?"

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"And looky here--you drop that school, you hear? I'll learn people to bring up a boy to put on airs over his own father and let on to be better'n what he is. You lemme

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catch you fooling around that school again, you hear? Your mother couldn't read, and she couldn't write, nuther, before she died. None of the family couldn't before they died. I can't; and here you're a-swelling yourself up like this. I ain't the man to stand it--you hear?"⁹

The people of the town were willing to help a desperate person whenever possible. In spite of the past record, the judge took Pap at his word when he promised to reform. It was a joy to hear Pap's humble words of reverence. The humility, however, lasted only until the family retired for the night. He slipped out of a window wearing the new clothes given him by the judge, and returned to his former ways.

The judge said it was the holiest time on record, or something like that. Then they tucked the old man into a beautiful room, which was the spare room, and in the night sometime he got powerful thirsty and clumb out onto the porch roof and slid down a stanchion and traded his new coat for a jug of forty-rod, and clumb back again and had a good old time; and toward daylight he crawled out again, drunk as a fiddler.¹⁰

Pap had the legal authority to regain custody of Huck and the money, but the judge, aware of his scandalous behaviour, postponed the civil action and made the waiting unbearable for the drunkard. He did take the boy from Widow Douglas to a cabin along the river. Pap treated his son cruelly, beat him fiercely during his extended drunks. Finally, when the punishment became unbearable, the boy escaped.

The problem of drinking in most small-town literature

9

Ibid.

10

Ibid., p. 29.

was given little attention. In Spoon River and Peyton Place, however, the subject is treated in more detail.

The conflict which took place in Spoon River between the "wet" and "dry" advocates made hypocrites of many. Such men as Editor Lindbloom spoke against drinking and used his paper to influence public opinion, while he was actually a friend of the saloon.

Against the saloons and the gambling house,
But friend to the private cellar, the back
room of the bank.
Unknown and elusive.¹¹

East Wheeland tells the situation of the newspaper under Editor Wheson, his newspaper carried the motto "The home against the saloon." The crusade to eliminate drinking only shifted the business from the saloon to the home.

Editor Wheson used to carry
At the head of his editorial column
For motto: "The home against the saloon."
And all of his life he stirred them up,
And wrung their noses to make them fight.
They quarreled to be sure, and seemed at war,
But really at heart they were always friends.
For when the battle was over, the field
Was swept, it seemed, of the vile saloon,
And taken him in to nurse his wounds,
And had him petted from cellar to garret,
Where home made beer and home made wine,
And whiskey distilled from corn and potatoes
Were served as freely, as once they were served
In Burchard's roaring grog shop!¹²

Oscar Hummel was killed one night when he mistakenly went to the judge's house instead of his friends'. The judge administered justice through the loaded stick, until

11

Spoon River Anthology, pp. 131-132.

12

The New Spoon River, p. 55.

the drunk died.

I staggered on through darkness
 There was a hazy sky, a few stars
 Which I followed as best I could
 It was nine o'clock, I was trying to get home.
 But somehow I was lost,
 Though really keeping the road.
 Then I reeled through a gate and into a yard,
 And called at the top of my voice:
 "Oh, Fiddler! Oh, Mr. Jones!"
 (I thought it was his house and he would
 show me the way home.)
 But who should step out but A. D. Blood,
 In his night shirt, waving a stick of wood,
 And roaring about the cursed saloons,
 And the criminals they made?
 "You drunken Oscar Hummel," he said,
 As I stood there weaving to and fro,
 Taking the blows from the stick in his hand
 Till I dropped down dead at his feet.¹³

Practically everyone in Peyton Place drank socially.

The MacKenzies served cocktails every evening, and no one took particular notice. The violent drinking in the town was among the shack dwellers, who stayed drunk most of the time. The most sensational scene occurred in the basement of the Sterns' home. Kenny Sterns was the town drunk. He was unable to understand his morally loose wife, and when she would leave home, he resorted to drink. The four men stayed drunk and disorderly in the cellar for several weeks. During a moment of semi-consciousness, Kenny had hallucinations of an attacker and charged the empty space with an axe in hand. The weapon fell on his own foot and he almost bled to death before Doctor Swain could save him.

The town drunk in small-town literature is to be pitied. In most instances he had suffered a great tragedy in his life and was not responsible for his failure to become an upstanding citizen.

CHAPTER FOUR

CONCLUSION

The writers after the First World War were not in revolt against the town as much as the tradition which had presented a false picture. Literature following the Goldsmith tradition created an illusion rather than a community where human beings lived. A town was not the ultimate haven where people were less sinful. These people were human, and passions, desires, and other limitations apply to them as well. Yet when the writers of the revolt era showed this human element in their work, it created a sharp contrast.

If writers like Twain, Masters, Anderson and Lewis had a didactic purpose in their writings, it was more to point out the shortcomings in the hope that the people would correct existing undesirable situations than to criticize or damage the town's reputation.

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VITA

Gerald Kerr Wells was born on June 8, 1934 in Richmond, Virginia. He attended the Richmond Public Schools. In February 1954 he graduated from Thomas Jefferson High School and was inducted into the service the following fall.

Mr. Wells spent two years in the United States Army in Erlangen, Germany. Immediately after his tour of duty ended in September 1956, he entered the University of Richmond.

He graduated from the School of Business Administration in 1960 with a B.S. degree in Business Administration. His concentration was accounting. Realizing that his interest was in teaching, Mr. Wells was admitted to the University of Richmond Graduate School in English in the fall of 1960.

After one year in graduate school he accepted a position with the Roanoke County School System. He taught for two years at William Byrd High School as an eleventh-grade English teacher. During his first year of teaching, 1961, he married the former Miss Carolyn Martin Cahoon.

He returned to the University in September 1963 to complete his graduate work.

Mr. Wells has accepted a position with the English Department of Presbyterian College for the 1964-1965 school year. He plans to begin work toward his Ph. D. degree in English in the summer of 1965.