Talk	of the	Town:	small-town	narrative	in twentieth	-century	American
			cult	ural produ	ction		

by

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### **Abstract**

This thesis contends that small-town narrative exists as a discrete form in historic and contemporary American cultural production, and that its codification occurred in and around the interwar period. By parsing this narrative into four distinct themes — orality, spatiality, migration and mobility, and ritual and routine — I argue that small-town America, a ubiquitous community construct in American culture, endures because of its narrative accessibility, familiarity, and usefulness as a focaliser of both inclusive and exclusive American identity and experience. Developing contemporary American studies and cultural social geography, 'Talk of the Town' interrogates the national fascination with small-town America in textual and visual representation through the lens of genre, concluding that in both its *dominant* and *counter* modes there is a common syntax and language through which it is articulated.

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#### **Thesis Introduction**

The term 'small-town America' is a ubiquitous one in American popular culture and has enjoyed seemingly perennial reproduction across creative and artistic media over the last 150 years. It has become the bedrock of presidential campaigns, where it has long symbolised an ostensible humility and authenticity in the candidate; it is often used as the contrasting socio-economic pole to an increasingly urbanised nation, providing a counterbalance to America's financial institutions like Wall Street and the excesses of modernity; and it has come to approximate the vast geography of the rural United States into a homogenous community structure. It exists as one of the more familiar symbols of ideological American space, providing a unique point of cultural origin and terminus simultaneously. The small town is often, as this thesis demonstrates, metonymical for all of rural America.

Its cultural currency exists, too, in far more imaginative terms, with small-town

America becoming one of the leading twentieth-century fictional settings and creative

muses, from the cinema of Frank Capra and Steven Spielberg where sentiment, nostalgia,

and so-called everyday life are anchored, to its scathing literary critiques (Sinclair Lewis'

Main Street, 1920) and scandalous representation (Grace Metalious' Peyton Place, 1956).

Summarised by David M. Cook in the foreword of his anthology The Small Town in American

Literature (1974), 'the small town has proved to be rich in materials for writers of

imaginative literature', though even the most cursory of glances at American culture shows

that 'literature' is just one facet of the small town's continued imaginative representation.¹

Cook's assertion that 'the small town in America is almost legend' is of course tied

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup> David M. Cook, *The Small Town in American Literature* (New York: Dodd, Mean and Company, 1974), p. 11.

inexorably to its continued proliferation in American culture; it exists as a self-sustaining and deeply complex legend, built on ideas of American 'innocence', white privilege, and social inequity.

This thesis makes a necessary intervention into the limited scholarship on small-town America and its influences by asking how such a myth structure sustains itself specifically in imaginative media and, more importantly, why it carries such narrative valency in American popular and creative culture. Specifically, this thesis contends that a generic form in its own right – termed here as *small-town narrative* – can be clearly delineated as a discrete literary and artistic mode complete with its own parameters and conditions. By positing this form, I will clearly delineate the evolution and lineages of small-town America's representation in American popular culture, clarifying both its past legacies and future trajectory.

This narrative form is part of a complex though recognisable product of America's small-town 'self-fashioning', in Nathanael T. Booth's words, and results from a nation in which its own myths become structurally integral.<sup>2</sup> If 'Main Street', as former Poet Laureate Robert Pinsky euphemistically suggests, is how the nation 'might dream of itself', then this dissertation's narratological investigation shows the artistic representation of this dream, and all its permutations across verbal and visual material, to be a complex, ubiquitous, and highly stylistic one.<sup>3</sup> As a means of unpacking questions of national and local identity, of environmental conditioning, and of community psychologies, few forms offer as comprehensive a focaliser as small-town narrative. This thesis intervenes in the cultural

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>2</sup> Nathanael T. Booth, *American Small-Town Fiction 1940-1960* (Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland & Company, Inc., 2019), p. 1.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>3</sup> Robert Pinksy, Thousands of Broadways: Dreams and Nightmares of the American Small Town (London: University of Chicago Press, 2009), p. 4.

studies of rural, local American space by charting the narratological development of the nation's central community construct and showing how, across literature, photography, and art, small-town narrative remains one of the undying motifs in American cultural production.

### A narrative investigation into small-town America

As I have noted above, 'Talk of the Town' is a narratological study into small-town America's continued reproduction in American popular culture. It resolves this conceptual 'problem' of perennial representation, or the question of why small-town America remains so ubiquitous a symbol, by conceptualising a small-town narrative generic model. I will demonstrate that this model was codified specifically in the interwar years (1917-1940) where the small town, across American media, reached a particular peak in terms of narrative representation.

The model of small-town narrative that is posited by this thesis is chiefly concerned with four themes that appear mutually across myriad verbal and visual texts, and that together comprise a common syntax that, when formally assembled, is unique to the small town. These four themes comprise the four chapters of this thesis: oral culture, spatiality, migration and mobility, and ritual and routine. They are not, of course, exhaustive but are principally featured in all of the primary texts studied in this thesis and when taken together provide a compelling model, one which is reproduced frequently across media concerned with the small town. The unique intersection of these four themes results in the definition of a generic model that has myriad applicability not simply across American disciplines and media but across temporalities too; these themes are timeless and recognisable yet deeply complex. Scholarship of the small town frequently engages with one or two of these themes, though there is rarely a coherency to the discussions beyond the level or survey.

This thesis attends to these four themes across disciplines so as to offer the first synthetic study of small-town narrative as genre, specified through a carefully selected group of primary materials.

The final important theoretical framework upon which this dissertation is built, and which must necessarily be introduced before the primary material is outlined, concerns the polarised notions of what I term 'dominant' and 'counter' small-town narrative. This polarised groupage of my primary materials – which, as in the case of all such categories, occasionally intersects – allows verbal and visual texts that directly contrast and oppose one another in theme, ideology, and purpose to be compared through their mutual reliance on a set of narrative tropes, conditions, and forms. Scholars have repeatedly called for a renewed definition of narratology, specifically for one which has 'precise semantic features [...] such as action, temporality, causality, and world-construction'; this thesis contends that small-town narrative offers a novel form which not only emblemizes these very ideals but which offers new insights into American culture and identity.<sup>4</sup>

The first term – dominant small-town narrative – is the recognisable form of small-town representation in American popular culture and memory, and has been written about extensively in the scholarship on rural America. Indeed, the 'Main Street' epithet alluded to in such scholarship often metonymically denotes this particular ideology. This dominant, nostalgic, and sentimentalised vision of small-town life as it exists in specific American cultures is bound to what might be considered the progenitor of all such communities, both historically and metaphorically: the New England village. Brooke Wortham-Galvin notes how 'the New England village has symbolised how to make community in a new nation [...] firmly

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>4</sup> Jan Christoph Meister, Tom Kindt, and Wilhelm Schernus, *Narratology Beyond Literary Criticism: Mediality, Disciplinarity* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2005), p. 3.

anchored to the pastoral idyll'; Caroline Blinder's photographic studies describe small-town

New England as the 'cradle of American democracy' and as 'quintessentially American';

Daniel J. Elazar refers to the 'commonwealth of communities' founded via the New England villages of revolutionary America.<sup>5</sup>

This utopian vision of American community thus forms the historic backbone of what is termed herein as 'dominant' small-town narrative. The texts representing small-town America through this mode often endorse this historic myth of the American rural community space as sacrosanct, unimpeachable, and typically a place of virtue and a feeling of 'home'. This dominant ideology was particularly visible during the Depression when many rural Americans were forced into city-bound exodus from impoverished rural spaces; protecting this formerly revered site of American community and identity became paramount to many writers and artists studied in this thesis, who will be outlined in detail shortly.

The conceptualisation of a 'dominant' small-town model necessitates the need for an inverse, contrasting representation, and this thesis contends that many small-town texts, both verbal and visual, are indicative of precisely this, termed herein as 'counter' small-town narrative. In these counter narratives, we see a departure from the reverential, positive representations of small-town America seen in dominant narratives in favour of highly critical, nuanced representations of provincial life where community is riven with ennui, and repressed vices. Chief among such examples is Sherwood Anderson's *Winesburg*, *Ohio* (1919) and its cycle of small-town melancholy which challenges the nineteenth-century

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>5</sup> Brooke Wortham-Galvin, 'The Fabrication of Place in America: The Fictions and Traditions of the New England Village', *Traditional Dwellings and Settlements Review*, 21 (Spring, 2010), 21-34, (p. 23); Caroline Blinder, *The American Photo-Text 1930-1960* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2019), p. 158; Daniel J. Elazar, 'Land and Liberty in American Civil Society', *Pubil* 18 (Autumn, 1988), 1-29, (p. 5).

idyll, presenting the small town as a space of torpor and absence. Such narratives rebuke the idea that the small town is a place of safety and security by exaggerating its flaws, from the benign (distrust of modernity) to the deeply problematic (racism, violence).

By contrasting these two approaches I conclude that they are far more proximal than they appear, given that they rely on a mutual syntax and theme structure. Both are necessary in unpacking the wider cultural mythologies of small-town America and go a great deal toward answering why it continues to dominate in American cultural production.

Comparing texts like *Winesburg, Ohio* with a canonical small-town celebratory text such as Thornton Wilder's *Our Town* (1938) shows how memory and existentialism can permeate both dominant and counter small-town narrative, and how questions of identity and belonging plague both rural America's detractors and advocates alike. By looking at the codification of this genre in the interwar period, and then analysing how this genre is bisected into dominant and counter variants, the shape of small-town American narrative is revealed as one of America's chief cultural constructs.

## The small town in American scholarship

The secondary literature dedicated to the small town in American historic and popular culture usually comprises two approaches. The first approach, representing the most common form of small-town scholarship, is the cultural study. These studies frequently use the author's own home town as a central anchor and then consider the socio-economic properties of small-town America in the nation's wider history, often traversing region and state in analyses that tend toward macro questions of national identity.

The antecedent of such scholarship is Richard Lingeman's Small-Town America: A Narrative History 1620 - The Present (1980) which compares the regional communities of rural America and describes the small town as 'a world within itself'. 6 Contemporary successors to Lingeman's cultural theory include Richard O. Davies (Main Street Blues, 1998), Miles Orvell (The Death and Life of Main Street, 2012), and Robert Wuthnow (Small Town America: Finding Community, Shaping the Future, 2013), all of whom frame their texts as cultural studies that take the ideology of Main Street and offer a broad study of its cultural ramifications. As stated, this research frequently invokes biographical information and indeed data collection – reaching back in part to the watershed sociological study Middletown (1929) written by Robert and Helen Lynd. In Orvell's case, a cultural mapping via literature and cinematic influences is sometimes adopted to explain the propagation of small-town America as symbol and construct, though this often falls short in fully explaining both the longevity of this construct and indeed its narratological valences. Orvell terms 'Main Street' as the most 'American of places' and writes of 'the small town as constructed space in American culture and as a powerful ideology with both symbolic and material dimensions'; he is aware, as many of the scholars of the small town are, that small-town America exists as far more than a benign community symbol in American popular culture.<sup>7</sup>

The secondary branch of scholarship concerning the American small town is less immediately definable and often comprises single-author studies or work in which certain aspects of America's small-town *topos* are alluded to through more conventional, larger theoretical frameworks. For example, bell hooks' *Belonging: A Culture of Place* (2009)

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>6</sup> Richard Lingeman, *Small Town America: A Narrative History 1620 - The Present* (New York: G.P Putnam's Sons, 1980), p. 36.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>7</sup> Miles Orvell, *The Death and Life of Main Street: Small Towns in American Memory, Space, and Community* (University of North Carolina Press, 2014), p. xi.

explores notions of acceptance, belonging, and of 'being wedded to the world' through the context of Black experience in contemporary America. hooks' recalls her life in rural, segregated Kentucky and alludes to 'the extent to which my sense and sensibility were deeply informed by the geography of place'; although certainly not a small town study in its strictest sense, hooks undoubtedly relies on the conceit of the small-town community and its particularly virulent, reactionary traits to sketch a wider idea of America. Other studies such as Helga Leitner's article 'Spaces of Encounters' (2012) deal specifically with issues of immigration in small-town America; Sally Bayley's *Homes on the Horizon* (2010) considers the ideology of home and its permutations in American culture, with a frequent bias toward the small town; Gabrielle Esperdy's *Modernizing Main Street* (2008) focuses on architecture and spatiality in small-town America as a means of tracing cultural and industrial change.

Both of these groupings, figured here for ease of understanding as *cultural* and *thematic* studies, are fundamental to my study and contextualise much of what first drew me to investigate the small town as a recurrent symbol in American verbal and visual texts. That said, neither the cultural nor thematic studies of, or related to, the small town adequately answer what is principally the most urgent question concerning its continued dominance in American creative and public memory. Simply: *why* does small-town America seem so pervasive in American artistic and creative history? As an addendum to this, *how* do texts invoke the many ideologies and constructs of small-town America in this way, and what means do we, as researchers, have to trace such representation?

This specific line of inquiry, one that can account for the continued creative reproduction of small-town America, is taken up by this thesis. For all of the necessary and important unpacking of small-town myth structures found in Orvell, Wuthnow, and Bayley, there is no definitive model or framework that allows for such narratives to be clearly

defined, categorised, and understood both individually and within wider contexts. When, for example, Orvell references a text like Frank Capra's *It's A Wonderful Life* (1946), this is to illustrate the small town's pervasive influence in popular culture but doesn't offer a definitive explanation as to why and how it achieves such potency. This thesis intervenes in such studies by undertaking a generic, narratological investigation into how the referents and cultural legacies of the small town formally converge across verbal and visual texts, answering the continued provocation of critics, scholars and thinkers on the small town: why does this American community construct seem so obdurate, so charged, in the imaginative topography of the United States?

There have been several studies across the twentieth and twenty-first centuries which seek to undertake an adjacent approach to small-town America as a cultural production, which this thesis acknowledges and hopes to further. Ima Honaker Herron's *The Small Town in American Literature* (1939), the first study of its kind and perhaps the single biggest influence on 'Talk of the Town', undertakes a broad survey of its eponymous subject though doesn't pretend to devise a reasoning or methodology for the small town's continued artistic representation. Not since Herron's publication, however, has an extensive study sought to categorise and explain the generic properties of small-town America as it appears in narrative form, one which extrapolates the mutual properties of small-town representation across various media and unites them through genre. Pulling on this very thread, I will examine the 'untidy' and 'unruly' nature of genre within the context of America's rural artistic representation, providing conclusive reasoning for the small town's narrative significance via its generic intersections and familiar accessibility. <sup>8</sup> I take the lofty

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>8</sup> Mark Storey, *Rural Fictions, Urban Realities* (Oxford Scholarship Online: May 2013), p. 12.

claim of John Frow in *Genre* (2015) that 'the generic organization of language, images, gestures, and sound make things happen by actively shaping the way we understand the world' by showing how small-town narrative precisely achieves this, or rather a way of understanding the *United States*, through its ubiquity and narrative significance.<sup>9</sup>

More recent publications, such as Nathanael T. Booth's *American Small-Town Fiction* 1940-1960 (2019), have striven for specificity in their periodization and study, with Booth's publication taking a more localised approach to small-town fiction through a critical mapping of the small town and its core physical referents. Through his psychogeographic approach and focus specifically on mid-century 'middlebrow' fiction, Booth frames his study of small-town America through the key term of 'redemptive nostalgia', a 'remembering of the past with the goal of remaking the present' which he finds endemic to the small town. <sup>10</sup> This term is particularly useful in my discussions of dominant small-town mythology, which deals frequently in nostalgic platitudes and notions of redemption and recuperation of a past time. Booth likewise highlights early in his study the relative shortcomings of small-town scholarship which either provide too broad a survey of small-town America within American popular culture or fail to continue the landmark work of Herron – two points this thesis firmly agrees with and seeks to resolve.

Ryan Poll's Main Street and Empire: The Fictional Small Town in the Age of Globalisation (2012) examines the small town (via its literary analogues) through the conceit of the 'island community' as contrasted with global culture, and Poll writes that his study 'turns the small town into a question'. <sup>11</sup> Conversely, this dissertation seeks to turn the small

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>9</sup> John Frow, *Genre* (New York: Routledge, 2015), p. 2.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>10</sup> Booth, p. 6.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>11</sup> Ryan Poll, *Main Street and Empire: The Fictional Small Town in the Age of Globalisation* (New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 2012), p. 6.

town into an answer through a thematic study of verbal and visual primary material and the framework of *small-town narrative*. It's an answer that accounts for the small town's continued invocation in the American creative process, from literature through photography and popular illustration, and that outlines the narrative significance, allure, and consequence of this central American community ideology.

Where these texts *do* provide compelling examples and sources of small-town America's interdisciplinary representation in American life and culture, they crucially overlook what I contend is the most vital approach to understanding this construct: a narrative model through which such texts can be further identified, extrapolated, and interpreted. Fundamentally, there exists among these texts a generic model yet to be defined and fully unpacked, one which links small-town American representation together across media and temporalities. 'Talk of the Town' identifies and defines that generic model and conclusively provides a template through which all instances of small-town American representation can be identified and narratologically explained. Ultimately, it answers the myth of small-town America's ubiquity by defining its form and the conditions that make it so, and why it seems to hold so much narrative purpose for writers, filmmakers, photographers, and visual artists alike.

## Small-town America in literature, photography, and art

Operating in a synthetic, interdisciplinary mode, 'Talk of the Town' achieves the following study of dominant and counter works through a diverse, period-specific selection of primary materials across a variety of media, though the borders of this periodization are frequently challenged through broader consultation of the small town across American history. Taking

the interwar years as the central period and context for this study, with occasional slippage either side of this framing, 'Talk of the Town' operates largely with primary material published between 1911-1940.

With the primary material split into three formal categories - literature, photography, and art - this study is interested not simply in the narrative properties that can be readily ascribed to small-town America but likewise in how these properties manifest differently across forms. If indeed the small town is an 'ideological nation form', as Poll and many other scholars contend, then it is important to recognise a canon responsible for the sustaining of such a form; this thesis not only outlines what might be termed a 'small-town canon' but also posits a generic blueprint by which other texts and forms might be coopted. 12 Just as canons, more generally, should be treated with scepticism so too should the myth structures of small-town America as it has existed for the last century in American popular culture; this thesis problematises the seemingly fixed, implacable myth of Main Street via a narratological investigation of its celebrants and detractors. To achieve this, a considered approach to primary material selection, and the synthesis of multiple forms and figures, was central in the formulation of 'Talk of the Town'; to articulate a narrative that is, I argue, so pervasive in American popular culture multiple forms and media are required to best sketch its shape.

Firstly, the literature portion of my primary materials covers writers working as early as 1911 (Edith Wharton, Ethan Frome) through to the 1940 publications of Granville Hicks (Small Town) and Sherwood Anderson's later works (Home Town). In the earlier years of this period I am specifically interested in a literary movement known as the 'revolt from the

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>12</sup> Poll. p. 3.

village', a term first coined by Carl Van Doren in a 1920 article in *The Nation* which addressed the growing resentment for small-town provincialism in a group of writers including Mary Austin, Sinclair Lewis, and Sherwood Anderson who enacted a 'wholesale rejection of the fantasy of a liveable small-town ethos'. Within this group, and across the four chapters, I examine Wharton's *Ethan Frome*; Mary Austin's *A Woman of Genius* (1912); Willa Cather's prairie novels (*The Song of the Lark*, 1915; *My Antonia*, 1918); Edgar Lee Masters' *Spoon River Anthology* (1915); and Sherwood Anderson's *Winesburg, Ohio*.

Examining this 'revolt' literature through the generic model of small-town narrative, the common referents, language, and ideology in each makes clear that there is a formal, narrative commonality between texts of this kind.

Unsurprisingly, given the framework of 'revolt' uniting these texts, this section of primary material offers unequivocal 'counter' narratives to the dominant small-town myth structure. The oscillation between dominant and counter small-town narratives across not simply the period chosen by this study but by the years preceding and following it too is also important to 'Talk of the Town', not least because this variation mirrors the so-called evolution of the small town itself in general discourse and socio-economic terms. For example, the late-nineteenth century works of New England regionalism, denoted in this study through the work of Sarah Orne Jewett and Mary Wilkins Freeman, mark a period of general reverential treatment of the small town as an (exclusive) community construct built on tradition. Moving into the 1910s and 1920s, where my periodisation begins, the small town's position as the apotheosis of American community becomes untenable as an increased scepticism of modernity found itself manifest in the literature of the period.

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>13</sup> Pinksy Robert, *Thousands of Broadways: Dreams and Nightmares of the American Small Town* (London: University of Chicago Press, 2009), p. 78.

Tracking these changes in the so-called timeline of small-town America, and its evolution in the cultural imaginary, dovetails neatly with my wider narratological study into its generic properties.

The fluidity and evolution of this central, national narrative – the myth of Main Street – was repurposed further still during the Depression, when verbal and visual texts sought to recuperate the small town as the last, best hope for America via nostalgic, sentimental works. Chief among such texts, and central to this study, is Thornton Wilder's play *Our Town* (1938). Wilder's nostalgic look at life in the idyllic New England small town of Grover's Corners seems every bit the equivalent of those earlier regionalist works, where conservative tradition remains the chief narrative leitmotif. Indeed, a perfect example of this study's intersecting narratological investigations is the fact that texts such as Sherwood Anderson's *Home Town* (1940), written later in his career, marks a significant tone change from *Winesburg*, *Ohio* and instead embraces the Depression-era context of small-town nostalgia; that is to say Anderson's authorial register moves from a counter narrative to a dominant one. This slippage between periods and tones is nevertheless important in understanding how such texts can continue to be identified as small-town narrative and what the implications of such a fluid genre are.

Alongside literature, visual texts are likewise considered in this study to show the breadth of small-town narrative's generic properties. One aspect of this study's visual component is my analysis of the Farm Security Administration's Depression-era photographic project. Looking at this vast collection of over 200,000 government-sanctioned photographs, produced by a select group of celebrated contemporary photographers including Dorothea Lange and Walker Evans, comparisons are drawn not merely between the visual rhetoric of each photographer's rural American scene but

between the photography and the literature of the period also. This thesis is particularly interested in Ben Shahn, an artist by trade who took up photographic work with the FSA in the 1930s and who was, as John Raeburn describes him, part of the 'second tier' of artistic talent employed by the government project.<sup>14</sup>

Whilst his fame may not have been as great as Evans or Lange, Shahn remains a vital figure in small-town narratology and was responsible for producing compelling examples of visual rural narrative, particularly in his series titled 'The Other Side of the Tracks' conducted in 1938 in London, Ohio. Shahn's work in impoverished rural small towns, paying particular focus to underrepresented demographics, namely Black Americans, marks his work clearly as counter small-town narrative, and this thesis investigates the ways in which Shahn sequences these small-town vignettes into a wider commentary on American social change during the Depression. By examining his focus on orality, attention to the spatial construction of Main Street, and his clear interests in migration and mobility, his work will be marked as typical of small-town narrative even in its photographic form.

I also discuss the proliferation of photographic journalism during and following the Depression, with attention paid to *Life* magazine and its nostalgic endorsement of dominant small-town myths via their attention to white, conservative rural traditions in, for example, articles like 'A Small Town's Saturday Night' from 1942. The blurring between documentary and narrative occurring across the FSA's work and the photographic journalism of *Life* magazine showcases how non-literary mediums relied on the same themes of orality, spatial awareness, migration, and everyday routine to craft narratives out of the seemingly mundane.

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>14</sup> John Raeburn, *A Staggering Revolution: A Cultural History of Thirties Photography* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2006), p. 108.

Providing the visual counterpoint to Shahn not simply in register but also in form, and finding more commonality with *Life's* dominant overtures, are the illustrations of Norman Rockwell whose work is perhaps the most readily recognisable and familiar in wider American popular culture of all the primary material consulted in this thesis. Rockwell's five-decade tenure at *The Saturday Evening Post*, as well as artwork completed before and after this position, resulted in highly circulated, highly reproduced images of an older, conservative America, replete with the symbolism and imagery of dominant, exclusive small-town narrative. By examining Rockwell's vignette style, wherein a small portion of everyday life is depicted, as well as his wider small-town New England universe which dominates all such scenes implicitly, I will explore how the narratives of everyday life are coded in Rockwell's work to be quintessentially *of* the small town. The resulting effect on Rockwell's readership and intended audience is a sustained endorsement of white, heteronormative hegemony.

In this selection of transmedial primary texts, there is a synthesis of meaning and theme across disciplines at stake; the ubiquity and pervasive nature of small-town America, as a setting or vehicle in American narrative, necessitates that multiple disciplines and forms engage with it directly. As such, this thesis ensures each of these disciplines, across verbal and visual material, are attended to and, more importantly, are unified through a common syntax and thematic framework. Of course, as with any study of this kind, which engages with such a significant, popular concept in American narrative and cultural production, there must naturally be omissions and creative decisions behind what is prioritised. A particular omission in this thesis is the 'southern' small town as it exists in the works of, for example, William Faulkner, Carson McCullers, and Zora Neale Hurston, the latter of whom is briefly discussed in Chapter One.

Although the work of these authors and their approach to small-town narrative has informed my discussions and creative thinking about small-town America more broadly, I feel that the southern small town, as a discrete construct, speaks to a more complex and localised community structure; in the words of John Agnew there is a 'continuing cultural distinctiveness' regarding the South that cannot be adequately engaged with in a study of this kind. The south cannot be as easily subsumed into the grander small-town narrative that I propose exists mutually across northern small towns, ranging from New England to the middle-frontier. Agreeing with William M. Reynold's hypothesising of the South as a place of metaphorical 'mist', ideological myopia, and a place of great 'complexities', I have chosen to focus on small-town America as it exists beyond the discrete regionality of the south whilst recognising its undoubted presence in my wider research.

The southern town's legacy as distinctly othered and separate in America, with its separatist identity and political ideologies following the Civil War through to the midtwentieth-century, requires a different kind of study to that which I undertake here. William Faulkner, as a particular example of a southern writer to whom elements of my small-town narrative model certainly pertain, engages with a different kind of American mythmaking in his southern towns and is a writer to whom the small town itself is not *quite* a central concern – I feel discussions of his canonical Yoknapatawpha County would have ranged into general place-writing rather than the fixed spatiality identified in other texts such as *Winesburg, Ohio* and *Spoon River Anthology*. Other writers not covered in this thesis, though whose work continues to be a part of my sustained interrogation of small-town

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>15</sup> American Space / American Place: Geographies of the Contemporary United States, ed. by John Agnew and Jonathan M. Smith, (New York: Routledge, 2002), p. 4.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>16</sup> William M. Reynolds, 'The Southern Mist: The Shaping of American Culture and Politics', *Counterpoints*, 412 (2013), 17-33, (p. 18-20).

narrative more generally, include Sinclair Lewis and Carson McCullers. The latter of these writers likewise writes of the southern 'mill town' in a manner that feels somewhat ideologically separate from the New England villages and Midwestern burgs fictionalised by her contemporaries, befitting a project with a slightly altered purview. Lewis' *Main Street* is perhaps the most canonical small-town text of my period and whilst Lewis is still discussed in reference to his wider ideological beliefs, as seen in Chapter One, this text does not form the basis of larger discussions around the regionally distinct Midwestern small town. Lewis' canonicity, as well as the novel's distinct similarities with other Midwestern writers considered in this study – chief among whom is Mary Austin, who offers a more nuanced take – means that questions of small-town narrative are better answered in texts of equal valency, though which remain slightly outside the remit of traditional scholarship. Put simply, the New England 'village', the Midwestern small town, and frontier borderland communities better speak to the holistic concept of small-town narrative in this study and, across the photography, artwork, and literature considered here, this through-line and narrative consistency becomes apparent.

### Small-town narrative as genre

The structure of this thesis is, as has been referenced above, centred around the four themes I have specifically identified as the core tenets of small-town narrative. Whilst these themes might readily be identified in other contexts, such as the 'city novel', I argue here that they coexist in such a fashion within the environment of small-town narrative that, taken together, they codify and shape a specific genre. Chapter One focuses on oral culture and its many forms and traditions, with particular emphasis placed on gossip and small-

town speech patterns as both healthy expressions of social exchange and as malicious features of the bored and isolated. Whilst these contrasting examples are explored there is, too, frequent discussion concerning the points of intersection between dominant and counter narrative and their usage of oral culture. For example, the use of small-town speech in *Winesburg*, *Ohio*, a counter small-town narrative, describes *both* oral culture's damaging effects (gossip and rumour) as well as its ameliorating, positive effects on the ennui of the town's citizens; what we quickly find is that it is rare to identify a small-town narrative text that is singular and one-note in its application of these themes. This chapter concludes that small-town narrative owes its historical and cultural formation on the past traditions of oral storytelling, present in the chosen narrative styles of several texts consulted here, from the frame narrative of *Ethan Frome* to Wilder's 'stage manager' character. To consider the small town is to first and foremost hear the voices of its inhabitants and the private narratives they construct within such spaces through exchange, gossip, singing, storytelling, and writing.

In Chapter Two, I attend to the spatiality of small-town America and to the familiar texture, referents, and physical construction of these spaces both physically and ideologically in the American cultural imaginary. For example, in the dominant narratives of small-town America this thesis explores a similar line of inquiry to the celebrated cultural geographer John Brinckerhoff Jackson, who argues that the 'qualities of a sense of place' are a 'lively awareness of the familiar environment', 'a ritual repetition', and 'a sense of fellowship based on shared experience'. This chapter attends to similar ideas by focusing upon the spatial referents of small-town America, namely the commercial spaces of general

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>17</sup> Joseph Brickerhoff Jackson, as quoted in, Robert E. Innis, 'America as Assemblage of Placeways: Toward a Meshwork of Lifelines', *The Journal of Speculative Philosophy*, 31 (2017), 40-62, (p. 54).

stores, bars, barbershops, and the like; the domestic space and the privacy of home interiors; to the outskirts of towns and the infrastructures that comprise these communities, from roads to the railroad. This chapter focuses on the physical make-up of the individual towns and communities found across my chosen texts in which narrative structures, too, reveal themselves, from the ordered and proximal Main Street of *Winesburg, Ohio*, the isolated outposts of Willa Cather's frontier towns, through to the imaginary construction that takes place in the minds of Thornton Wilder's theatre audience.

By examining how regional differences and shifting proximities manifest across small-town texts, more can be understood about how the physicality of small-town America is essential to constructing its narratives. From facilitating social exchange to enforcing isolation, it is evident that the small town proper continues to be far more than a backdrop in these narratives. Elsewhere, the chapter argues that attention to the domestic sphere, in particular, is often of vital importance to narrators of the small town; it can be both a place of safety and comfort (Norman Rockwell's illustrations) or a claustrophobic metonym of the isolated town beyond (*Ethan Frome*). Ultimately, the atypical preoccupation with space, place, and physical construction native to small-town narrative, both dominant and counter, sets it apart from other narrative modes and marks how the myths of Main Street rely on a realistic, navigable reproduction.

Following this discussion of spatiality and small-town physicality, 'Talk of the Town' turns toward questions of mobility and migration in Chapter Three, examining the work of scholars such as Peter Freese and Janis P. Stout who claim that the 'journey narrative' is a central one in both American literature and life. This chapter is particularly focused on instances of failed travel, or indeed 'escape' as Stout frequently terms it, in counter small-town narrative, where the shackles of provincialism holdfast against 'sequences of escape'

so dominant elsewhere in American culture. <sup>18</sup> The first section of this chapter looks specifically at the role of infrastructure and industrial modernity within small-town narrative, from the railroad to the automobile. It considers the role of vehicular movement in not only aiding the physical construction of small towns and allowing their denizens, and thus their narrators, to move more freely, but in standardising notions of closeness and distance too. Visible in Mary Austin's protagonist Olivia Lattimore and her awareness from a young age of the 'fourwent ways of the world' that stretched beyond, indefinitely, from the perimeter of her lonesome Midwestern town, as well as Cather's nostalgic representation of the 'train whistle' in *The Song of the Lark*, notions of mobility and transit are vital in small-town narratives. They promise a freedom rarely realised, and can be a sorrowful reminder of one's own entrapment just as easily as they can be a means of escape. <sup>19</sup>

This chapter continues by exploring issues of immigration and racial othering in small-town texts, paying particular attention to Ben Shahn's racially-conscious Ohio photography which uses the common metaphor of the 'other side of the tracks' to document poverty and segregation in the small-town Midwest. The final section of this chapter considers one of the more fundamental tenets of small-town literature in particular, and a core of counter narrative, which is rural-to-urban exodus. So often in counter, 'revolt' narratives, one perceives the desire for escape, or the rarer realised escape, to an urban centre a symbolic rebuking of small-town conservatism. This chapter section explores the flight from, and eventual return to, small-town America as visible through Willa Cather and Mary Austin's female protagonists and Anderson's adolescent quasi-protagonist George

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>18</sup> Janis P. Stout, *The Journey Narrative in American Literature: Patterns and Departures* (Westport, Connecticut: 1983), p. 38.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>19</sup> Mary Hunter Austin, *A Woman of Genius* (New York: Doubleday, 1912), p. 6; Willa Cather, *The Song of the Lark* (Maine: Kennebec Large Print, 2010), p. 139.

Willard. Likewise, the inverse narratives wherein escape or flight is met with scepticism, often found in dominant narratives including *Our Town* and Norman Rockwell's illustrations, mark the point of tension in small-town narrative more generally wherein both celebrants and detractors must negotiate both the small town's fixity and its context within the nation beyond. This remains a particular point of contention in contemporary American culture, and my period of study marks a fevered codification of such narrative centred around the contrast between rural and urban America – small-town America becomes, in these texts, the true barometer of migratory change and consequence in the early-to-mid twentieth-century United States.

In the fourth and final chapter of this thesis, I consider the rather amorphous notion of 'everyday life' in small-town narrative, using the theory and writing of Ben Highmore, Rita Felski, and others. This chapter begins by proposing a specific narrative distinction in the equally useful terms of everyday *routine* and *ritual*, defining the former by its habituation and narrative circularity and the latter by its deliberate performance and narrative linearity. The theme of adolescent departure as discussed in Chapter Three is again useful here; there is something to be said for the ritualistic parting from the small town and subsequent homecoming that is legible in many of the texts considered here, from dominant to counter narrative. This chapter contends such moments, ubiquitous in small-town narrative, mark a ritualistic performance through the narrative progression and linearity they afford.

Winesburg, Ohio, for example, is predestined to end with this final act of quasi-escape; Willa Cather and Mary Austin, too, rely on the ritual departure and return of their protagonists to better commentate of the particularities of small-town America.

Recurrent across this thesis there is the frequent blurring between such distinctions and polarisations, with ritual and routine being no different. For example, the domestic

chores depicted in *Ethan Frome* are fundamentally routine; they signify the claustrophobia of the New England farmhouse and symbolise a fraught and unhappy marriage. In a dominant small-town narrative like *Our Town*, however, domestic chores come to symbolise a deliberate performance of a stable, idyllic life, from the opening of windows during the morning to the making of breakfast. For dominant small-town narratives, the 'performance' of everyday life extends to the habitual routines of the domestic because it specifically enforces their wider heteronormative hegemony.

This chapter explores the distinctions and intersections of everyday ritual and routine as being not simply endemic to the small town, but likewise crucial to how its narratives are constructed and related. Just as small-town America is so frequently considered in scholarship as a quintessential American construct, vital in parsing the nation at large, so too is analysis of the rituals and routines that constitute its everyday performances equally quintessential. By examining how authors and artists take the seemingly insignificant, banal moments of daily life and imbue them with narrative purpose, this chapter contends that this final thematic constituent of small-town narrative is inexorably part of its wider fabric.

What 'Talk of the Town' achieves across its four chapters is a concise generic definition of one of America's leading cultural and imaginative muses – the small town becomes a narrative framework by which past and future work may be measured. Why such a study needs to take place has a two-fold answer. Firstly, it is to address the so-called myth of small-town America as it exists in contemporary American culture by tracing its narrative origins. It is not enough to simply recognise when a text is exemplary of small-town narrative but to understand what the consequences of this are, namely how does this contribute to wider national understandings and in what ways is it underwriting the America

beyond its borders. Secondly, this study makes known the exact conditions and properties of small-town narrative so that it might be more easily recognised and accounted for, going some way toward explaining its artistic and narrative appeal.

It is no mistake nor coincidence that small-town America has remained one of the most dominant and familiar narratives in the United States across the last century through to the present. This thesis, by historically conceptualising the birth of a specific genre to which the small town is central, brings to life the legacy and evolution of small-town America in art and culture. Here, the myth of Main Street is unspooled, and from it a new mode of looking at American community culture is revealed in narrative form.

## One: Porch talk and rural rumour: small-town gossip in interwar American literature

Small-town gossip and rumour are often the greatest social currency of community stories, with plot and characterization frequently progressed through expository dialogue veiled as porch voyeurism and communal tongue-wagging. Henry Nash Smith notes that '[the small town] is a world of grim, savage religion, of silent endurance, of families held together by no tenderness, of communities whose only amusement is malicious gossip'. 20 Greg Camfield conversely opines that gossip within the small town is not only 'natural' but 'potentially humane, if practiced carefully', with his references to Sarah Orne Jewett's local colour fiction illustrating this dominant representation of small-town life. 21 This chapter examines how gossip is presented in small-town verbal and visual media as a complex social characteristic, placing particular emphasis on 'counter' small-town narratives where gossip finds its most overt representation as a socially constructive and destructive force. From the private grief of Mary Austin's protagonist Olivia Lattimore, whose small-town migration is marked by gossip and malice, to Willa Cather's headstrong Thea Kronborg who seems, regardless of her talents and skills, to be permanently bound to the provincial town of Moonstone, Colorado, both authors find the small town to be the perfect setting in which to deconstruct small-town orality. Even apparently banal instances of gossip, as will be shown, bespeak the underlying social dynamics immanent in small-town narratives; as Blakey

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>20</sup> Henry Nash Smith, *Virgin Land: The American West as Symbol* (Cambridge: Vintage Books, 1950), p. 286.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>21</sup> Greg Camfield, 'Jewett's "Country of the Pointed Firs" as Gossip Manual', *Studies in American Humour*, 9 (2002), 39-53, (p. 46).

Vermeule notes, 'gossip is always concerned with power' and has the potential to 'destroy lives'.<sup>22</sup>

'Talk of the Town' finds oral culture to be the chief narrative tool adopted by practitioners of small-town narrative as it is herein defined, and this chapter's examination of oral culture and its complexities will trace across small-town media a common preference for narrative through gossip, speech, and storytelling. This chapter divides the notion of oral culture into three distinct modes, each variously represented across the literature, photography, and visual art considered in this thesis.

The first facet explored is gossip, wherein I consider both its destructive and malicious effects on community as well as its unique, choral inclusivity. Secondly, this chapter considers formal appropriation of oral culture, from frame narratives to authorial intrusion. Finally, the less easily defined instances of orality that resonate loudly across small-town narrative are explored, from everyday storytelling to socially ameliorating talk, where the performance of oral sociability itself becomes narratively significant. How these themes are adhered to, or departed from, in *dominant* and *counter* small-town narrative is likewise fundamental to explaining how a narrative genre was codified during the early-to-mid-century, where contrasting texts share a common syntax of everyday speech.

The definition of gossip that this chapter makes repeated reference to derives from Patricia Meyer Spacks' detailed cultural studies of gossip as a social phenomenon. There are many strands to Spacks' research, all of which illuminate gossip's cultural relevancy, but I am particularly drawn to the aspects of her scholarship that situates gossip within a narratological context. For example, when Spacks writes that 'gossip is not fiction, but both

<sup>22</sup> Blakey Vermeule, 'Gossip and Literary Narrative', *Philosophy and Literature*, 30 (April, 2006), 102-117, (p. 105); Ibid., (p. 102).

as oral tradition and in such written transformations as memoirs and collections of letters it embodies the fictional,' I am intent on parsing how orality and gossip can be construed as narrative forms within the context of my small-town texts. <sup>23</sup> In the counter, 'revolt' narratives of Anderson, Masters, and Austin, for example, gossip 'embodies the fictional' via the brief diversion it offers its practitioners from the lack of stimuli and experience in provincial small towns. As Spacks continues, 'gossip, like novels, is a way of turning life into a story' and this chapter is preoccupied with how orality works in tandem with other recognisable themes to codify *small-town narrative* as a unique genre form. <sup>24</sup> Finally, the idea of 'self-containment' within gossip will be explored as a means of understanding narrative through the singular reference or symbol of gossip, from Zora Neale Hurston's anonymous porch choruses to Mary Austin's 'Taylorville gossips'. If indeed gossip 'creates a new territory', a social *topos* in which practitioners are permitted and victims banished, through social adherence to its unwritten rules then small-town America seems every bit its parent territory, such is gossip's ubiquity in rural communities.

Further explorations of oral culture and its formal appropriation are vital to this chapter's arguments concerning small-town narrative as genre. Edgar Lee Masters and Sherwood Anderson, two figures central to the 'Revolt from the Village' literary movement, exemplify this appropriation of orality in their verbal style. The unique epitaph form of Masters' *Spoon River Anthology*, considered alongside Anderson's short story cycle form and overlapping frame narrative style, offer a compelling literary treatment of oral culture and gossip in small-town America in a manner that mimics its intra-narrative performance. The residents of Spoon River and Winesburg find in the social exchange of gossip a means of

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>23</sup> Patricia Meyer Spacks, *Gossip* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1985), p. 4.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>24</sup> Ibid, p. 13.

giving voice to their impoverished lives, whilst the authors themselves find a new form and mode of relation.

Finally, the more diffuse notions of orality that occur in these texts, principally the everyday exchange that occurs on 'Main Street' and its related small-town spaces, conclude this chapter's conceptualisation of oral culture as it appears in small-town narrative.

Whether this includes Ben Shahn's small-town Depression-era photography, where oral exchange appears to rebuke the otherwise impoverished world he inhabits, to the variously nostalgic moments in the *dominant* literature of the period where voice can both unite and exclude, attention will be paid to narrative instances of so-called everyday orality.

Central to my study is the notion of narrative pressure, in particular linearity versus static, cyclical narratives, and the tension between these two states across dominant and counter small-town narratives. For example, gossip is variously performed by the dead of Masters' *Spoon River Anthology*, and ironically the living in *Winesburg*, *Ohio*, in a manner that ensures a cyclical, non-linear narrative. Repetitions and banal futility mark these narratives of rural revolt, with gossip acting as a neat synecdoche for the stasis of small-town life within these narratives and orality becoming a crutch in lieu of escape. Elsewhere, Cather and Austin's fiction elucidates the narrative pressures of gossip that result in their protagonists' flight and subsequent return, finding themselves and their perceptions of the town altered indefinitely. Likewise, the intersections and departures in visual representation occurring between FSA photography and Norman Rockwell, where gossip is imagined as both a social necessity as well as a problematic signifier of enforced community traditionalism, will be considered in terms of their narrative framing.

Do Shahn's street scenes imply a narrative progression, or rather are they hermetic and unchanging scenes like Rockwell's early career illustrations of the small-town idyll? Are

Masters and Anderson's characters performing their existences through gossip and oral culture because of the banality that defines the rest of their (non)existences? These questions will be considered and contextualised through a narratological study of small-town gossip and orality.

## Epitaphs and 'Empty Rhetoric': Spoon River Anthology and the monologue form

Populated by the ghosts of the titular town, speaking from their final resting places with an eerie certitude, Edgar Lee Masters' *Spoon River Anthology* presents small-town speech and gossip as undying tropes of provincial life. One of the foremost small-town narrative texts of the twentieth-century, *Spoon River Anthology* is, as James Hurt describes it, a 'a highly personal, highly subjective vision of small-town life and the national life'. <sup>25</sup> Emblemizing the 'unflattering pictures and morbid tone' that we readily associate with the 'revolt from the village' movement, Masters' text is not the earliest example of small-town narrative that this thesis will consider but it is a useful origin point given its unique form among my primary materials, its position as a canonical Midwestern text and significant 'revolt' narrative, and for its subsequent influence on authors such as Sherwood Anderson.

A medley of assorted caricatures, equally melancholy and comic, Masters presents his small-town personae as concerned only with enacting an oral revenge on the town that neglected them. John T. Flanagan notes that 'Masters, himself resentful of the small town,

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>25</sup> James Hurt, 'The Sources of the Spoon: Edgar Lee Maters and the "Spoon River Anthology", *The Centennial Review*, 24 (Fall, 1980), 403-431, (p. 431).

allowed the epitaphs of his characters to echo his own bitterness and cynicism'. <sup>26</sup> Such 'bitterness' and 'cynicism' becomes chiefly manifest through Masters' use of gossip and small-town speech, a usage that is simultaneously explicit – 'I am Minerva [...] Jeered at by the yahoos of the street' <sup>27</sup> – and implicit, often alluded to through the cryptic posing of rhetorical questions: 'were you not ashamed, fellow citizens?' <sup>28</sup> Here, the reference to the fictive 'yahoos' of the internal world of the text is offset by the implicating 'fellow citizens?', which, along with frequent use of second-person, ensures Masters' reader becomes complicit in the 'social network' of Spoon River. Small-town narrative's insistence on coopting those who perceive it is a defining feature; evocation of oral culture engenders this strange narratological effect of complicity. <sup>29</sup>

Fundamental to the narrative construction of *Spoon River Anthology* is Masters' unique epitaph form, in which his characters speak, alone and unheard, in the 'wingless void' of death, and yet inexplicably address, plead with, and decry their fellow citizens.<sup>30</sup> A form that seeks dialogue where none exists, Masters' epitaph verse is a fundamental commentary on the isolating and oppressive nature of small-town speech, on the stifling circularity of its patterns. Six epitaphs into his collection, Masters introduces the character of Cassius Hueffer, a man who lies in anguish over the falsities etched on his gravestone and who is powerless to change them. 'Those who knew me smile / as they read this empty rhetoric,' ends his first stanza, an ambiguous reference perhaps to the 'empty rhetoric'

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>26</sup> John T. Flanagan, 'Literary Protest in the Midwest', *Southwest Review*, 34 (Spring, 1949), pp. 148-157, (p. 154).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>27</sup> Edgar Lee Masters, Spoon River Anthology (SMK Books, 2014), p. 8.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>28</sup> ibid. p. 21.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>29</sup> Robert Wuthnow, *Small-Town America: Finding community, shaping the future* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013) p. 39.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>30</sup> Masters, p. 8.

customary to headstones, with meaningless platitudes substituting the realities of one's life.<sup>31</sup>

Unpacking this term 'empty rhetoric', however, reveals a metanarratorial commentary by Masters himself. Cassius Hueffer is denouncing the 'empty rhetoric' of small-town gossip, the hobby of the idle townsperson, as well as the 'fool' who has 'graven' the epitaph to which he must 'submit'; this fool is of course Masters himself.<sup>32</sup> The 'empty rhetoric' of small-town oral culture that Spoon River Anthology finds so abhorrent, and that it so prominently takes to task, is ultimately the means through which Masters must conduct his deconstruction. Gossip, then, blurs the boundaries between Masters and his epitaphs, between the storyteller and his subjects. James Hurt writes that the 'highly personal nature of the epitaphs [...] present not just the small town as world but also the poet himself as small town' and continues in kind when he states the text is a 'portrait of the artist as a small town'.33 As Masters recounts their tragedies, he engages in the base form of oral culture – gossip – through his epitaph sketches; Mrs. Williams notes at the beginning of her epitaph how she was 'talked about, lied about' in waking life.<sup>34</sup> Masters marks a new form of small-town narrative here where the town itself becomes a product of orality. Spoon River becomes, through gossip and orality, a 'new territory' in accordance with Spacks' theorisation, a space made physical through disembodied voices and their gossip and storytelling.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>31</sup> Masters, p. 3.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>33</sup> James Hurt, 'The Sources of the Spoon: Edgar Lee Maters and the "Spoon River Anthology", *The Centennial Review*, 24 (Fall, 1980), 403-431, (p. 403).; Ibid., (p. 404).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>34</sup> Masters, p. 58.

Similarly, one can read Masters' own alignment with several of the characters he creates in the *Anthology*, such is the 'highly personal' nature of what Hurt calls this 'spiritual autobiography'. <sup>35</sup> Editor Whedon, the sole journalist of Spoon River, seems a fitting cypher for the town's own architect and poet – Masters - as his denouncements of small-town vices and transgressions, of 'garbage' and 'abortions', seem to evince what Ima Honaker Herron calls Masters' 'unflattering pictures and morbid tone'. <sup>36</sup> Whedon's epitaph is particularly harrowing as he ruminates over his own immorality, noting his duty to 'scratch over scandal for money, / and exhume it to the winds for revenge, / or to sell papers'. <sup>37</sup> The use of 'revenge' is telling here, as it is 'revenge' that Hilfer argues is a central tenet of Van Doren's 'revolt from the village' movement.

That one of the speakers, who closely resembles Masters, should speak of 'revenge', 'scandal' and the poison of 'anonymous words' confirms *Spoon River Anthology* not simply as a 'revolt' text but one that foregrounds gossip and rumour as its chief antagonists.<sup>38</sup>

Whedon's duty as a newspaper editor is the dissemination of oral culture in printed form, a localised form of storytelling through the veil of journalistic truth - a truth he 'perverts' - and his recounting of 'crushing reputations' with the 'base designs' of his paper attests to Vermeuele's notion that gossip and its attendant power can 'destroy lives'.

A further formal technique in Masters' verse collection that emboldens his oralculture polemic is his changing use of person, often employing second-person to directly implicate those who metaphorically walk among the tombstones. Nicholas Bindle's pathetic

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>35</sup> Hurt, The Centennial Review, p. 430.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>36</sup> Ima Honaker Herron, *The Small town in American Literature* (New York: Haskell House Publishers, 1971), p. 354.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>37</sup> Masters, p. 57.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid.

cry 'were you not ashamed, fellow citizens?' is one such example, not simply inviting an emotional response from Masters' readers but also formally inaugurating them as citizens of the bleak, desperate town.<sup>39</sup> Similarly, the character of "Indignation" Jones accuses both the unnamed citizens of Spoon River, as well as Masters' reader, in the following outcry: 'Whom you tormented and drove to death'. 40

Masters' language is unambiguous in its articulation of suffering, and even less nuanced in suggesting that Spoon River's network of gossip and communication is directly responsible. This changing use of person is a key aspect to Masters' verse, as the distinction between reader and the imagined 'other' of Spoon River to whom the text is supposedly addressed becomes opaque. This accosting of the reader as they walk the metaphorical path through Masters' fictional graveyard is, as will be shown in more detail in the following chapter, part of small-town narrative's use of spatiality to evoke a sense of realism, of familiar and known space. Wending between speakers in Spoon River Anthology achieves the intimate sense of being present in the titular town, of hearing the ghostly voices in proximity.

The implication of Masters' readership into his gossiping chorus is most overt in one of the text's first epitaphs belonging to Serepta Mason, which makes reference to the duplicitous nature of small-town life of which gossip is both the instigator and product: 'On the side of me which you in the village could see'. 41 Mason's awareness of the 'side' other townspeople 'could see' hints at an established network of gossip, rumour, and secrecy, a network the reader cannot help but be subsumed by as they read Masters' posthumous oral

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>39</sup> Ibid., p. 21. <sup>40</sup> Ibid., p. 10.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>41</sup> Ibid., p. 4.

histories and 'walk' among his fictional dead. As oral culture becomes the primary narratorial device of Masters' poetry, so too does this shifting second-person mode become Masters' way of conjoining his readership with the 'sick and exhausted souls' populating the text. 42 James Hurt writes of the 'pithy, anecdotal detail' that comprise Masters' epitaphs, two adjectives that seem to gesture toward the quotidian speech patterns of gossip and small-talk. 43 Just as Spacks tells us that gossip 'is a way of turning life into a story', here Masters' many-dead turn *death* into a story with rumours, gossip and tales of their former lives.

These characters are defined by this 'anecdotal' detail, both individually and collectively, and the established networks of class and status subsist even through the ostensible levelling of death. They exist because of small-town gossip, which maintained such social strata in waking life and continues to do so in Masters' supernatural monologues. When Judge Somers asks 'how does it happen? Tell me', a response is impossible and yet we feel moved to attempt one; Masters' deconstruction and critique of oral culture concludes not simply that gossip is a social disease but that Spoon River, as a synecdoche for *all* small towns, is the microculture from which it originates. Its ghosts are left to wander, and wonder, and we, the haunted, are left to hear their unresolved desires and secrets, and are powerless to heed them.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>42</sup> Robert L. Dorman, *Revolt of the Provinces: The Regionalist Movement in America, 1920-1940* (University of North Carolina Press, 1993), p. 17.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>43</sup> James Hurt, 'The Sources of the Spoon: Edgar Lee Maters and the "Spoon River Anthology", *The Centennial Review*, 24 (Fall, 1980), pp. 403-431, (p. 406).

## 'Psychological realism': The lonely voices of Winesburg, Ohio

Sherwood Anderson's short story cycle *Winesburg, Ohio,* published four years after *Spoon River Anthology* though drafted two years prior, in many ways presents the physical site of Masters' disembodied anxieties. <sup>44</sup> Spoon River's hundred dead may as well be spiritual expatriates of Winesburg, Ohio such is the thematic crossover between the two places and, like Masters, Anderson relies on gossip as a narratorial device that dictates character motivation and psychology. The critical discourse surrounding *Winesburg, Ohio* makes repeated reference to this psychological aspect, with David R. Pichaske drawing attention to the 'psychological realism' of Anderson's prose, whilst John T. Flanagan labels Anderson's vignette style 'psychographs' and describes Anderson as a 'psychiatrist revealing case histories'. <sup>45</sup> These psychoanalytic readings of Anderson are fundamentally rooted in oration, in the recitation of stories to a common reader through an oral tradition. <sup>46</sup>

In the story 'Hands', the first vignette following the 'Book of the Grotesques' frame narrative, Anderson makes immediate reference to the destructive and vitriolic nature of gossip in small-town America. Anderson recounts the 'strange, hideous whispers' that 'fell from loose-hung lips' when he writes of Wing Biddlebaum and his exile from a Pennsylvanian town, where he was a schoolteacher, before alighting in Winesburg as a drifter and outcast. 47 Here, Anderson presents gossip as a malicious and irresistible social

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>44</sup>See William L. Phillips, 'How Sherwood Anderson Wrote *Winesburg, Ohio,' American Literature*, 23 (March, 1951), 7-30, (p. 17) where Phillips remarks that 'very probably, this reading of Masters' book just six months before the writing of the first Winesburg story helped shape the "book of the grotesque."'

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>45</sup> David R. Pichaske, 'Dave Etter: Fishing for our lost American souls', *Journal of Modern Literature*, 23 (Summer, 2000), 393-427, (p. 403); John T. Flangan., 'Literary Protest in the Midwest', *Southwest Review*, 34 (Spring, 1949), 148-157, (p. 154).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>46</sup> San Juan Jr., Epifanio, 'Vision and Reality: A Reconsideration of Sherwood Anderson's "Winesburg, Ohio", *American Literature*, 35 (May, 1963), 137-155, (p. 146).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>47</sup> Sherwood Anderson, Winesburg, Ohio (Digireads: January, 2005), p. 5.

pressure, whose 'hideous' qualities befit his 'Book of the Grotesques' and so becomes the primary trait of his fictional town. Through the nuanced phraseology of gossip and rumour, the story 'Hands' is suggestive of not only gay desire but also paedophilia; the angered father of one of Biddlebaum's students declares 'I'll teach you to put your hands on my boy, you beast' during the height of story's central gossip, which Biddlebaum sorrowfully recalls in retrospect upon fleeing his old town. <sup>48</sup> Here, the register quickly shifts to an omniscient narrator who emphasises how such accusations were born from a 'half-witted boy' who 'went forth to tell his dreams as facts,' though the narrative implications of such gossip are already apparent in Biddledaum's present-day exile. <sup>49</sup> This opening gambit of *Winesburg*, *Ohio*, to begin a short story cycle with so damning a portrait of small-town life through gossip, feeds Flanagan's critical assertion that 'the Midwest small town had been recorded as an ugly, gossip-ridden [...] stolid community'. <sup>50</sup>

These ideas are more implicitly addressed through the quasi-protagonist George Willard. As the town's burgeoning journalist, itself a common trope of small-town narrative as visible in *Spoon River Anthology*, George is perpetually surrounded by voices and small-town speech and seems more attuned than any other to the cadences of rural life. It is through George's focalization that Anderson extends Masters' idea of small-town gossip as an undying and spectral presence: 'Suddenly, something happens, he stops under a tree and waits as for a voice calling his name. Ghosts of old things creep into his consciousness; the voices outside of himself whisper a message concerning the limitations of life'.<sup>51</sup>

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>48</sup> Ibid., p. 5.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>49</sup> Ibid., p. 5.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>50</sup> Southwest Review, p. 152.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>51</sup> Anderson, Winesburg, Ohio, p. 85.

Such is George Willard's desire to escape Winesburg, to 'revolt from the village', that the anxieties of life in the town manifest themselves not as hallucinations of the physical, of specific people or place, but instead as the disembodied and anonymous voices of Winesburg's pervasive gossip. The 'voices outside of himself' can be interpreted as the voices of the townsfolk who have judged and commented on George throughout his life and whom he has come, in many ways, to resent. Flanagan's writings on the Midwest are again useful here: 'For individuals who desire to create or lead there is only one possibility, flight'. <sup>52</sup> George enacts this 'one possibility' at the cycle's close, chased, as the above passage suggests, by the voices of small-town insularity and 'old things'. These disembodied voices seem to be analogous to the ghosts of Winesburg's spiritual sister-town, Spoon River, and George Willard seems to physically embody the anxieties of Masters' dead. He ultimately achieves what they cannot: flight from the town.

Anderson's desire for a new formal mode, discussed in depth later, is directly related to his discussions of small-town America and his orally intrusive stylistics. R. Anthony Arthur terms the frequency of authorial intrusion in realist texts as an 'augmenting of narrative', a term that befits Anderson's style which is itself a product of oral, provincial storytelling culture. The previously cited quote, 'his story is an old one, it will be worth telling someday,' which Anderson notes early on in 'Adventure', is an almost playful aside in reference to Alice Hindman's 'step-father, a carriage painter' that, like small-town gossip, taunts and teases the recipient with half-formed information that may never be elaborated upon; this technique is reminiscent of oral tradition and familiar social exchange. Perhaps

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>52</sup> Southwest Review, p. 153.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>53</sup> R. Anthony Arthur, 'Authorial Intrusion as Art in "The Last Chronicle of Barset', *The Journal of Narrative Technique*, 1 (Sep., 1971), 200-206, (p. 203).

the most nuanced gesture by Anderson toward the metanarrative of gossip and rumour as potent forms of storytelling is in 'Paper Pills', in which small-town stories are equated to the 'twisted apples' of Winesburg's orchards:

It is a very curious story. It is delicious, like the twisted little apples that grow in the orchards of Winesburg [...] one runs from tree to tree over the frosted ground picking the gnarled, twisted apples and filling his pockets with them. Only the few know the sweetness of the twisted apples'.<sup>54</sup>

The 'few' that know the 'sweetness of the twisted apples' are undoubtedly Winesburg's chief purveyors of gossip, trading rumours as freely as merchants hawking these indigenous, 'twisted' fruits of the town. Noting the imagery of running through the 'orchard', picking up half-heard tall tales as one passes through, and then considering George's aural epiphany mentioned previously, which occurs as he stops 'under a tree', draws together the heart line of Winesburg's gossip that appears similarly organic. The small-town bucolic idyll and notions of gossip become one here, as the figurative grapevine, or 'orchard', grows between the stories. Some of Anderson's stories appear half-formed or hinge on promises of further elaboration - the rotten and discarded fruit - whilst more formed stories that centre around George Willard present Anderson's commentaries on the small town at their most fruitful, the core of which is the innate idea of escape or revolt as impelled by the town's oral traditions. Spacks' idea of gossip embodying the fictional are perfectly exemplified here, with narrative stylistics converging through one central conceit concerning gossip — Anderson's form itself becomes a kind of small-town gossip narrative. This is compounded

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>54</sup> Anderson, Winesburg, Ohio, pp. 6-7.

by Spacks' idea that 'gossip [...] supplies a form analogizing the exchange between narrator and reader: the novel's basic economics,' further suggestive of its formal properties and how these in turn lend themselves to the generic properties of small-town narrative itself.

Both, it is clear, work harmoniously to present a realist narrative.

This curious metaphor can be extrapolated across the cycle and indicates Anderson's deliberate attempt to adopt a new form for his exploration of small-town oral culture, as the author himself notes:

I have even sometimes thought that the novel form does not fit an American writer, that it is a form which had been brought in. What I wanted is a new looseness; and in Winesburg I had made my own form.<sup>55</sup>

Crucially, this 'new looseness' that Anderson aspires to in his form is inherently tied to his treatment of gossip and the earlier-cited 'loose-hung lips' that manufacture Winesburg's lore. Jennifer J. Smith goes further in describing the fundamentals of Anderson's form: 'The interplay between independent and interconnected tales generated new ways to tell stories, especially as authors increasingly concluded that [quoting Anderson:] "life is a loose, flowing thing."'56 Small-town gossip is by its very nature a 'loose, flowing thing' that, for inhabitants of a town like Winesburg, is the only means to defer rural ennui; storytelling through gossip becomes a revolt from the village for those who lack the means to physically escape. Anderson presents small-town speech, and its subsequent mythmaking, as a coping mechanism for those mired in provincial malaise and a way of transferring anxieties and

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>55</sup> Jennifer J. Smith, 'Locating the Short Story Cycle', *The American Short Story Cycle* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2018), p. 12.; no original source was cited.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>56</sup> Ibid., pp. 12-13

fears of stunted lives into stories that, for a moment, turn their orators into 'some obscure poet of the town'.<sup>57</sup>

Winesburg, Ohio depicts the small-town-as-form through Anderson's insistence on creating a new genre through the central conceit of his fictional town, not simply depicted in descriptive and detailed prose but cartographically as well. Here is not simply a portrait of the artist as small town but so too is it a portrait of short stories, of form, as small town; the generic innovations occurring here are significant, and Anderson makes of the existing small-town narrative framework a text which represents it entirely in microcosm. Compared to the maximalist properties of the 'city novel', the opposing literary form in early twentieth-century modernity practised by writers such as Theodore Dreiser (Sister Carrie, 1900) and John Dos Passos (Manhattan Transfer, 1925), small-town narrative seeks to codify techniques such as gossip into a distinct form. It is hard to imagine a city novel in which a character such as Wing Biddlebaum is driven directly from his home by a braying mob – an exodus that is predicated entirely on half-verified rumour – whereas in small-town narrative it feels not only plausible but expected. The genre and the setting appear to inform one another, and subsequently excite readerly expectations. The parameters of small-town narrative, as this thesis has it defined, are here legible and bounded in Anderson's cycle – Winesburg, Ohio uses orality to craft a new form for writing about smalltown America.

As part of this formal mapping, *Winesburg, Ohio* treats gossip and rumour as ideological referents of the small town, anchored directly to its more familiar, physical referents. Occurring around glowing stoves in general goods stores; beneath rain-soaked

<sup>57</sup> Anderson, *Winesburg, Ohio*, p. 3.

awnings on Main Street; in the upstairs rooms of boarding houses, gossip is depicted by Anderson as being enmeshed within the very fabric of rural life – it is as comforting as it is alienating. Take, for example, one of many instances in which George Willard finds himself wandering Main Street late at night:

When George Willard got back into Main Street it was past ten o'clock and had begun to rain. Three times he walked up and down the length of Main Street. Sylvester West's drug store was still open and he went in and bought a cigar. When Shorty Crandall the clerk came out at the door with him he was pleased. For five minutes, the two stood in the shelter of the store awning and talked.<sup>58</sup>

Anderson's attention to spatiality and the rural dimensions of Winesburg is fundamental to how talk, gossip, and rumour coexist in his narrative. The 'awning', a familiar symbol of small-town commerce and the pre-war idyll, creates beneath it a liminal space of social interaction that extols the virtues of small-town speech. Other small details, such as 'Shorty' Crandall's curious, unexplained nickname help to colour the intimate social lives of Winesburg and prompt readerly speculation as to how such names take root in community; they carry the same ear-bending register as gossip.

George is someone forever on the cusp of leaving Winesburg but who finds in small-town gossip and its performance a kind of nostalgic re-envisioning of the community as utopian. This is exemplified when he stops at the tobacco store during a walk: 'He went into Main Street and sat on the curbing before Wacker's tobacco store. For an hour he lingered

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>58</sup> Ibid., p. 17.

about listening to the talk of men'.<sup>59</sup> Trading the store awning for the curb, George again finds that small-town gossip and voice are inextricable from the physical surroundings of Winesburg, further proof that it is such voices he is hearing 'outside of himself' toward the cycle's end during his moment of epiphany. As well as this, 'the talk of men' has an imperious air to it that equates small-town chat with ideas of masculinity and maturation in George's mind. Such ideas go against the typical tone of counter small-town narrative that portrays rural communities as backward and insular, which Anderson is certainly contributing to. That said, Anderson departs from Masters' monotonous diatribe against small-town speech here in favour of a more multivalent and complex presentation, with his cycle dealing with both the social ills and rewards of small-town oral culture.

Through the figure of Kate Swift, a similarly conflicted figure – as so many of Winesburg, Ohio's characters are – Anderson details the performance of small-town gossip as a means of transcending one's status:

As she came through Main Street she saw the light from the printshop window shining on the snow and on an impulse opened the door and went in. For an hour she sat by the stove in the office talking of life. She talked with passionate earnestness.<sup>60</sup>

Just as these small-town spaces can be the sites of idle gossip and rumourmongering, so too can they be places where the 'power' afforded those engaging in the social transaction of gossip is distributed evenly. Performance of small-town narrative and its various constituents is vital to understanding how dominant / counter texts operate; moments like

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>59</sup> Ibid., p. 78.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>60</sup> Ibid., p. 58.

Kate Swift's interaction in the printshop mark a performance of routine, veiled as a kind of liberative act. The social exchange described is commonplace, yet it is described as an 'impulsive' act of sociability. Such is the lack of stimuli and opportunity in Winesburg that even simple acts of community are treated as novel, or sacred. Their performance in Anderson's text expands the melancholy sense of absence in Winesburg itself; the ordinary, here denoted through oral tradition, has necessarily become extraordinary such is the dearth of experience available.

Anderson's position as a counter, 'revolt' narrator of the small town is complicated by this multivalent representation of oral culture. It's not uncommon for scholarship of the small town and its literature to tend toward absolutes when discussing Anderson and his contemporaries, as Flanagan, and indeed scholars like David Anderson, imply when they write how 'Midwestern novelists have devoted their talents to reviling the society of their region'. Of course, revilement is an operative note in 'revolt' work, but this thesis is interested in parsing how such revilement can be balanced, often in the same texts, with occasional idealisation. These same biographical details alluded to by Flanagan surface in the rare instances of compassion shown toward the small town by Anderson, in which his hometown of Clyde, Ohio is remembered amidst the melancholy. John H. Sullivan argues for such a case in his writing on this very town: 'On Saturday, Clyde is surrounded by men, women, and children from the surrounding area who have come to shop, visit the lone movie house, or gather on street corners or in stores to talk and gossip'. 62

The transparent rendering of real-life hometowns into Midwestern literature is commonplace in American writing of the period, with Anderson (Clyde, Ohio) and Sinclair

<sup>61</sup> Southwest Review, p. 148.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>62</sup> John H. Sullivan, 'Winesburg Revisited', *The Antioch Review* (Summer, 1960), 213-221, (p. 215).

Lewis (Sauk Centre, Minnesota) being the most prominent. Anderson's hometown of Clyde, as a place of typical small-town gossip, occurring on 'street corners' and 'in stores', finds its mimetic double in *Winesburg, Ohio*; his own biography informs his rendering of small-town vernacular speech. Thus, we see definitively in *Winesburg, Ohio* that gossip is part of the small town's natural fabric and is anchored to the physical referents of provincial life so that it becomes a defining trope of small-town narrative; Anderson achieves a 'prose of reality' by hybridizing his own biography and experiences of first-hand orality with wider small-town myths.<sup>63</sup>

Masters and Anderson both engage in an equivalent deconstruction of dominant small-town mythologies through attention to oral culture, finding common ground on issues of provincialism and gossip whilst Anderson's occasionally positive representation marks the complexity of small-town oral culture. For Masters and his verse collection, gossip is restricted to the text's epitaph form, resulting in ambiguous allusion to small-town secrets and passing references to other former occupants of the town. Anderson, who held 'admiration for Masters' portraits' and small-town elegies, attends more to the physical space in which oral culture inheres within his short story cycle. <sup>64</sup> He presents gossip as an integral vehicle for character motivation and a ubiquitous motif that recurs across his stories - his cycle form encourages dialogue between such stories. Enabled by frequent authorial intrusion – 'His story is an old one [...] It will be worth telling some day' <sup>65</sup> – his form mimics

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>63</sup> Epifanio San Juan Jr., 'Vision and Reality: A Reconsideration of Sherwood Anderson's "Winesburg, Ohio", *American Literature*, 35 (May, 1963), 137-155, (p. 146).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>64</sup> Phillips, William L., 'How Sherwood Anderson Wrote *Winesburg, Ohio,' American Literature*, 23 (March, 1951), 7-30, (p. 17).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>65</sup> Anderson, Winesburg, Ohio, p. 36.

oral culture and small-town vernacular in a bid to achieve a hybridized realist-naturalist portrait of rural life.

There exists between Masters and Anderson a common language of loss and melancholy that invokes and mimics small-town oral culture in a bid to move beyond 'local colour' narratives of the fin-de-siècle, such as Jewett's *The Country of the Pointed Firs* (1896), and engage in a new form of small-town naturalism in a subversive mode. For both, there is a sense of performing gossip as a means of achieving fulfilment or purpose, or to stave off ennui – a recurring trope in counter small-town texts. Likewise, there is a shared sense of themselves, their biographies, and their own lamentations, becoming *small-town* in their own right, of artist and subject merging into one. Whether it is the conceit of a graveyard and the cipher of Masters as newspaper editor, or Anderson's vocal desire for a new 'form', both use oral culture traditions – gossip, rumour, storytelling – to achieve a portrait of Midwestern small-town life. In doing so, they provide paradigmatic examples of small-town narrative, to which voice and speech are inexorable.

## 'Gossip saves the marooned folk': Women's revolt in Willa Cather's and Mary Austin's work

In the literature of Willa Cather and Mary Hunter Austin, provincial communities sit less like the ordered, planned communities of New England, or even the neatly mapped Midwestern streets of Anderson's Winesburg and Masters' Spoon River, and more like in-land shipwrecks adrift among the prairies and cut-off entirely from the surrounding country. Houses are spread out across acres of pasture, paved roads make way for dirt tracks, and sightlines stretch on uninterrupted, seemingly forever, until they reach mountain, hill, or valley. Cather's depiction of her frontier towns is historic rather than contemporary to her writing in the 1910s, and she channels the evolution of small-town narrative setting as modernity wrought significant change. My Antonia's 1890s setting marks the meeting of frontier myth with modern community narrative, and Cather's perspective toward these historic spaces engenders comparison with the contemporaneous publications by Anderson, Masters, and Austin. Here, in their land of 'repressed individuals [...] stagnating stupidities, malicious gossip, futile aspirations, and timid pieties', as Ima Honaker Herron describes it, Cather and Austin find common ground for the exploration of how oral culture, particularly gossip, storytelling, and the quotidian speech patterns of rural America, can be simultaneously freeing and utopian as well as virulent, damaging, and ultimately exilic.<sup>66</sup>

Cather, in her novels *The Song of the Lark* and *My Antonia*, explores what she terms the 'fear of the tongue, that terror of little towns' through attention to the social transaction of gossip in her communities, how it can both empower and other, as well as

<sup>66</sup> Ima Honaker Herron, *The Small Town in American Literature*, (New York: Haskell House Publishers, 1971), p. 396.

through her own innate interest in the sites and rituals of social communication.<sup>67</sup> Her narratives are defined by the legacy of small-town oral culture as it is inherited by her protagonists; Thea Kronborg, as will be discussed, is frequently unable to lose the oral mannerisms of her small-town beginnings. Similarly, Austin's novel *A Woman of Genius* (1912) anticipates Cather's criticism of small-town American social mores through her 'villain' setting of Taylorville, a conservative community that holds Austin's protagonist, Olivia Lattimore, to be a disruptor of the provincial status quo.

Cather and Austin both published small-town narratives in the same decade as Masters and Anderson, though there are some important period variances between these authors. Austin, for example, is the earliest of these four authors, publishing in 1912, and Cather's *My Antonia*, whilst published in 1918, uses a frame narrative set in the 1890s. This section on Cather and Austin *follows* discussions on Masters and Anderson by nature of both regional and temporal differences occurring in Cather and Austin's small-town narratives – both pairs of authors work in similar modes to one another, but likewise consider the ideals and social mores of small-town America in geographically distinct and temporally separate environments. To better illuminate the shifts and commonalities among texts of my period, these kinds of primary material distinctions help illustrate the breadth and complexity of small-town narrative being produced during this period.

As with Masters and Anderson, both Cather and Austin find small-town oral culture to be a vital narrative property to their stories, central to their protagonists' struggles and the chief means through which they orchestrate their criticisms of small-town American life. Speech patterns doggedly follow them through the course of their life, even *ex situ* from the

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>67</sup> Willa Cather, *The Song of the Lark* (Maine: Kennebec Large Print, 2010), p. 78.

small town's where they originate, and the pervasive nature of small-town gossip and tradition dictate how they live their lives.

The forebear to Willa Cather's consideration of small-town speech is Mary Hunter

Austin, a writer of the American Southwest to whom the environments of desert and prairie provided rich narrative inspiration, and which prompted lyrical, if not critical, writing on this distinct rural American space. In *A Woman of Genius*, the plot of which is heavily mirrored in *The Song of the Lark* which followed it three years later, Austin explores various manifestations of small-town speech, notably gossip and rumour, through her regional sensibility. Perhaps more famous for her naturalist treatise *The Land of Little Rain* (1903), elegising the Mojave Desert and its flora and fauna, Austin displays an equivalent in-depth analysis of the Midwestern small town in *A Woman of Genius*. Linking both texts, despite their difference in subject matter, is an intimate, local oral culture tradition based on gossip, judgement, and rumour. The oral relation of American space is paramount to Austin – from mesa to Main Street, her texts read like oral histories where multiple voices are captured, some named whilst others are lost in the chorus of community, and where places and people are recounted in forensic detail.

Olivia Lattimore, from whose mutual cloth of prodigiousness and aptitude Cather's Thea Kronborg is certainly cut, is someone to whom the small-town environment is a stultifying, scornful enclave. 'They don't approve of the stage in Taylorville', Olivia remarks early in the novel, with the 'stage' marking a clear synecdoche for anything culturally atypical to rural America, namely the modern urban exports of theatre and art. 68 'They' metonymizes the unseen gossips of Taylorville, a technique used across regional, small-town

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>68</sup> Mary Hunter Austin, *A Woman of Genius*, (New York: Doubleday, 1912), p. 61.

narratives, from Cather's small-town oral choruses through to Zora Neale Hurston's porch gossips in Their Eyes Were Watching God (1937). In general, the conservative nature of Taylorville is tied directly to small-town speech and its capacity for social regulation, with Olivia at one point rallying against such networks with the emotive cry: 'against the embattled social forces of Taylorville what could even the gods do!'69

Hurston's Their Eyes Were Watching God very much echoes these techniques, where choral anonymity likewise dictates the social mores of her small-town setting. Hurston's text, which follows the life and relationships of Janie Mae Crawford in the town of Eatonville, Florida, often marks when these anonymous choruses are talking, but as to who among the gossips is the main interlocutor we are frequently ignorant. The use of staccato punctuation in the novel's first major invocation of gossip draws attention to the anonymity of Eatonville's gossiping cadre:

'What she doin coming back here in dem overhalls? Can't se find no dress to pu ton? ---Where's dat blue satin dress she left here in? --- Where all dat money her husband took a dnd died and left her? --- 170

This passages continues in the same style, asking questions that demand no answer but are accusatory in tone and that meld the speakers into a chorus of small-town gossip: 'They scrambled a noisy "good evenin" and left their mouths setting open and their ears full of hope' (emphasis added). 71 Hurston's Eatonville is a place of homogeneity, with Janie existing as the sole agent of any remote desire to 'revolt', change, or better herself in the

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>69</sup> Ibid., p. 60.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>70</sup> Zora Neale Hurston, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, (New York: Harper Collins, 2008), p. 15. <sup>71</sup> Ibid., p. 3.

wake of repeated suffering, and, as the novel's protagonist, becomes the sole target of the town's gossip. In fact, the porch becomes a kind of panopticon, an all-seeing metonym for small-town segregation and social cliques:<sup>72</sup>

'They know mo' 'bout yuh than you do yo' self'.

'The town talked it for three days'.

'Janie, everybody's talkin' 'bout how dat Tea Cake is draggin' you round'. 73

Hurston's use of pronouns such as 'they' reduces those on the porch to a single, anonymous being, inseparable through their use of gossip and near omniscience that condemns Janie. What is most curious here is that Hurston, writing during a period in which the general trend in small-town narrative leaned toward the dominant and recuperative, retains the critical register of earlier 'revolt' writing like Austin and Cather's. Whilst not all primary material can be considered in equal weighting in this chapter, the comparisons between Hurston and my core primary material is certainly noteworthy for illustrating how orality and gossip pervade small-town narratives and how they contribute to a sustained interrogation of provincialism. Common to Austin, Cather, and Hurston is the notion of anonymity and gossip as a proxy for actual lived experience or stimulus, two ideas which Spacks identifies as central to gossip as a social construct: 'without purposeful intent, gossipers bandy words and anecdotes about other people, thus protecting themselves from serious engagement with one another'.<sup>74</sup>

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>72</sup> The porch space in Hurston's work has been widely treated, with work by Richard Grey, Trudier Harris, and Geneva Cobb-Moore, to name but three, informing this study's consideration of the porch *topos*.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>73</sup> Hurston, p. 8; Ibid., p. 82; Ibid., p. 156.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>74</sup> Spacks, *Gossip*, p. 5.

The detached choral nature of Austin's gossips ties Olivia to such institutions of small-town speech indefinitely, with her negotiation of small-town oral culture becoming a rite of passage: 'Somewhere between the ages of sixteen and eighteen, one was loosed on a free and lively social intercourse from which one was expected to emerge later, triumphantly mated'. Austin imagines small-town speech as a kind of social chrysalis, a network of sociability that one actively becomes subsumed by and then 'emerges' from later, either as part of the collective hive mind or, like Olivia and Thea, as sceptical, eager-to-revolt young women. In fact, Olivia grows increasingly apathetic to the Taylorville gossips; her disconnection from Taylorville and the formation of a distinct identity apart from its social networks catalyses her small-town revolt: 'It hadn't been possible to keep my professional adventure from the townspeople, nor had I attempted it'. Like the choruses of small-town gossips described above, Austin uses third-person collectively to signify the gulf of identity between Olivia and the rest of Taylorville, described here as a socially irresistible force.

To perform the banal routine of gossip is to become one with the whole, a recurring motif in both dominant and counter small-town works. The narrative pressure of Olivia's flight is co-opted into the circular rhythms of gossip; she may well leave the town physically, but a vestige of her character will always remain part of the small-town's gossip cycle. Her fluctuations and returns to the small towns of her life are presaged by this cyclicality – gossip assumes both progressive and regressive roles in Austin's small-town narrative, an anxiety visible across much of the primary material to be consulted in this thesis. Like Anderson, Austin asserts that the prevailing leitmotif of small-town orality is that gossip is

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>75</sup> Ibid., p. 54.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>76</sup> Ibid., p. 102.

malicious and damaging, though she readily concedes that the community bonds it forges and maintains, however exclusive, are unmistakable.

Austin's descriptions of gossip, through this duality, never quite descends to the damnation of Cather and her 'terror of little towns', though her descriptions of small-town rumour and speech alight on changeable descriptions in a manner that is attentive and broad. Variously described as both a 'web of passionate human interactions' and as a more general 'attitude of circumspection', Austin negotiates her small-town setting's various representations of small-town oral culture, like Cather, by choosing not to indulge in a singular assault on gossip but rather crafting a reflexive narrative study. 77 Nicholas Witschi, a scholar interested in the correspondence and rapport that existed between Austin and fellow small-town satirist Sinclair Lewis, notes how 'she seized and conveyed the deadliness of all that is confining in the rural Middle West'. 78 Reading this, one would assume Austin portrays gossip in a scathing, resentful manner when in fact she is attentive to small-town speech's variability, much like Cather. The 'deadliness' of her small towns is in the malaise of unbreakable routine, on the indestructible strands of that so-called 'web' of sociability. Just as malicious gossip represents small-town America at its most volatile and insular, so too do the more generalized occurrences of speech, the 'social forces' that dictate idle chatter around stoves and on sidewalks, denote a different kind of confinement. It is the kind indexed by routine and rituals as discussed in Chapter Four of this thesis, measured out by coffees drunk, rumours shared, and church meetings attended. In small-town narrative, the

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>77</sup> Ibid., p. 122.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>78</sup> Nicholas Witschi, 'Sinclair Lewis, the voice of satire, and Mary Austin's revolt from the village', *American Literary Realism*, 30 (Fall, 1997), 75-90, (p. 76).

performance of these routines and rituals is vital to their frequent sense of realism; the act of gossip and engagement with oral culture is chief among these performances.

Oral culture is Austin's primary mode for her small-town critical inquiries and notions of social censorship. One instance of gossip, or more importantly the *fear* of gossip, involves a description pertaining to the hired help at Olivia's family ranch, and her eavesdropping of the family's affairs:

Her chief accomplishments while she stayed with us, were concocted out of the scraps and fag ends of our private conversations. I could always tell that Ida had overheard something by the alacrity with which she banged the pots about in the kitchen in order than she might get through with her work and go out and tell somebody.<sup>79</sup>

The 'scraps' and 'fag ends' of 'private' conversations comprise much of the small-town narrative style, where authors like Austin, Cather, and Anderson may use what is overheard, misinterpreted, and whispered to craft a climate of social disquiet in their small communities, where any expression or utterance may face public scrutiny. Witschi notes how both Austin and Sinclair Lewis, another famed small-town narrator of this period, 'have much in common as critic and censor of small-town America', and it seems Austin's oral focus is how such anxieties are expressed.<sup>80</sup>

This approach to oral culture and its representation in small-town America is likewise used to evoke a sense of myth, even nostalgia, for the communities described by Austin,

Cather et al. This is exemplified when Olivia recounts a memory of her mother's singing,

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>79</sup> Austin, p. 78.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>80</sup> Witschi, p. 77.

demonstrative of the inherent ties between speech and memory that permeates many of the cited small-town narratives in this chapter.

My mother in the dusk, rocking and singing of those wildly sweet and tragic melodies that the men brought back out of the South [...] to this day I cannot hear it without a certain swelling to let in the smell of the summer dusk and the flitter of the bats outside and the quaver of my mother's voice.<sup>81</sup>

Austin's evocation of voice in this sentimental manner is nostalgic in a mode distinct from, for example, the more overt and immediate post-Depression nostalgia of Thornton Wilder's small-town drama *Our Town*, a play that similarly narrates the experiences of a rural town where gossip and speech are vital narrative vehicles, though does so three decades later in a period when small-town narratives tended toward the *dominant*, recuperative, and nostalgic. In Wilder's play, discussed elsewhere in this thesis, nostalgia is conjured by relocating his audience to a past-made-present, and where melancholy and lamentation are erased through the performance of past (oral) traditions. Austin likewise evokes nostalgia directly through the voice of Olivia's mother, and anchors it to rural small-town referents like the porch space as well as the abstract 'South'. For a counter small-town text this is a surprising moment of nostalgia that further complicates small-town narrative as a generic form. Unlike the typically proximal nature of small-town gossip that occurs on sidewalks and in front rooms, there is an expansiveness here to Austin's depiction of small-town speech's virtuous traits.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>81</sup> Austin, p. 13.

A similar moment wherein the existential properties of small-town speech seem to transcend their environment occurs early in A Woman of Genius, where Olivia recalls her father's death and her early memories of the grieving process. 'The first thing I was aware of was the sound of Forester blubbering [...] through which I could hear a great many voices in a kind of frightened and extenuating remonstrance[...] at every word of which my mother's sobbing broke out afresh'.82 Through references to past trauma as experienced by herself, her brother, and wider family, Olivia narrates her grieving process through the very specific lens of voice and speech, and Austin is careful to describe the house 'being full of neighbours' contributing to the chorus that Olivia so closely associates with the memory. Here, the same anonymous voices that Olivia will grow to resent because of their idle gossip and conservative perspectives become a chorus of lamentation, they exist dually in her mind as a reminder of small-town proximity and connectedness as well as, ultimately, a force which breaks such ties and forces her exit. Whereas this same chorus comes to represent narrative stasis and small-town provincialism later in the text, passing judgement with destructive apathy from the porches of Taylorville, it is instead significant here in altering the narrative's temporal flow. Past and present merge, and the oral traditions remembered by Olivia allow for both character progression and narrative linearity; the treatment of oral culture here is complex and marks its multivalent effects on narrative shape in small-town texts. It can be narratively circular, as with Masters' epitaphs speaking to a world they are no longer a part of, wherein the individual and collective narratives of the small-town space continually return to the same routines and anxieties, finding themselves unchanged. Oral culture, too, can be narratively linear, here represented

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>82</sup> Ibid., p. 24.

through its catalysis of a young adult's desire for escape, and engender movement away from the small town.

Olivia's memories of small-town speech and 'gossip' at its most comforting and banal – here represented by the platitudes offered during a period of grief – conjoined with her present experience of Taylorville as a hive of anonymous, gossiping choruses, shows the 'implicit voyeurism' of gossip and small-town speech to be a complicated ideal. <sup>83</sup> The 'voyeurism' associated with experiencing grief as a young child and listening to adult 'neighbours' who have entered one's private, domestic space is telling, and it is a voyeurism that seems to have a profound effect on Olivia later in her life.

Most notably, the echoes of this trauma are at their most pronounced with the death of Olivia's baby; she hides the nature of her grief from the reader: '...on the loss of my baby, of which I have spared you as much as possible'. 84 Having seen first-hand how quickly grief becomes the subject of idle, small-town talk, she assumes responsibility as narrator in preventing her own tragedy from likewise becoming gossip fodder; again, one might remark upon the censorship here as Witschi discusses. Olivia shows a heightened awareness of how small-town oral culture is constructed and how individuals are responsible for inflecting such oral narratives with their own histories. Likewise, we see the narrative progression of Olivia's character, and her relation to the reader, directly affected by anxieties concerning small-town gossip, a reminder that the circular stasis of small-town speech can still contribute, especially in 'revolt' texts, a sense of progression by contrast.

For Austin, A Woman of Genius represents an important reckoning between a young woman and the memories and past grievances of her rural life, with various tragedies and

<sup>83</sup> Patricia Meyer Spacks, 'In Praise of Gossip', The Hudson Review, 35 (Spring, 1982), 19-38, (p. 25).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>84</sup> Austin, p. 85.

griefs surfacing in the narrative through a temporally unstable orality. Memories intermingle with the present, nostalgia suffuses a wider melancholy, and Austin's small-town story hums with speech. What constitutes malicious rumourmongering in one scene is in the next a quaint reminder of home and childhood; the isolation of Austin's settings amplifies these characteristics so that the performance of gossip as banal routine can, in other scenes, be transposed into a ritual of remembrance. No instance of gossip or orality is considered by Austin without some equal consideration of the small towns where it originates, of the porches and parlours where it multiplies in both Olivia's childhood and adulthood. This attentiveness is why *A Woman of Genius* is so typical of the small-town narrative model and is demonstrative of small-town narrative's heavy reliance on orality.

In Willa Cather's oeuvre, oral culture is likewise central to her style and setting, becoming a fixture that yields narratives of gossip, rumour, storytelling, and provincial mythmaking. The inextricable bond between her settings and this manner of oral tradition is one of the core aspects of Cather's writing that renders her texts exemplary of small-town narrative. Evelyn Funda discusses this oral aspect of Cather's writing:

Willa Cather's novels are alive with the pulse of oral narrative, and those moments when characters perform their own personal narratives, pass on treasured legends, or instruct with parables are typically moments of intense intimacy between characters that emphasise their 'physical harmony'. 85

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>85</sup> Evelyn Funda, 'A Chorus of Gossips: Mistaking Invasion for Intimacy in Willa Cather's "A Lost Lady", *Narrative*, 7 (January, 1999), 89-113, (p. 89)

Cather's writing, particularly her 'Prairie trilogy' comprising *O Pioneers* (1914), *The Song of the Lark* and *My Antonia*, are small-town stories that use their local communities, far from any roads, as case studies of female identity-building and image-making. Funda's assertions that such small-town stories are 'alive with the pulse of oral narrative' helps underscore this chapter's central belief that small-town narrative relies heavily on oral culture to find definition. If indeed Cather's primary focus is on this central conceit of female coming-ofage in a text like *The Song of the Lark*, then it is through the wider voices of small-town life that she tracks such development. Gossip, rumour, and storytelling each conspire in the formative years of Cather's protagonists and contribute not only to their final characterisation but to the town's, also.

Cather makes use of oral culture in three distinct modes, with each contributing to a pervasive sense of self-reflexivity and lamentation over rural American community. The first of these modes is oral culture as a destructive force, in which gossip is the dominant form and portrayed as a malicious social disease that excludes certain demographics whilst empowering its practitioners. The second is a regular invocation of oral culture in a distinctly constructive mode, wherein it can provide inclusivity and social bonding, amplified by the remoteness, and multiculturalism, of her settings. Thirdly is her more *general* attention to voice, to the cadences and rhythms of rural speech that are not necessarily gossip, neither malicious nor ameliorating, destructive or constructive, but simply *are*. This kind of orality might be termed 'everyday speech', a category that is, much like small-town America itself, complex and diffuse. Like Sherwood Anderson, she regularly interrupts her texts with authorial intrusion in a manner that resembles the ear-bending intimacy, even banality, of small-town speech. So too does she occasionally adopt an imperious voice, where she zooms out from the small-town environs of Black Hawk, Nebraska and Moonstone,

Colorado to instead inspect the wider American community which she finds so fruitful, so full of narratable experience and affect: 'So into all the little settlements of quiet people, tiding of what their boys and girls are doing in the world bring real refreshment; bring to the old, memories, and to the young, dreams'. 86

This complicated approach to her presentation of oral culture, the variety of which speaks to the wider multivalences in small-town narrative more generally, is perhaps explained through Cather's own biography. Derek Driedger writes that Cather's own experiences as a journalist for her local newspaper, as well as editorial experience with University of Nebraska's newspaper *The Hesperian* and the *Lincoln Courier*, left her with a sharp ear for speech, gossip, rumour and an intense interest in teasing out such modalities in her own writing. Driedger writes in his study of Cather and 'anti-narrative' that 'the great American newspaper takes in intellect, promise, talent; it gives out only colloquial gossip', an insinuation that Cather is perhaps more adept than most in negotiating the multivalent uses and effects of gossip, and oral culture more broadly, in her writing.<sup>87</sup>

In *The Song of the Lark,* gossiping is largely anonymous and occurs across

Moonstone, often relegated to an ambiguous third-person pronoun that denies knowledge
of the speaker(s): 'the Moonstone gossips, assembled in Mrs. Smiley's millinery and notion
store, often discussed Dr. Archie's politeness to his wife'.<sup>88</sup> 'The Moonstone gossips' is
playfully vague, anchoring the anonymous gossips to a single location in the town and
suggesting their existence has its own bounded sense of space. As with previous texts and
authors, there is a sense of the small town and its narrative tropes becoming one; the

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>86</sup> Cather, The Song of the Lark, p. 662.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>87</sup> Derek Driedger, 'Writing Isolation and the Resistance to Assimilation as "Imaginative Art": Willa Cather's Anti-Narrative in "Shadows on the Rock", *Journal of Narrative Theory*, 37 (Fall 2007), 351-374, (p. 354).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>88</sup> Cather, *The Song of the Lark*, p. 128.

gossips *are* small-town America. Of course, it is rarely the case in small, rural communities that gossip is confined in this manner but rather finds itself manifest in institutions where it is both expected – the home – and those where it borders on the profane – the church, for example. It is, as Blakey Vermeule writes, 'everywhere practiced'. <sup>89</sup> Cather writes of Moonstone's God-fearing populace, noting how 'all the church people were forever chattering about things of which they knew nothing'. . <sup>90</sup> Here she succinctly defines the root of all gossip which is its very idleness, its 'nothing' substance which is fashioned into a social narrative structure to be passed around like a tithe basket, accumulating detail along its course. The fact that, in these two instances, gossip is ascribed a location either by direct reference or implication – the millinery and the church – points clearly to gossip as a 'means of social regulation' using familiar and recognizable small-town institutions. <sup>91</sup>

As I discuss in depth in Chapter Four, small-town American life is commonly defined in its attendant narratives by routines and rhythms, by its familiar pace and ubiquitous institutions, so it is natural that gossip should occur in such spaces as a regulating force.

Cather writes of how 'there'd be talk', of 'unfriendly comment', of 'being talked about all over town', all of which inscribe small-town communities with a sense of control and authority that is not seen but heard, panoptic in its judgement but physically evasive. 

Cather's treatment of gossip and oral culture more broadly as a socially controlling force is again discussed by Funda, who writes that the attention Cather pays gossip as a narrative

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>89</sup> Vermeule, p. 104.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>90</sup> The Song of the Lark, p. 313.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>91</sup> Tomasso Bertolotti and Lonrezo Magnani, 'An Epistemological analysis of gossip and gossip-based knowledge', *Synthese*, 191 (November, 2014), 4037-4067, (p. 4039).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>92</sup> The Song of the Lark, p. 147, p. 150, p. 154.

form suggests she 'understood the richness of the narrative dimensions of gossip [...] She recognised its formal characteristics and its impact in a culture'. 93

Cather's presentation of gossip in both *The Song of the Lark* and *My Antonia* hinges on this immanent power dynamic, one that ultimately shuns her most realized protagonist of Thea Kronborg in *The Song of the Lark* from the small town altogether. The static routine of gossip as banal pastime is frequently touched upon in 'revolt' literature and counter small-town texts. With that said, the impetus that drives Thea from the small town is, among other factors, this stifling sense of gossip and rumourmongering which marks oral culture as both narratively static and progressive *simultaneously*. The 'richness of the narrative dimensions of gossip' that Cather recognises in her texts is precisely why her representation of oral culture is so various; it can be something which prohibits and isolates just as it can inspire escape and exodus.

Thea, Cather's prodigious lead, finds the speech habits of Moonstone, where 'the world is little, people are little, human lives are little', to be exclusionary and judgmental, ruled by the liberal belief that 'people talked when they felt like it, and said what they chose'. 94 In 'gossipy Moonstone', as Herron terms it, people's actions are rarely inconspicuous and any desires deemed above their station, namely Thea's aspirations of becoming a singer, are chalked up to youthful, immature follies. In fact, Cather compartmentalizes such small-town insularities into a new language altogether, which is referenced throughout by Thea and those she meets in the city. 'I like your language, it's pure Moonstone, Thea!' Fred, Thea's companion and love interest when she moves to New York, remarks to her one evening when they are ensconced in the cosmopolitan,

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>93</sup> Funda, p. 104.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>94</sup> The Song of the Lark, p. 113., Ibid., p. 181.

multilingual world of the city. Here, the rural speech habits of Moonstone pervade Thea's second life as an urban woman; the provincial shackles of the town remain fastened to her through speech. Thea responds, offended, by saying 'the name [Moonstone] [...] makes a difference to me how I feel about myself' and, to Fred, that 'you would have acted differently with a girl of your own kind'.95

Thea recognizes how the speech and language of her small-town origins has come to define her attempt at new life, how the same language that Moonstone's gossips wielded has now rendered her a rural other in New York. The language of Moonstone has here come to represent the town's social practice and manners, its entire identity, to the uninitiated urban *bon vivant*. This all affirms Funda's description of gossip and speech as 'as a performance of self and culture [...] a defining factor in how individuals are defined by society'. 96 Thea becomes defined by such patterns of speech by circumstance of her voice, accent, and oral mannerisms; the anonymous gossips from which she fled have found a second wind in Thea's own speech. To speak against them is to speak *as* them. Here, oral culture and gossip are narratologically circular, or static, keeping Cather's story rooted to its small-town origins and leaving her character's 'revolt' as a mitigated, temporary affair. As soon as these communities are spoken into being, by author and their (fictional) inhabitants alike, moral and social codes are inscribed automatically. The response is either acceptance and stasis or revolt and flight.

Thea's anxieties over how she communicates with the two worlds she inhabits, the urban and the rural, is a recurrent motif and Fred regularly patronizes her with references to Moonstone and its native tongue. 'Isn't it perfectly good English?', Thea asks late in the

<sup>95</sup> Ibid., p. 230.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>96</sup> Funda, p. 89.

novel, to which Fred replies: 'Perfectly good Moonstone my dear. Like the ready-made clothes that hang in the windows made to fit everybody and fit nobody'. 97 The irony here is that Thea, distinct from the social milieu of Moonstone by way of her natural talents, prodigiousness, and active desire to leave, becomes bound to them inextricably through this analogy. Such a metaphor taps into what Funda describes as gossip's chief characteristic, wherein people 'reinforce their shared values and world view' through mutual language. 98 Thea, who finds Moonstone gossip abhorrent though, by circumstance of birth, is caught in its social grasp, ultimately becomes part of a 'world view' that she does not believe in. Trapped between the 'shared values' of Moonstone and the decadent, autonomous world of city life, Thea finds that her language, her 'ready-made clothes', is fit for neither purpose, can narrate neither environment. Fred promises her she will 'get a new speech full of shades and color like your voice; alive, like your mind', with the implication here that smalltown speech, so closely associated with gossip, is monochromatic (or monosyllabic), but Thea's frequent nostalgia for her homelife suggests that her 'Moonstone' language will always be her mother tongue.<sup>99</sup>

Cather's treatment of Moonstone and Black Hawk is not a singular, polemical remonstration on small-town America as a place solely of 'malicious gossips' and 'futile aspirations', but rather a multivalent depiction of rural life where oral speech can be equally constructive as it is damaging. Robert L. Dorman, writing on the history of regionalism in America, attends to this complex presentation of place and its people in Cather's writing when he talks of 'landscapes like the ones Cather painted, obscure places, backwaters,

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>97</sup> The Song of the Lark, p. 514.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>98</sup> Funda, p. 97.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>99</sup> The Song of the Lark, p. 341.

anywhere there were people with old songs, or crafts, or stories, or memories – the attenuated remnants of the older America'. <sup>100</sup> In this more constructive mode, Cather describes how Mrs. Archie, wife of Thea's patron Dr. Archie, would sit among the very same gossips Thea grows to resent, thankful for their companionship and for the illusion of lived experience generated by their fanciful stories of faraway places and people farther still:

When there was nowhere else to go, she used to sit for hours in Mrs. Smiley's millinery and notion store, listening to talk of the women who came in [...] she never talked much herself but she knew all the gossip of the town and she had a sharp ear for racy anecdotes – travelling men's stories: they used to be called in Moonstone. 101

Here, gossip and speech become a means of deferral, keeping at bay the anguish and uncertainty of living remotely in a town defined by repetition. Mrs. Archie, described as knowing 'all of the gossip of the town', is absolved somewhat by the admission she 'never talked much herself', though she is still firmly a part of 'gossipy Moonstone's' chorus.

Gossip's performance again assumes narratively static properties; it is engaged with by the bored, the old, and the unambitious. It is everything that Thea is not, and yet she too must navigate its legacy with every word uttered.

Elsewhere, Thea's love interest Joe is described as being 'observant, truthful, and kindly – perhaps the chief requisites in a good storyteller', and so becomes emblematic of the virtues of small-town speech; his tragic and untimely death speaks to the wider anxieties concerning the fate of such virtues and their endurance. In Cather's narratives of

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>100</sup> Dorman, p. 87.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>101</sup> The Song of the Lark, pp. 54-55.

small-town life, where oral culture inheres as a defining trait, speech is not simply relegated to the social baseness of gossip but can also become socially affirming and constructive as opposed to destructive. Storytelling becomes a mode of sociability in *The Song of the Lark* which is principally found in the Mexican community on the 'other side of the tracks' in Moonstone, a common small-town geographic index of social and racial segregation that is explored in detail in Chapter Three of this thesis. Thea's unique relationship with this section of town and its notorious figures like Spanish Johnny is affirmed by her oral relationship with them: 'Her stories gave them something to talk about and to conjecture about, cut off as they are from the restless currents of the world'. 102

Through attention to camaraderie, neighbourliness, and the performance of rural, down-home storytelling, Cather suggests small-town orality can *build* quasi-utopian American communities as equally as it can transform said places into gossip-ridden backwaters. Her writing can be elegiac and wistful, lamenting the changing circumstances of American modernity in which the formerly intimate aspects of small-town speech are becoming redundant – 'But the old people lingered about the stove to greet each other'. <sup>103</sup> Like Cather's 'old people', who find warmth and solace in the social exchange of idle talk around a stove or in a tavern, the face and shape of small-town America is on the verge of significant change in her pre-war moment and such melancholy pervades her texts, with her narratives anticipating both the rise and fall of small-town oral culture through her complex representation.

The 'restless currents' of modernity seem to forever ebb at the shores of small-town life, a tide held fast in the New England utopias of Thornton Wilder and Norman Rockwell,

<sup>102</sup> Ibid., p. 662.

<sup>103</sup> Ibid., p. 185.

for example, but that gains ground in the Midwestern waystations of Anderson and Masters' where conversely inhabitants must leave, or drown. Whilst Thea is haunted by the hostile gossips of Moonstone when abroad in New York and Chicago, she is simultaneously wistful for the more utopian memories of storytelling and sociability she shared with the Spanish and Mexican migrants of Moonstone; Cather's presentation of oral culture as destructive and constructive coexist throughout the novel. These kinds of complications demonstrate why Cather's treatment of oral culture in small-town America is so narratively interesting; Thea's urban liberation is checked by constant reminders of her small-town, frequently through the cipher of gossip and talk, though it can be a reminder of past sociability just as quickly as it can of provincialism and insularity.

If Cather does indeed attain a 'regional consciousness' in her works, then it is because of her treatment of oral culture as an ambiguous, though essential, constituent of small-town narrative – her lucidity to how speech and storytelling govern rural community narratives is as close to a small-town 'consciousness' as we are likely to find. <sup>104</sup> Likewise, her treatment of orality as antagonistic and destructive, as well as also rendering it as a necessary social institution, is her greatest strength as a narrator of small-town life and of American realism, a term already attributed to Cather's contemporaries such as Sherwood Anderson. She demonstrates, as Funda describes, 'how an audience of oral narrative that is corrupted into voyeur and storytelling intimacy becomes perverted into infringement, intrusion, and invasion,' and it is these very properties of small-town oral culture that sees Thea flee into urban anonymity.

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>104</sup> Robert L. Dorman, *Revolt of the Provinces: The Regionalist Movement in America, 1920-1940* (University of North Carolina Press, 1993), p. 38.

Cather herself uses the mannerisms and patterns of oral culture to achieve an authentic authorial voice in a manner akin to Sherwood Anderson in *Winesburg, Ohio*. She regularly interjects in her stories with intrusions flavoured by small-town speech; she halts a narrative segue early on in *The Song of the Lark* to simply state 'but of that later'. Like Anderson, Cather assumes the mediatory role of her small-town's oral culture and so adorns the edges of her narratives with nods and suggestions to other figures and events. 'And of one of these, we shall have more to say,' she teases, when referencing the 'railroad men' whom Thea and her mother regularly chatted to 'over the fences', another subtle nod to a site of small-town speech which is habitual to the Kronborg women. Thus, she achieves this 'elevated status' hinted at by Funda, one that manifests both within and without her narrative, a status attained by character and author alike.

It is fitting, then, that the most adept writers of small-town oral culture, like

Anderson, Cather, and Austin, should inflect their narratives with the very intonations,
pauses, and embellishments as one would expect to hear uttered by their small-town
populace. To write the small town is to speak the small town. Small-town oral culture
becomes complicated and multifaceted in Cather's work; it is spoken and narrated in the
shifting cadences of hushed gossip, boisterous revelry, reflective storytelling, and even in
melancholy song. Richard Giannone adeptly summaries this unique narratorial aspect of
Cather's work: 'the final effect of her work is comparable to that created by telling a story in
a muted voice with a hardly audible murmur. The listener must become attuned to vocal
nuances, hints, pauses, elusive promptings'. 107 Cather's work is indeed alive with the

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>105</sup> The Song of the Lark, p. 40.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>106</sup> Ibid., p. 51.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>107</sup> Richard Giannone, 'Willa Cather and the Unfinished Drama of Deliverance': *Prairie Schooner*, 52 (Spring 1978), 25-46, (p. 45).

shifting notes of oral culture in all its forms, and her narratives border on the symphonic in their oral scope and complexity. That all these ideas should sit in such proximity to the setting and conceit of the small town shows how they both generically inform one another.

Ultimately, both Cather and Austin attend to the small town in the American West, distinct from previous regional examples care of its distant, unplanned geography, as a place sustained by oral culture, particularly by that 'terror of little towns': gossip. Their protagonists Thea Kronborg and Olivia Lattimore both leave their small towns in favour of metropolitan life, and the memories they have of such places are infused with notions of voice and speech. So too are the talents associated with the precocious female protagonists, who mature into world-wise women fully accustomed to life in New York and Chicago, born from the voice – both Thea and Olivia's singing becomes a conceit in their respective novels that not only anchors their narratives to oral culture but which stresses the difference between themselves and the towns they ultimately flee. Their voices are capable of beauty, of expressing life beyond the boundaries of small towns and small lives, and so become a gift. The influence of such towns, however, is still audible in each intonation.

# 'Pictorial myths': Narratives of small-town orality in photography and visual art

In her critical study of *Life* magazine and its ideological footprint in American popular culture, Sheila Webb argues that the magazine's photojournalism was complicit in the 'visualisation of small town virtues', and that such photographic narratives saw small-town America 'embody quintessential ideas of the ideal American space'. <sup>108</sup> It is true that visual narratives of small-town America and, importantly, their dissemination, are vital in understanding the codification of a small-town narrative model, and Webb's comments provide useful foundations for my study into this generic construct. To understand the complexities of small-town narrative, to see its full shape, visual materials must be considered alongside the texts cited previously. Reading small-town America is not sufficient; it must also be seen.

In the photography and artwork of the Depression small-town American narratives rose to the fore, with a particular focus on orality. In the works of photographers such as Walker Evans and Dorothea Lange, the small town, its people, and their stories become freighted with narrative qualities. Vignettes, anecdotes, and gestures all concerned with gossip, storytelling, and general rural mythmaking - the same gestures which are legible in the works of Mary Austin, Willa Cather, and Sherwood Anderson - find mutual potency in the period's visual culture. This narrative language can be traced across the period's visual texts and seats them in a wider literary tradition, a language best understood as the 'American Scene', a loose-fitting genre term referred to by James Curtis and Sheila Grannen

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>108</sup> Sheila Webb, 'A Pictorial Myth in the Pages of "Life": Small-Town America as the Ideal Place', *Studies in Popular Culture*, 28 (April, 2006), 35-58, (p. 35); Ibid., p. 38.

as being comprised of 'regionalism and social realism' in the 'mid-1930s'. 109 It is variously described akin to Regionalism and its attendant visual narratives that seem to evoke a flavor of 'American particularism', where the commonplace and familiar abound. 110

This section's first critical focus is on the Farm Securities Administration (FSA), a New Deal initiative headed by bureaucrat Roy Stryker which sought to 'introduce America to Americans' through ethnographic work carried out by itinerant photographers in the nation's rural communities. <sup>111</sup> Through attention to the work of the FSA's visual corpus as a whole, with specific attention paid to the artist and photographer Ben Shahn, I will contend that this socially interrogative, government-devised programme yielded some of the most striking visual narratives of small-town life that, even in the fixity of their frames, capture curious instances of small-town oral culture.

Similarly, I will also consider the prolific narratives of small-town American life that inhere in the period's commercial photojournalism, specifically in *Life* magazine, and how the synchronicities between such work and macro projects such as the FSA attest to the 'pictorial myth' of small-town America. Cara Finnegan writes that 'for many Americans [...[ the FSA photographs constitute a vivid part of our public memory of the Depression [...] many of them serve as remarkable examples of the sheer aesthetic power of the photographic image'. <sup>112</sup> I will extrapolate this idea across all photographic and visual mediums considered here to suggest that small-town narratives, both textual and visual,

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>109</sup> James C. Curtis, and Sheila Grannen, 'Let us now praise famous photographs: Walker Evans and Documentary Photography', *Winterthur Portfolio*, 16 (Spring, 1980), 1-23, (p. 4).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>110</sup> Matthew Baigell, *The American Scene: American Painting of the 1930s* (New York and Washington: Praeger Publishing, 1974), p. 55.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>111</sup> Alan Trachtenberg, 'Minnesota History in the Camera's Eye 1935-1943', *Minnesota History*, 61 (Spring, 2009), 174-195, (p. 180).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>112</sup> Cara A. Finnegan, 'Documentary as art in "U.S Camera", *Rhetoric Society Quarterly*, 31 (Spring, 2001), 37-68, (p. 37).

contribute to this so-called collective, or 'public', memory of small-town America as it exists in popular culture. Ultimately, I will examine how the intersection between commercial and government-supported photography helps to shape the very same narrative model visible in canonical texts like *Winesburg, Ohio* and *Spoon River Anthology,* where a blend of ethnological impulses and individual artistry collide to imaginatively render the small town and its narrative qualities.

As well as this consideration of photographic narratives of small-town life, I will consider the prevalence of oral culture as it appears in popular art and illustrations of the period, epitomized in this study by the artist Norman Rockwell and his tenure as cover artist for The Saturday Evening Post. This study will examine Rockwell's legacy in cultural studies centred around the small town where, as Miles Orvell writes, 'more than any other artist of the twentieth-century, Rockwell created the ethos of small-town America, even as a mass migration was taking place [...] he was the dramatist of the safely and humorously familiar, and his images carried the warm feeling of 'home'. 113 Rockwell's familiar world of ruddyfaced boy scouts with dirty knees, wholesome elderly stock-types and their leisurely pastimes of fishing, gossiping and lazing on the sunporch, is mapped via the recognizable terrain of main streets, town squares, and neat, framed houses and, as Orvell's writing attests, he is a figure who has become incorporated into cultural studies concerned with the small town. This mapping is itself predicated on the idea of dominant, exclusionary smalltown narrative, on telling stories built on conservative beliefs and values. The role of oral culture in such narratives, and indeed the counter narratives offered in this section, remains vital to understanding the complex shape of small-town narrative as genre and form.

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>113</sup>Miles Orvell, *The Death and Life of Main Street: Small Towns in American Memory, Space, and Community* (University of North Carolina Press, 2014), p. 43.

### 'Artful Documentary': Small-town America and the FSA

Following the devastation of the Depression, the FSA was devised as a New Deal initiative to document and promote awareness of the nation's poverty, whilst simultaneously (and problematically) recuperating a past founded on small, rural communities and the conservative values shared there. Alan Trachtenberg, writing in his seminal work *Reading American Photographs* (1989), highlights how significant the FSA photographic project is as a narrative record of everyday American rural life. He goes on to state that the project 'developed as a unique blend of personal visions that are also objective records of scenes, things, and persons witnessed by the photographer' and that ultimately it 'expanded into a general ethnology of everyday life'. <sup>114</sup> Indeed, this highlighting of an ethnological impulse in the FSA photography implies a general preference for social interaction and a privileging of small-town oration, which becomes evident as the FSA catalogue is studied. <sup>115</sup>

Roy Stryker, the FSA's lead officiant, personally issued 'shooting-scripts' to his selected photographers which instructed them to find 'modern, democratic communities' within the nation's small-town archipelago and depict the 'American scene'. <sup>116</sup> In his view, as he searched for 'authentic' American social practice among the ruined towns of the South and Midwest, documenting the 'egalitarianism' of small-town Main Streets would engender a renewed model of American community. <sup>117</sup> The people found there, and the voices with which they narrated their impoverished lives, are central to these visual documents.

114 Ibid.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>115</sup> Rhetoric Society Quarterly, p. 37.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>116</sup> James Curtis, *Mind's Eye, Mind's Truth: FSA Photography Reconsidered* (Temple University Press, 1989), p. 110.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>117</sup> Ibid., p. 103.

James Curtis writes of the FSA as a project wherein 'the realism was deliberate, calculated, and highly stylized'. <sup>118</sup> In the works of Ben Shahn, these notions of stylistics and documentary are particularly telling, and in the small-town scenes which comprise his contribution to the FSA's catalogue, scenes of speech both idle and otherwise, of gossip, chat, and rumormongering, begin to provide a small-town narrative that speaks to far more than the FSA's seemingly homologous, 'protestant' presentation of documentary without narrative. Within Shahn's ethnographic works of social realism, we can trace distinct rural narratives pertaining to speech, gossip, and idle talk in the same tradition as the literature of the period.

Shahn's photograph 'Scene in Smithland, Kentucky, 1935' (see Fig. 1) captures two middle-class gentlemen casually talking outside the 'Smithland Grocery Co'. storefront, typified by its glass lettering and displayed wares just visible between the two subjects. Both men are well-dressed, in buttoned overcoats and dress hats, with the moustached man on the right leaning on a cane. His crooked right arm and the look of wry acknowledgement on his face suggest something amusing has passed between the two, and we can presume that neither are aware they are being photographed given Shahn's preference for a right-angled viewfinder which allowed for covert exposures. Both men are turned inward toward one another, notably so given Shahn's frequent portraits that capture subjects leaning with their backs to buildings and facing outward toward the camera. Here, the unmistakable intimacy of conversation is legible in the body language of the affluent businessmen, and its occurrence on a small-town sidewalk before a grocery store sets the scene within the same traditions of small-town oral culture interpreted in the previous literary texts.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>118</sup> Ibid., p. 5.

This image appears in multiple forms on the Library of Congress's archived collection as well as the Museum of Modern Art's digital collections, including the cropped version discussed above. The uncropped exposure reveals a Black man, less formally dressed than the businessman from whom he stands apart, staring directly at Shahn's lens and leaning against the entrance to the grocery store behind the figures. This symbolic separateness is of course contended with in far more detail in Shahn's London, Ohio scenes, discussed later, but it is curious to note how instances of orality and sociability in his small-town scenes can be undercut by this overt exemplification of silence and, by extension, segregation.

Shahn's focus on orality is clear in these scenes, but as to *why* critics can only speculate. Timothy Egan, author of *The Photography of Ben Shahn* (2008), writes that 'from his parents, Ben inherited a love for storytelling. They could connect narratives passed on from prior generations with the struggles of the day. Shahn's art would strive to do the same thing'. <sup>119</sup> Egan affirms that it is precisely Shahn's upbringing in the 'oral storytelling tradition of his Jewish family in Lithuania' that engenders his photographic narrative style. <sup>120</sup> This perhaps explains why Shahn is so drawn to scenes of social exchange in his rural compositions; he understands that to narrate a life one must look to the other lives in which it is constellated.

One of Shahn's most deliberate depictions of small-town social exchange, attesting to this 'oral storytelling tradition', is 'After Church, Sunday in Little Rock, 1935' (Fig. 2). Churches, with their attendant connotations of community, social interaction, and orality, are prolific signifiers of small-town community in the textual and visual narratives studied in this chapter, and Shahn's catalogue is no different. In this photograph, he captures the

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>119</sup> Timothy Egan, *The Photographs of Ben Shahn* (Washington D.C: Giles, 2008), p. ix.

denouement of Sunday service at a rural church, with the exclusively African-American congregation gathered in an assortment of groups, cliques, and postures in the shadow of the church. As Jon Raeburn notes of Stryker's 'shooting scripts', and how they sought a 'holistic' view of 'American culture', there is something both typical and atypical to Shahn's scene here. <sup>121</sup> It demonstrates the seeking out of these kinds of 'typical' community spaces, as Stryker would deem them, whilst privileging an all-Black community which certainly was not the norm in the FSA's wider ethnographic project.

In the post-Church service 'Sunday in Little Rock', talk that was previously denied in the awed hush of the interior during service is set loose; plans form for the day ahead as children skirt to and fro between the gathered adults. The four men in the centre-left of the photograph, one of whom stands with both hands in the pockets of his suit trousers, are engaged in talk in much the same manner as the storefront businessmen of the Smithland photograph. In 'artful documentary' compositions such as these, Shahn presents rural oral culture as an authentic, necessary mode of existence, but likewise presents a scene that feels alive with lived experience and orality. His subjects may not lean in to one another with cupped hands in an exaggerated caricature of gossip, nor do they appear particularly animated with their body language, but Shahn captures the subtleties of human speech, particularly in his rural scenes, in a manner complementary to the wider small-town oral traditions described in this chapter. Sometimes such orality is performed with deliberation — Rockwell's 'The Gossips', as will be shown, typifies this — yet here its understated, routine presentation feels authentic and free of artifice.

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>121</sup> John Raeburn, *A Staggering Revolution: A Cultural History of Thirties Photography* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2006), p. 15.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>122</sup> Laura Katzman, 'Ben Shahn and the Archive', *Archives of American Art Journal*, 54 (Summer, 2015), 4-33, (p. 8).

In 1938, Shahn undertook significant independent work in Ohio, adopting the same itinerant approach to his work as with the FSA where he sought out small towns, back roads, and dusty waystations in which, Egan remarks provocatively, 'you feel the texture of want'. 123 Egan notes, as do many critics who reconcile the vernacular aesthetics of the socalled everyday, the narrative potentiality of banal routine and spaces. He continues by writing that in Ohio, Shahn found 'rich repositories of everyday life' and 'took photographs at country fairs, travelling shows, people at baseball games, at lunch counters'. 124 Found in such quotidian scenes is the portrayal of small-town speech, a necessary asset in the construction of these wider community 'repositories'. It is not enough to capture these scenes of apparent everyday American occurrence as sites of vernacular small-town space; Shahn recognises the important in capturing the people who perform such spaces into being, often through the simple act of speech. With that said, there is a curious anxiety legible in Shahn's work and within the archive left behind. Foremostly, as John Raeburn claims in his book Ben Shahn's American Scene (2010), Shahn wanted to 'photograph the average American' which suggests a search for some kind of quintessential rural identity. 125 However, Raeburn later claims that 'Shahn's pictures reveal a striking degree of equivocation about the script's assumption that a photographic survey of small towns would reveal their undiminished vitality and ratify their standing as an American institution'. 126 Shahn seemed to rebuke Roy Stryker's 'shooting script' mandate that smalltown American community was one-note and all-good, though his own desires to find

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>123</sup> Egan, p. viii.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>124</sup> Ibid., p. xiii.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>125</sup> John Raeburn, *Ben Shahn's American Scene: Photographs 1938* (Illinois: University of Illinois Press, 2010), p. 6.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>126</sup> Ibid., p. 10.

identity and meaning in these same spaces results in a parallel search where, I argue, an attention to orality becomes a key device.

The photograph 'Scenes at Buckeye Lake Amusement Park, Near Columbus, Ohio, 1938' (Fig. 3) show two women, one middle-aged and the other elderly, engaged in conversation outside the entrance to a 'Palmist' attraction at the titular amusement park. What at first appears to be a quotidian portrait reveals itself as a measured, thoughtful depiction of small-town speech. Both women lean against the unit housing the Palmist attraction, with another stall visible through the opening on the left. They are turned inward, like the Smithland businessmen, unaware of Shahn or at least feigning ignorance, and appear to be smilling. Curiously, both women touch their hair, a neat symmetry of bodylanguage that marks the idiosyncrasies of everyday speech, specifically the subjective, paralinguistic gestures that accompany such talk. Whether a fortuitous coincidence or a perfectly timed exposure by Shahn, the pronounced use of their hands whilst talking outside the 'Palmist' attraction is an amusing sight gag, and one that is rooted in orality. These women, neatly mirroring each's language both verbal and otherwise, convey the associated involvement and complete absorption of talk and gossip in their small-town setting.

Patricia Meyer Spacks' significant writings on gossip as constructive as well as destructive, used in this chapter's discussions on Willa Cather, are equally useful in unpacking its visual representations in Shahn's work. Spacks writes of gossip as 'healing talk', referring to its physiological effects, perhaps most potently felt in the intimate, proximal communities of small-town America in which gossip is often an unavoidable and

idiosyncratic part of everyday life.<sup>127</sup> I propose that such elements are teased out in Shahn's photograph(s) at Buckeye Lake Amusement park.

The women's expression of humour is itself a healthy social expression, but it is the elderly woman's mimicking of the younger woman's movement, even unconsciously, that is the most vital signifier of gossip's timeless, mollifying effects. They become living signifiers of gossip and small-talk as a homogenising force – an aspect that, as we have seen, can be both destructive as well as constructive. Spacks' assertion that 'gossip involves a special mode of knowing, as well as of saying' is affirmed in the visible speech and symmetrical gesture of Shahn's subjects. 128 Like the clairvoyant seers awaiting patrons through the darkened doorway of the Palmist's room, where cold reading of small anecdotes and details are extrapolated onto wider life narratives, so too does Shahn's photograph betray wider narratives of small-town oral culture and its representations. We begin to sketch the lives beyond the figures, to imagine the words said and unsaid as they stand apart from the main hustle of the fair. Shahn's subtle invocations of gossip through his portraits, whether streetscenes or vignettes from a county show, lend themselves to such poetic license. Appealing to the voyeur, they invite us to hear their conversations and to take part in the unique small-town narratives he captures so adeptly.

A curious counterpart to the 'government-sponsored' nature of Shahn's FSA photography is the photojournalism of the period, which adopts a far more overt dominant narrative of community-building than Shahn. Chief among these publications was *Life*, the *raison d'etre* of which Sheila Webb defines as ordering the 'chaos and flux of life into a

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>127</sup> Patricia Meyer Spacks, 'In Praise of Gossip', *The Hudson Review*, 35 (Spring, 1982), 19-38, (p. 25). <sup>128</sup> Ibid., p. 28.

comforting narrative'. <sup>129</sup> In photojournalist essays concerned with the small town, which were numerous during *Life's* peak, the same fixations demonstrated by Shahn become visible in more objective community portraits, and the nuanced and often candid nature of the FSA's photography makes way for more structured, choreographed scenes of small-town life in a dominant mode. The 'comforting narratives' of small-town America become the curatorial tools of commercial journalism, collected and presented in an often sterile, highly contrived manner to promote and endorse the dominant mythologies of small-town America.

One particularly striking example is a spread from 1940 in *Life* titled 'A Small Town's Saturday Night' which featured the small town of Franklin, Indiana as photographed by Bernard Hoffman. The photoessay follows the Dunn family and their Saturday night rituals as a family unit, passing through certain typical small-town institutions and variously engaging with the scene's community ethos. Mrs. Dunn enters the bustle of Main Street for some late-night shopping; Mr. Dunn retreats to the barbershop that 'hums with political discussion'; their children take in a movie at the local theatre and enjoy a milkshake at the drugstore. <sup>130</sup> In the iconic cover photograph for the article, Hoffman captures the 'gay white way' of Franklin's Main Street during the height of Saturday night sociability, with the cars triple-parked along sidewalks filled with shoppers of all ages – 'By 8:30 Main Street is jammed and central square parked three deep with cars'. <sup>131</sup>

In particular, the photograph taken of the barbershop, filled with eight men all dressed in their formal Saturday-night attire, captures a certain masculinist mode of small-

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>129</sup> Webb, Studies in Popular Culture, p. 40.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>130</sup> Bernard Hoffman, 'A Small Town's Saturday Night', *Life*, December 2<sup>nd</sup>, 1940, pp. 63-68, (p. 63).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>131</sup> Ibid., p. 65.

town orality readily associated with dominant narratives (fig. 4). *Life's* caption labels the space a 'political forum', and so politics, both local and national, becomes confined to a male-gendered scene of private discussion. There is perhaps a sense of trying to elevate the scene beyond 'gossip' and reframe it as something more formal, but the realities of such a scene are framed in much the same way as Shahn's street scenes. Talk of this kind is homogenised into gossip, such is the inherent exclusivity of the space and chorus of conversationalists that we have seen elsewhere pictured. The men smile and turn toward one another on the right of the image with the barber poised carefully at his work, his head tilted as if in recognition at a shared thought or opinion. Framed by the window, with the storefront lettering of 'Haircut specialist' printed over the scene, the barbershop tableau is a microcosm of small-town oratory. The men in Hoffman's photograph gather to opine about the state of all things, both local and national, and do so in presumably assenting company. In keeping with *Life*'s broader coverage of life in American small towns, it is a decidedly dominant and conservative portrait of orality.

The idea that 'elevated' discussions occur in the barbershop, exclusive to men, whilst women and children engage in commercial sociability outside, is certainly bound to the dominant mythologies of small-town America. Dominant traditions like this abound across the *Life* spread, and so the barbershop image itself is particularly exemplary in promoting the dominant white hegemony of small-town America. This deliberate performance again speaks to gossip and oral culture as a constantly shifting facet to small-town narrative – it can be both banal, habitual and routine, but so too can it be deliberate, coded, and ritualised as this particular vignette in Franklin's barbershop attests. These two terms, ritual and routine, will be outlined more distinctly in Chapter Four of this study, but both are vital

in understanding how we can read narrative in small-town texts that seem, at first, to be precisely free of any narrative material.

'Among America's great institutions, none is more remarkable than Saturday night in a small Midwestern town,' Life writes in the opening copy of the photoessay, affirming the importance of the small town in wider journalistic narratives of American life. The anecdotes of life on show here, from the performative gesturing of two children sitting at a drugstore counter to the scandalous euphemism of the final image - 'Lover's Lane' - which captures parked cars along a dirt track just outside of town, all contribute to a 'complete' image of small-town America, in much the same way as Stryker's FSA shooting scripts strove for 'holistic' representation. Again, oral culture informs this narrative most demonstratively, visible in the photograph of Ila Dean and her 'boy friend [sic]', Mayo Heath (fig. 5). The pair sit at a table in the City Paint and Drug Store, both staring at each other affectionately, as they lean over their milkshakes. Behind them two men engage in conversation also, but it is the unspoken suggestion of gossip, titillation, and adolescent romance of the two young subjects that speaks most clearly toward a sense of dominant small-town orality. The framing of Life's scene centres, like Shahn's equivalent scenes, the interlocutors and attempts to capture the seemingly ineffable physical properties of gossip. The scene itself appears to be invoking a certain nostalgia for a period and place that precedes the era of publication; the small town's constant figuring of 'passing away' permanently seems coded in these images of chat and sociability, and Life positions itself as an archivist and advocate of such dominant ideologies.

Elsewhere in the spread, 'The Nook, a college hangout-cum-diner, is pictured, with several four-seater booths all filled with adolescents engaging in ostensibly idle chat over glasses of Coca-Cola (fig. 6). The privileging of certain speech patterns, as with the 'political

forum' captioning of the barbershop scene, versus the more quotidian observations of the youthful diners – a 'hangout' rather than a 'forum' – shows the stratification of orality that exists here in an overtly dominant small-town narrative. Orality is plural, and even in these still frames such variety remains visible.

Hoffman's 'Nook' photograph is sentimental, nostalgic, and above all else, evocative of the 'sounds' of dominant small-town oral culture. To look at the busy interiors of Franklin, through the windows of its shops, and to see the crowds thronged along Main Street, is to 'hear' the ubiquitous murmur of small-town sociability, to witness the prevailing hegemonies and dominant myth structures of rural America in their totality through the lens of oral culture. Hoffman's photoessay tours the expected locales, both interiors and exteriors, of small-town America and frequently alights in the places where small-town narrative is most potently visible and audible. Dry Goods shops, drug stores, barbers, the local movie theatre, even the interior of cars; these comprise small-town oral culture because they are the sites where social transaction takes place most frequently, where gossip is traded and stories are told.

In the BBC Four documentary *America in Pictures: The Story of Life Magazine* (2011), British photographer Rankin travels to small-town America to trace the history of *Life* as one of the chief narrators of 'heartland' America. Speaking in a small-town diner, Rankin interviews Burk Uzzle, a career photographer who, in 1961, became *Life*'s youngest ever photographer at the age of 23. On the specifics of the magazine's small-town narrative ideology, Uzzle comments:

Life always cared about the big issues of the day, but was devoted to small-town America.

Stories of the lives of ordinary people, their work, their pleasure, their anguish. The

magazine returned to them again and again across the decades as if the small town summed up everything *Life* believed in. 132

Most telling in this exchange, however, is Uzzle's insistence that 'they would open up to you', with 'they' denoting the magazine's small-town subjects, and that it was the photographer's job 'to be respectful'. The phrase 'open up' has inherent connotations of oral culture, of bridging a social disconnect and creating a dialogue. It is only natural, then, that *Life*'s photoessays, described by Rankin as a 'unique blend of journalism and art', should seem so preoccupied with the language of the everyday and how it is uttered. Again, Uzzle remarks that 'because of its small-town orientation [...] *Life* seemed to care about real people,' a problematic assertion which equates speech and orality – the primary motifs of the Franklin, Indiana photoessay – with an idea of the authentic or 'real' as it is coded in dominant narrative.

Given the racial elision at play in *Life's* small-town profiles, presented as exclusively white spaces, the veracity of *Life's* claims to narrate the stories of 'real people' becomes blurred. It is only the speech and language of white, middle-America that constitutes the 'real', *Life* seems to suggest. It is only their narratives that could ever truly account for small-town life. The narratives on offer in the spreads and photoessays discussed here are certainly fixated on the small town, but it is a fixation inflected with the dominant, conservative traditions common in post-Depression rhetoric regarding rural America. As Erika Doss notes in her book *Looking at Life* (2001), '*Life* played a major role in representing and disseminating information and ideas, and shaping their meaning to an ever increasing

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>132</sup> 'America in Pictures: The Story of Life Magazine', dir. by Jack Cocker, (BBC, 2013).

body of consumers fluent in the language of pictorial communication'. <sup>133</sup> Doss' arguments here centre around the ideologies driving *Life's* work and subsequent popularity in the self-coined 'American Century', and her repeated use of words like 'compelling', 'controlling', 'coherence' and 'integration' are all suggestive of the highly-contrived narratives produced therein. The small town, as one of *Life's* chief muses, sits at the intersection of this visual reportage and institutional narrative framing; the result is a perfect example of dominant ideology in which community life is presented as sacrosanct and ineffable.

Of course, the significant disjuncture between Shahn's photography, sanctioned by government policy, and *Life*'s commercially manufactured appeal and sentiment, is that the latter is designed specifically for a 'predominantly white, middle-class' readership. <sup>134</sup>

Shahn's work on small-town America, particularly on his portraits, makes a concerted effort to be indiscriminate, and he specifically goes to the 'the other side of the tracks' to visually narrate the lives of African-Americans, as discussed in Chapter Three. The oral culture we might read in Shahn's work, the gossip between two women or those idling after a Sunday church service, is presented as universal, as a habit of the everyday that does not discriminate. Timothy Egan writes how 'Shahn drove rutted country lanes in Louisiana, Mississippi, Arkansas, and Alabama, recording the African-American faces that seldom appeared in the town squares [...] he went into churches, to the steps of country courthouses'. <sup>135</sup> *Life* magazine presents Franklin in a strictly homologous mode, from the exclusively white barbershop political forum to focalising its master narrative through the

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>133</sup> Erika Doss, *Looking at Life: Rethinking America's Favourite Magazine, 1936-1972* (Washington: Smithsonian Books, 2001), p. 4.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>134</sup> Claude Hubert Cookman, *American Photojournalism: Motivations and Meanings* (Northwestern University Press, 2009), p. 178.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>135</sup> Egan, p. xii.

Dunns, posited as an archetypal, white American family. Ultimately, its narrative of small-town life, heavily focused on oral culture and the sites of social exchange, is dictated by the mores of a white, middle-class society.

With these exclusions in mind, what is true across *both* the FSA's photography and more commercialized photojournalism is a natural interest in the cadences of small-town life, captured through portraits of people at rest and play, talking intimately and in larger groups. Two women standing before a psychic's tent at a county fair, or a family gathered in a general goods store on Saturday night, carry with them attendant ideas of speech and talk, the primary unit of social exchange in small-town America. Oral culture manifests itself with equal narrative potential in visual culture of the period as it does the literature; Shahn and Hoffman's small-town types (miners, churchgoers, rural businessmen) seem every bit the analogues of Winesburg's denizens, or the hundred-dead in Spoon River's unquiet cemetery. No matter the small town in question, orality is central to its depiction.

# 'Outdated rhetoric, warm sentimentality': Small-town nostalgia, oral culture, and Norman Rockwell

Though described by art historian Alexander Nemerov as a complicated illustrator to whom sadness and happiness often coexisted in the same frame, Norman Rockwell is largely remembered in the American canon as a 'homespun painter of happy sentiment,' who depicted a small-town American life tinged with nostalgia and romanticism during his tenure with The Saturday Evening Post. 136 His paintings and illustrations came to elegize a period that, as scholarship and dominant narrative repeatedly tells us, 'will soon be passing away'. 137 Rockwell's aesthetic and style is predicated on a reproducing of dominant smalltown referents, from harmonious domestic spaces to leisure and play within the ostensibly safe, small-town environment. Crucially, Rockwell's illustrations of dominant small-town scenes are preoccupied with oral culture and its apparent vitality to rural American space.

This specific focus on small-town oral culture and its contingent tropes – gossip, rumour, storytelling – becomes apparent as one negotiates Rockwell's extensive catalogue, in which familiar dominant small-town environments ring loud with voices. Richard Halpern, author of Norman Rockwell: The Underside of Innocence (2006), deconstructs the smalltown mythos of Rockwell's work through the lens of 'innocence' and nostalgia, noting that 'Rockwell in effect became a master at representing American ideologies'. 138 One of these core dominant ideologies, this chapter argues, is community and sociability as demonstrated through oral culture, to which Rockwell is keenly attentive through his regional scenes and assorted caricatures.

<sup>136</sup> Alexander Nemerov, 'Coming Home in 1945: Reading Robert Frost and Norman Rockwell', American Art, 18 (Summer, 2004), 58-79, (p. 62).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>137</sup> Ibid., p. 141.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>138</sup> Halpern, p. 46.

In earlier works, Rockwell shows isolated instances of gossip and orality in a distinct vignette style as was customary on *Post* covers. 'Three Ladies Gossiping' (1928) (fig. 7), for example shows a gendered instance of female gossip that typifies its historic narrative across art and literature, as pointed out by Spacks and Vermeuele. Three women are gathered in a tableau of exaggerated intimacy, sitting on dining chairs so proximate to one another that they obscure the body shapes and faces of the subjects. Sartorially, the women appear middle-class and, along with the upright posture of the central figure, facing directly away from the viewer, denote a certain affluence. This is a natural environment for gossip, if one is to follow Spacks' characterization of gossip as social practice. Spacks writes that gossip occurs 'temporarily isolated from a larger social world', a description entirely befitting Rockwell's three subjects who, by way of the absent background detail, are suspended, temporally and spatially, in a sphere of gossip. <sup>139</sup> Rockwell's style more generally, using anecdote and vignette to suggest the small-town world beyond, speaks to this temporary isolation 'from a larger world'.

Beyond their close-knit social circle, the reality of their lives is abstract, colourless. When gossiping, however, and participating in the 'atmosphere of erotic titillation' that occurs naturally in highly intimate social gatherings, Rockwell's women narrate their own individual lives through gossip and ostensibly find meaning. Spacks' talks of the 'hidden life of women, rarely on stage, always whispering in the wings, [which] can frighten those who do not share it,' and goes on to ask 'what secrets do they tell one another, what power do they conceal?' These questions feel particularly relevant to Rockwell's scene, where his subjects seem suspended in the throes of such secretive verbal indulgence. In the earlier

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>139</sup> Ibid., p. 3.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>140</sup> Spacks, *The Hudson Review*, p. 20.

years of *The Post*, figures pictured on the front were often isolated from any knowable 'background' – Rockwell's work, as it progressed over the decades, quickly began situating such characters in more familiar, community-orientated spaces. Here though, they are isolated by their own orality, and the 'power' held by these small choruses is not unlike those represented across other small-town texts and narratives, like Austin's and Cather's mentioned previously.

How, then, are we to read this illustration as evidence of Rockwell's objective small-town narrative model? The answer lies in Rockwell's penchant for the vignette or anecdote, of miniature scenes that speak to an objective sense of a world or space. His style stays true, across his career, to limning the scenes and private worlds of small-town America through attention to its homes, business, and, most importantly, its people. Rockwell's signature technique is the description of a face, of bodies at rest and at play, and so it is that such figures are frequently shown in dialogue with one another, interacting as characters in a play or drama. He himself described small-town America as 'an already-written story'; it is fair to assume that, at least thematically, his characters 'know' one another, and are related in his wider community mythos. 141 They are characters in his stories, and they are its narrators, too.

The *Post* front cover from March 6<sup>th</sup> 1948, titled *The Gossips* (fig. 8), is Rockwell's most pronounced depiction of orality as a common, ubiquitous social habit. In this image, 30 talking heads, divided into 15 pairs, each engage in animated discussion through either face-to-face dialogue or use of the telephone. Ranging from younger couples to the elderly, Rockwell relies solely on facial expressions, of which he was particularly adept, to gesture

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>141</sup> 'Artist's Foreword', Laurie Norton Moffatt, *Norman Rockwell: A Definitive Catalogue* (Massachusetts: Norman Rockwell Museum, 1986), p. xi.

toward the body language of gossip and oral culture. Nemerov comments on Rockwell's proficiency as a portraitist of faces: 'Rockwell was a celebrated painter of faces rendering them into caricatured smiles, frowns, grimaces, and assorted other memorable expressions'. Rockwell's visual repertoire of small-town 'stock types', described by Allan Wallach as 'benevolent adults, patriotic stalwarts, lovable eccentrics,' all appear to feature in 'The Gossips', as a game of small-town 'telephone' seems to play out in real time. 143

Aged men in baseball caps with a scoring pencil behind their ear; older women with rollers in their hair or the middle-class flourish of a fascinator, all feature here engaging in the social repartee of gossip as they discuss, presumably, the same original tidbit as it becomes ever more embellished. Variously exaggerated poses of laughter and shock are visible, as the right-hand speaker in each pair turns to their left and passes on the rumour or story. Blakey Vermeule writes that 'even the most casual reader of social fiction will recognize that gossiping is what characters do most passionately,' and the animate nature of Rockwell's 30 expressions, with some boisterously laughing whilst others adopt expressions of scandal, mark the recognizable performance of gossip.<sup>144</sup>

Rockwell seems to attend to the gendered notions of gossip here as well, in a manner not entirely dissimilar to *Life's* Franklin barbershop scene. Of the 30 characters featured, 18 are female and 12 are male, a nuanced affirmation of gossips' historic gendering as predominantly female. Blakey Vermeule writes on how gossip is viewed in dominant narratives to this end. 'Gossip is for women. It is idle, frivolous, and vicious,'

<sup>142</sup> Nemerov, *American Art*, p. 63.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>143</sup> Allan Wallach, 'The Norman Rockwell Museum and the Representation of Social Conflict', in *Seeing High and Low: Representing Social Conflict in American Visual Culture*, ed. by Patricia Johnston, (University of California Press, 2006), pp. 282-83; like the European game 'Chinese Whispers', wherein a sentence is related to a group by whispering, with the intention that it changes, through embellishment and mistake, into a new phrase.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>144</sup> Vermeule, *Philosophy and Literature*, p. 102.

Vermeule writes, acknowledging the problematic association of gossip as a female social practice which Rockwell simultaneously disrupts through his populated, mixed-gender portraits, as well as affirms through a female bias.<sup>145</sup>

The narratorial expectations of gossip are further disrupted when we consider Rockwell's dissemination of local narratives via a national publication. Spacks writes that 'gossip lacks a conceivable audience', a notion that Rockwell refutes by presenting his instance of small-town gossip to the *Post*'s peak circulation of 7 million. Ackwell constructs a small-town narrative through this established dialogue between the local communities of America and the urban metropoles, where the *Post* was widely read. Gossip occurs universally, but Rockwell suggests, as do the other writers and artists considered in this chapter, that it occurs most naturally, most organically, in the small-town worlds he creates. These small towns might not be visible here, but their presence is felt because it is the world to which these gossips belong in his wider mythos. Despite the urban audience reading *The Post* and perceiving Rockwell's scenes, the implication with his work is always that the small town is present just beyond the frame; gossip is thus suggested to be endemic to small-town America.

The mimesis between his characters, the 'small town consanguinity' of his figures, and their exaggerated posturing, point toward a thematic and stylistic repetition true across all his works which deal in small-town narratives writ large and small. Oral culture is fundamental to Rockwell's navigation of small-town life; it seems pivotal to him that his subjects talk, gossip, and address both one another and, on a metanarratorial level, the audience. So often in Rockwell's work, too, is the impression ascertained of a familiarity not

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>145</sup> Ibid., p. 104.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>146</sup> Spacks, *Gossip*, p. 4.

simply between subject and viewer, but the subjects themselves. Across his covers, there is a kind of extended small-town universe in which voices converge and become entwined. What is implicit here is an ideal that Lyn C. MacGregor refers to in her small-town cultural studies, where she notes that 'first, everyone in a small town knows everybody else's business [...] secondly, everyone in a small town knows everyone else', <sup>147</sup> These very same ideas are inescapable when we look at Rockwell's American Scene, where characters seem to move and talk as if animated on the canvas or page. Rockwell's characters know not only each other's secrets, but those of his audience too. Rockwell's world is his white, middle-class audience's world, one they remember through ersatz memories and nostalgia of childhoods' past. To hear that world spoken through his characters is to temporarily revive it as a real, lived space. Rockwell's distinct orality speaks directly to this audience and makes them complicit in the gossip and rumourmongering of his small-town vignettes. Like Masters, it is not enough to allow passive readership; the audience must join the conversation.

#### Conclusion

From the short story cycles of Midwestern revolt writers to novels of small-town female liberation, from rural street photography through commercial illustration, the thrum of talk is audible. Small-town narrative relies first and foremost on an active sense of orality and speech within its construction, in marking *how* everyday speech, gossip, and storytelling are not incidental to plot and artistic craft but, rather, integral. As readers and viewers, it is

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>147</sup> Lyn C. MacGregor, *Habits of the Heartland: Small-town life in Modern America* (New York: Cornell University Press, 2010), p. 5.

imperative that we recognize the performance and experience of speech, of gossip, of oral mythmaking, in the small-town scenes variously depicted, and to measure the narrative consequences of an instance of gossip or of seemingly benign social exchange. The sheer ubiquity of these techniques in small-town texts necessitates such close inspection.

The writers and artists considered in this chapter each appropriate and adapt the nuances of oral culture in the shaping of their own small-town texts so that both become inextricable. For social pessimists like Edgar Lee Masters, whose *Spoon River Anthology* compiles a hundred-plus social jeremiads, it is necessary that 'free verse, Midwest style' be used so as to gesture toward the subsuming of 'everyday common speech patterns into the province of poetry'. <sup>148</sup> The oral culture of small towns, the malicious gossip and derogatory rumours, to which Masters is writing back becomes incorporated not simply into his epistolary format but into the general use of poetry; to write of oral culture, Masters must write *in* its most ancient iteration.

As shown in this chapter, and expanded upon in subsequent chapters, the 'revolt' writers vary in their representation of oral culture, from Anderson's elegy *Winesburg, Ohio* to the more nuanced and expansive occasions of orality in Willa Cather's Plains texts and Mary Austin's towns of Taylorville and Higglestone. The competing notions of oral tradition, from nostalgic storytelling and idle exchange to vicious gossip and rumour, that coexist in these texts ultimately provoke the central tenet of revolt writing: flight from the rural town. The narrative significance that such orality holds, from the gossip that impels Thea and Olivia to leave for urban centres to the nostalgic legacies that remain in their own patterns of speech, are as various as they are vital in crafting a sense of small-town narrative. The

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>148</sup> A Place Called Home: Writings on the Midwestern Small Town, ed. by Richard O. Davies, Joseph A. Amato, David R. Pichaske (St Paul, Minnesota: Minnesota Historical Society, 2003), p. 166.

towns that sit at the heart of these stories live on in the dialects and cadences of the characters who either choose to leave or are forced; the town itself becomes a kind of language, and so it is that so many authors of the period focused on oral traditions and gossip when describing a small-town environment. They took this small-town language as their own.

As Edith B. Gelles attests, 'gossip stores and conveys the written conventions of a circle of people, it is far from idle talk. It is an expression of the rules and values governing behaviour in a particular time and place'. These various narratives of pre and post-Depression America show the small town to be a particularly potent 'time and place' for gossip and indeed oral culture more generally, positing orality as a fundamental constituent of the small-town narrative model. What makes the work of these writers and visual artists so demonstrative of a genre or narrative model is the syntactical relationship between them, between verbal and visual texts, and the mutual importance they place on oral traditions within wider small-town narrative contexts.

Ben Shahn's Depression-era photography captures the social transaction of people otherwise impoverished, with his cast of subjects ranging from poor, abject small-town inhabitants, frequently Black Americans, to more affluent, white denizens marking time through idle recreation and other Main Street activities. Shahn's photography is important to this thesis not simply because it visually archives such a tight, measured portrait of small-town America in this period of study but because it marks its own kind of deviation from grander myths and dominant narrative structures of the small town in American popular culture. Shahn's scenes react against the stricter homogeneity of the FSA project and, whilst

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>149</sup> Edith B. Gelles, 'Gossip: An Eighteenth-Century Case', *Journal of Social History*, 22 (Summer, 1989), 667-683, (p. 668).

doing so, mark visual narratives of small-town life which range from capturing the exchange of speech and gossip to, as we will see in Chapter Three, documenting narratives of prejudice and marginalisation in small-town America.

Norman Rockwell's own visual narratives, found in his long career as an illustrator, likewise use a 'language' of orality (gestures, paralinguistics, close-up portraits) to offer a contrasting, more idealised vision of small-town oral tradition rooted in dominant mythmaking and historic, New England village traditions. What we see in Rockwell's work is a narrative of community belonging and inclusivity (by way of exclusion of all non-hegemonic, non-white demographics), and one which promotes gossip and idle chat as quotidian, harmless, and ubiquitous. Using the same visual syntax of social exchange and visible talk as Shahn, albeit in a different medium, Rockwell conversely manages to craft an archetypal dominant small-town narrative where values are reinforced and shared through gossip and talk.

What is shown conclusively by comparing these dominant and counter small-town narratives is that oral culture is the foremost referent of such rural and regionally occupied texts. How the inhabitants of these settings talk, how they negotiate their community spaces through language, and how the writers and artists themselves convey this sense of common speech is fundamental to small-town narrative. It is impossible to conceive of a community where oral culture does not dominate one's day to day life, and from Rockwell's New England and Cather's prairies to Anderson's Midwest, we see such orality is central to the narratives constructed around these communities. So too, then, should it dominate how we perceive these community spaces which seem, across all these texts, to reach out to us directly and make us complicit in their own speech patterns.

Two: The View from Main Street: chorology, topophrenia, and physical space in textual and visual narratives of small-town America

In his book *Main Street Blues: The Decline of Small-Town America* (1998), Richard O. Davies presents his own hometown of Camden, Ohio, as a case-study for dominant community narrative in America:

It was a secure and pleasant community, its streets guarded by mature maple and elm trees, its modest brick and wood frame houses providing shelter for a population of slightly more than one thousand that was 100 percent white, overwhelmingly Protestant, and middle class.<sup>1</sup>

Davies' description of this familiar, homogenous, farming community alights on several key physical features of small towns that proliferate in narratives of rural America. With its leafy avenues of elms and maples, beneath which sit 'modest' homes for presumed nuclear families, and its typical demographic description of white conservatives, Camden is seated in a very specific, and prolific, cultural narrative regarding American social geography. The small town here is an insular environment of traditional white conservatism; it is presented as an idyllic space, one 'long assumed to be the repository of virtuous behaviour and good old-fashioned neighbourliness'. Central to Davies' theorizing of the dominant small town here, which contributes to a rich tradition of community mythmaking that reaches back to nineteenth-century New England regionalism, is the physicality of the small town. Its

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup> Davies, p. ix.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>2</sup> Ibid., p. 12.

construction is vital in one's interpretation of it as an ostensibly ideal (read: exclusive) community; to discuss the small town in any meaningful capacity, whether through dominant nostalgia or self-reflexive counter narrative, we must attend to space and place.

Wider questions of our relationship to space and place, and indeed how to separate these two terms, underpin this chapter's focus on small-town spatiality and its subsequent narrative representation. By considering how both verbal and visual small-town narratives rely on physical reconstruction, 'place-memory', and evocation of sites of affect and experience within the 'Main Street' cultural paradigm, this chapter turns toward Yi-Fu Tuan's pioneering spatiality research alongside his contemporary successor, Robert Tally Jr., as a means of explaining small-town narrative's central preoccupation with space and place.<sup>3</sup> I use Tuan's idea of topophilia, the 'affective bond between people and place', as an initial path into small-town spatiality, arguing that in American cultural representation the ideas of place and landscape hold particular potency. 4 I then examine how Tally's notion of topophrenia evolves Tuan's theory, using it to dissect the spatial construction of small-town narrative. Tally describes topophrenia as a 'constant and uneasy "place-mindedness" that characterises a subject's interactions with his or her environment', and this chapter explores this very same place-mindedness in small-town verbal and visual material where 'matters of displacement and replacement, of movement between places and over spaces, and of the multifarious relations among place, space, [and] individuals' dominate.<sup>5</sup> Finally, underpinning these discussions of small-town topoi, defined here via its Greek etymology referring to 'place', is Tim Cresswell's notion of chorology, which he describes as 'a spatial

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>3</sup> Tim Cresswell, *Place: a short introduction* (Oxford, Blackwell Publishing, 2004), p. 87.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>4</sup> Yi-Fu Tuan, *Topophilia: A Study of Environmental Perception, Attitudes, and Values* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1974), p. 20.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>5</sup> Robert T. Tally Jr., *Topophrenia: Place, Narrative, and the Spatial Imagination* (Indiana: Indiana University Press, 2018), pp. 1-2.

version of chronology' that allows place-narrative to be mapped and understood with, I argue, the legibility of text.<sup>6</sup>

The principal argument of this chapter is that in both dominant and subversive smalltown narratives, across verbal and visual texts, there is an intrinsic preoccupation with space and geography through topophrenic narrative. Davies' critical study and its attention to the small-town's physicality, from descriptions of its core institutions (barbershops, town halls, banks) to the aforementioned frame houses and 'shantytowns', marks how vital 'Main Street' physicality is to any critical study of the small town. When describing his data collection process, Davies conjures up ideas of the topophrenic; to study the small town, he suggests, one must walk its streets and feel the asphalt beneath one's feet: 'we poked around stores, chatted with waitresses and bartenders, examined local history collections and newspaper files in town libraries, culled information from town officials and newspaper editors, walked quiet streets'. Here, Davies affirms how vital attention to small-town physicality, space, and geography is to any of its attendant descriptions or narratives. From the fictional narratives of small-town America (as with Sherwood Anderson, Willa Cather, Edith Wharton et al.); its rural sociological studies (Robert Wuthnow, Miles Orvell, Robert Pinsky); as well as in its visual representations (Norman Rockwell; Life magazine, FSA photography), a fixation on physical description dominates. It is the purpose of this chapter to explore this necessary preoccupation with the spatiality of Main Street and the consequences of this narrative chorology in verbal and visual texts.

How, then, are the themes of gossip, migration, and routine shaped around their physical sites of occurrence in the works of Cather, Wharton, and Anderson, for example?

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>6</sup> Cresswell, p. 16.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>7</sup> Ibid., p. xiii.

How are the same attributes gestured to in the visual works of Norman Rockwell and the photographers of the Farm Security Administration? The compact and proximate environment of Winesburg, Ohio, for example, seems to pre-empt Anderson's prevailing tone of cyclicality and inescapability; the same characteristics promote a sense of safety and familiarity in the dominant small-town narrative of Thornton Wilder's Our Town. To any writer or artist imagining the small town and its stories, its physical construction is vital in enabling its wider themes and commentaries. Main Street bears culturally mythic significance, but it's also a physical space reproduced indefinitely across literature, photography, and art. How such space is described and navigated is central to its narrative shape, as this chapter will demonstrate. Whether in the physical descriptions of named roads and routes; references to distance, scale, and relative positioning of buildings, houses, and other small-town institutions; or reference to maps, coordinates, and other cartographic signifiers, the tendency toward physical specificity in my chosen small-town texts distinguishes their unique narratology in American culture. Simply put, there is a heightened sense of physical mapping and specific description in small-town narrative, one that works alongside the other core themes identified in this thesis to form a specific, historically contingent generic model.

Alongside these discussions, I will examine the fundamental differences between space and place in cultural studies and how each is applicable to the narratives of small-town America. John Agnew and Jonathan M. Smith distinguish the two terms by writing that 'space is also understood as commanded or controlled, whereas place is lived or experienced', with them later qualifying that space is an 'abstraction' of gridded,

coordinated place and is 'opposed to the particularity of place'. 8 I will use this distinction when considering how small-town narratives take the particularity of localised rural communities and from them offer commentary on the broader abstraction of national spatial identity, concluding that small-town space, as with the other constituent themes of small-town narrative, provides a focaliser for American cultural analysis.

As will be demonstrated, some of the most recognisable constructed communities of American popular culture – examples of which include Grover's Corners (Thornton Wilder, Our Town), Bedford Falls (Frank Capra, It's a Wonderful Life), and Winesburg – are seated within a chorological and topophrenic tradition. For gossip to take place on street corners, so must the street corners be described, named, and repaved in the visual imaginary. For domestic ritual and homelife to become the sacrosanct staple of dominant American narrative, so must the physical home space be described with equal reverence. The physical construction of small-town environments is vital, necessary, and ubiquitous in the textual and visual works considered both in this chapter and across the thesis objectively. Jennifer J. Smith writes that 'place continues to make meaningful the paradoxes of community, namely the connections between individuals and the individual's insuperable solitude,' and it is precisely this concept of narratives both solitary and communal within the context of smalltown place that I will herein join together and unpack further. 9 By looking not simply at why small-town narratives remained so prominent across the early to middle twentieth-century but how, namely through their construction, reproduction, and physical proportions in

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>8</sup> John Agnew and Jonathan M. Smith, *American Space / American Place: Geographies of the Contemporary United States* (New York: Routledge, 2002), pp. 4-5.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>9</sup> This quote is taken from Smith's *The American Short Story Cycle* which looks at a similar, thematically adjacent set of primary texts to this thesis. See Jennifer J. Smith, 'The Persistence of Place', *The American Short Story Cycle*, (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2018), p. 59.

literature and visual art, we can better understand how small-town narrative became a recognisable genre that continues to endure into the present.

## Walking Winesburg: The topophrenic town narratives of Winesburg, Ohio

In all editions of Sherwood Anderson's Winesburg, Ohio, one finds a map of the fictional town acting as a visual preface, detailing the various roads that intersect across Winesburg's modest rural footprint as well as key institutions and their locations - Hern's Grocery and Biff Carter's Lunch Room are all significant enough to be included in Anderson's legend. The first introduction to Anderson's lonely Midwestern burg is thus immediately physical and visual, a small-town overture of sorts that establishes the key leitmotifs across the short story cycle. Anderson's technique here is narratively significant though certainly not unique; the language of cartography is frequently used in criticism of the small town and its attendant narratives, emphasising the importance of physical and spatial referencing as a means of understanding the narratives. Gregory A. Waller for example, writing on The Saturday Evening Post and Norman Rockwell, notes 'the Post's series fiction collectively mapped a wide-ranging, if still highly selective, vision of America'; bell hooks writes in Belonging: A Culture of Place (1990) of 'mapping the territory, discovering myself, and finding homeplace'; Miles Orvell, in his study of small-town ideology, notes how in chromolithographic maps 'streets were labelled and buildings were drawn individually so that the viewer, depending on the size of the town, would enjoy an almost three

dimensional effect'.<sup>10</sup> Further to these examples, Robert T. Tally Jr., writing on what he calls the 'cartographical imperative', makes the following compelling claim:

At a more basic, existential level, mapping might be seen as an inevitable (not to say neutral) activity, for the individual subject cannot help but try to orient itself by imagining its position vis-à-vis that of other subjects and in relation to a broader, objective reality. Indeed, notwithstanding the multiple ambiguities attendant to any cartographic enterprise, one might suggest that mapping is almost essential to our being. I map, therefore I am. 11

A text like *Winesburg, Ohio* operates on, I argue, the 'existential level' identified by Tally, which is to say it is heavily preoccupied with lived experience and emotional affect within a specific, *mapped* environment. Small-town America, as it is figured by my study, naturally must 'orient' itself against the 'broader, objective' realities of the nation and its socioeconomic opposite: the city. A text set in New York City, for example John Dos Passos' modernist opus *Manhattan Transfer*, is unlikely to include a map such is the unique spatial scale posed by urban space. A small-town text, however, relies on a more specific reckoning with its physical construction and representation, and so the map becomes the first point of entry not simply into Winesburg, but into small-town narrative more generally.

Perhaps the most striking critical reading of the small town in these terms, and which seems to reconcile Sherwood Anderson's use of the map most tellingly, is provided by

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>10</sup> Gregory A. Waller, 'Imagining and Promoting the Small-Town Theatre', *Cinema Journal*, 44 (Spring, 2005), 3-19, (p. 5); bell hooks, *Belonging: A Sense of Place* (New York and London: Routledge, 2009), p. 27; Orvell, *The Death and Life of Main Street*.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>11</sup> Tally, p. 1.

prominent sociologist of small-town America, Roberth Wuthnow, by way of paraphrasing Benedict Anderson:

To say that community is imagined is not to say that it is only a mental fabrication. The fact that a small town occupies a particular place on the map, has a name and a history, and is defined geographically well enough to be easily recognised is important.<sup>12</sup>

Anderson's use of a map is telling in this regard; he seeks to emulate the 'name', 'history' and geographic definition of a real town by applying its conventions to his narrative. In doing so, he expresses a desire to translate his inclinations toward the small-town's physicality – epitomised by the cycle's hand-drawn map – into textual form. The sites of social exchange in his cycle, the aforementioned named stores and institutions as well as streets and sidewalks, become locales where the psychological and epiphanic are grounded in an authentic American scene.

It is useful at this point to consider the legacy of small-town narrative's reliance on cartographic semantics in the early-to-mid twentieth-century, and indeed the texts that contrast *Winesburg, Ohio*. Thornton Wilder's play *Our Town*, published two decades after Anderson's text, similarly explores the existentialism of small-town life through physicality albeit in a dominant, utopian register. Wilder's narrator, the Stage Manager, introduces the town's setting proper with the description, 'Grover's Corners, just across the Massachusetts line: latitude 42 degrees 40 minutes, longitude 70 degrees 37 minutes'. With a plottable set of coordinates (which actually point to an anonymous stretch of the North Atlantic Ocean), Wilder emphasises the importance of geographic specificity in authenticating his small-town

 $^{12}$  Wuthnow, Small-Town America: Finding Community, Shaping the Future, p. 148.

narrative in a tradition that gestures back to Anderson's map of Winesburg; here, a dramaturgical figuring of space into place occurs. <sup>13</sup> The narratives soon to unfold, we are told early on in each text, will occur in a place familiar, recognisable, and navigable to both its characters and the visual imaginations of its audience. This is a vital technique in the topophrenic narratives of small-town America, creating a genuine sense of authentic place that is at once tangible and knowable within the broader, abstract space of American landscape and community.

Peter Brown and Michael Irwin discuss the role of maps in their edited volume

Literature and Place (2008), where they similarly argue that a map can act as a cipher of spatial experience:

Writers and publishers operating in a make-believe domain can also feel moved to provide their readers with a map. Why is this? One answer might be that the inclusion of a map within a fictional context increases the illusion of reality, of there being a physically consistent world which the narrative occupies. More prosaically, maps provide a structure, useful to author and reader alike as they steer a way through plots of events that happen in different but related places.<sup>14</sup>

Both these readings are certainly applicable to *Winesburg, Ohio*; it is a short story cycle principally concerned with this 'illusion of reality', achieved through the spatial authenticity afforded by the inclusion of a map and recurrent chorological descriptions of place and space. Brown and Irwin make an important claim of writers whose narratives make use of maps and other cartographic signifiers when they write, '[maps] downplay the liminal and

 $<sup>^{\</sup>rm 13}$  Thornton Wilder,  $\it Our\ Town$  (London: Penguin Classics, 2000), p. 1.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>14</sup> Peter Brown and Michael Irwin, *Literature and Place: 1800-2000* (Bern: Peter Lange, 2008), p. 18.

in-between'. <sup>15</sup> This, however, is decidedly untrue of Anderson who, through his use of 'psychological realism' and privileging of interior narratives, ensures that the experiences of Winesburg's lonely denizens are mapped against the environment they inhabit. He becomes, as Ima Honaker Herron writes, 'Anderson the psychoanalyst', a term which lends itself to topophrenic readings of *Winesburg*, *Ohio* given the psychological, or 'mindedness', nature of its etymology. <sup>16</sup>

Instead of Anderson's attention to small-town spatiality resulting in a negation of his narrative's emotional depth, he allows each to inform the other, exemplifying what Richard Francaviglia underlines as the true role of a map in fiction: 'though it is tempting to think of a map as a purely graphic device, maps, like the places they represent, could not exist without *language*. Maps occupy a unique interface between image and narratives'.<sup>17</sup> Anderson's map, then, becomes a metonym of his cycle's place-orientated narratives and authenticates his geographic language of proper nouns and descriptions of proximity and distance. The passage quoted in Chapter One, for example, makes reference to George walking the 'length of Main Street' and arriving at 'Sylvester West's drugstore'. In a cycle comprised of familiar chorological descriptions, from sidewalk to sitting room, Anderson's map itself becomes the small town *as* topos, neatly presented as a knowable, narratable space.

Of course, the physical descriptions of Winesburg itself all refer back, semantically or literally, to that very map which announced its presence in American literature. One such instance is the following passage from midway in the cycle: 'Enoch Robinson and George

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>15</sup> Ibid., p. 19.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>16</sup> Ima Honaker Herron, *The Small town in American Literature* (New York: Haskell House Publishers, 1971), p. 372.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>17</sup> Richard Francaviglia, 'Walt Disney's Frontierland as an Allegorical Map of the American West', *Western Historical Quarterly*, 30 (Summer, 1999), 155-182, (p. 158).

Willard met beneath a wooden awning that extended out over the sidewalk before Voight's wagon shop on Maumee Street just off the main street of Winesburg'. <sup>18</sup> The descriptions here are, as with all texts discussed in this chapter, commonplace in small-town narratives: the awning is both a familiar referent of Main Street commerce as well as a unique topos where acts of sociability and community can be performed. The reference to 'Voight's Wagon Shop', 'Maumee Street' and 'main street' in such a staccato fashion seems to linguistically mimic their close geographic proximity. Gabrielle Esperdy writes, in her monograph *Modernizing Main Street* (2008), that 'across the country, Main Streets possessed an "essential homogeneity" regardless of size and location'. <sup>19</sup> Anderson seems to endorse this tradition through the nominal familiarity of Winesburg's rural blueprint; the names of streets and their shopfronts ring out with melodic familiarity, a symphony of spatial memory recognisable to his audience and their own experiences of rural life.

The description of the scene featuring Enoch and George seems to gesture toward this homogeneity given its familiar, almost comforting description that allows for reference to the text's very own map for verification. This familiarity sees readerly projection of small-town expectations mapped against Winesburg itself, as specific 'place-memories' of American space and community assume quasi-tangible form through Anderson's Midwestern town. *Winesburg, Ohio*'s overt melancholy and innate resentment toward small-town community, coupled with Anderson's use of familiar community topoi — sidewalks, awnings, stores — sees his text oscillate between dominant and subversive small-town narratives.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>18</sup> Anderson, Winesburg, Ohio, p. 61.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>19</sup> Gabrielle Esperdy, *Modernizing Main Street: Architecture and Consumer Culture in the New Deal* (London: University Chicago Press, 2008), p. 15.

Anderson's use of small-town topoi in this way calls to mind Tuan's topophilia and its 'affective bonds'; though *Winesburg, Ohio* is certainly not a nostalgic text like the dominant small-town narratives endorsed by Norman Rockwell and Thornton Wilder, Anderson's narrative technique does rely on a certain affective nostalgia to craft a convincing American scene. A fictional Midwestern town with plausible dimensions, Winesburg becomes as tangible as any town, on any map, because of Anderson's narrative specificity and attention to spatial detail. The topophrenia of small-town narrative lies in its exacting reproduction, appeal to memory, and centrality to the text itself be this through map, prose or both.

The moments of epiphany enjoyed by George when sheltering on the stoop of a general store or engaged in amicable chat — 'he stumbled forward with the curious feeling of one revisiting a place that had been a part of some former existence' <sup>20</sup> - anecdotally gesture toward the dominant small-town myth of inclusive community. Anderson refrains from endorsing this myth *entirely*, however, through his characters' complex psychologies and their negotiation of this familiar space which subverts expectation. This particular Main Street may look similar to its dominant counterparts, but the lives lived here are a far cry from the residents of Grover's Corners, or Bedford Falls.

Such subversions are visible when Alice Hindman, feverish with loneliness, runs naked through the twilit streets of Winesburg, disturbing an image of dominant, utopian small-town narrative via a subversive, transgressive action.<sup>21</sup> In the local colour fiction of the late nineteenth century, such as Sarah Orne Jewett's *The Country of the Pointed Firs*,

<sup>20</sup> Anderson, *Winesburg, Ohio*, p. 65.

<sup>21</sup> Alice Hindman and the subversions of gendered stereotypes are discussed in more detail in Chapter Four.

women of the small town remained 'limited and heavily domestic' with a social diet comprised of gossip, maternal advice, and little else; Anderson instead presents a woman privately rebelling against such social strictures through her negotiation of small-town space. The 'frustrated souls who dared not live the life to which their erotic or artistic impulses impelled them', as John T. Flanagan describes Anderson's characters, are given lease to explore their repressed wants in such moments where the physical space of small-town America becomes a liminal psychological boundary to be crossed. Again, this melding of character psychology with negotiations and experiences of place are exemplary of topophrenia.<sup>23</sup>

Anderson's references to the roads and byways of Winesburg, as well as his character's navigation of such spaces, are many and frequently colour the cycle's unique narrative blend of sentiment and melancholy, of dominant and subversive narrative. Again, the chronotopic language of roads, streets, and other named routes establish in the reader's mind a sense of distinct, realised setting. Brown and Irwin, paraphrasing J. Hillis Miller's *Topographies* (1995), affirm such language when they note how 'the delineation of places – landscapes [...] and their network of connections by means of paths, roads [...] and human agency [is] one of literature's mainstays'.<sup>24</sup> This concluding remark finds specific applicability to small-town narrative, both verbal and visual, which particularly emphasises the mapping and rendering of physical space. Anderson appears to negotiate what Tim Cresswell refers

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>22</sup> Sarah Orne Jewett, 'The Bowden Reunion', *The Country of Pointed Firs* (Project Gutenberg), eBook, < <a href="http://www.gutenberg.org/files/367/367-h/367-h.htm">http://www.gutenberg.org/files/367/367-h/367-h.htm</a>>, [Date Accessed: 24<sup>th</sup> October 2019], no page reference available.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>23</sup> Flanagan, *Southwest Review*, p. 152.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>24</sup> Brown and Irwin, p. 14

to as a 'place-ballet', where places are 'performed on a daily basis through people living their everyday life'. 25

Walking, as a prime example of 'place-ballet' in small-town narrative, is a method through which Anderson's characters 'perform' Winesburg's physicality, bringing to life its cartographical representation through spatial interaction. So often is George Willard described as walking through the streets of Winesburg, either alone or with one of the town's lonely and dispossessed inhabitants, as he ruminates on the facts of his life: 'In the darkness George Willard walked along the alleyway, going carefully and cautiously'. <sup>26</sup> Not only does he 'perform' the setting into being —he is the very light by which Winesburg is revealed to the reader - but he also progresses the spatial development of Winesburg in a narratological sense. Space and place exist not simply as static backdrops in small-town narrative but are highly changeable forms which can enable and disable character interaction and progression.

Anderson's use of highly specific small-town topoi in a nostalgic, dominant narratorial mode are few, though significant to the narrative when they do occur. For example, in 'Respectability', Anderson writes: 'George Willard and the telegraph operator came into the main street of Winesburg. The lights from the store windows lay bright and shining on the sidewalks. People moved about laughing and talking'. <sup>27</sup> Here, the topos of the storefront interior (similarly recurrent in the artwork of Norman Rockwell, as will be discussed) spills over onto another small-town topos - the sidewalk – as Anderson marks how closely small-town narrative topoi coexist and interact with one another. Here, walking

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>25</sup> Cresswell, p. 34.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>26</sup> Anderson, Winesburg, Ohio, p. 15.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>27</sup> Ibid, p. 42.

again marks a demonstrable performance of small-town space through recognisable action, and in doing so adheres to the 'enunciative' properties of space as outlined by Michel de Certeau:

It is a process of appropriation of the topographical system on the part of the pedestrian (just as the speaker appropriates and takes on the language); it is a spatial acting-out of the place (just as the speech act is an acoustic acting-out of language); and it implies *relations* among differentiated positions.<sup>28</sup>

In Anderson's attention to walking as navigation there is a sense of Cresswell's 'place-ballet' as well as de Certeau's 'enunciative' sense of spatial performance, and both such techniques seem particularly heightened in the theatre of the small-town everyday where 'the long poem of walking' can be most intimately inscribed.<sup>29</sup> To suggest small-town topoi and their attendant narratives can be moved through, can be interacted with, is to suggest not only a commonality between narratives of this kind but also marks how contingent such small-town spaces are in the crafting of story and narrative. It quickly becomes apparent how 'place-minded' small towns and their narratives become; these mutual referents are not simply surface-level details but the bedrock upon which small-town stories are built. How such space is performed, perceived, and represented is often the primary focus in small-town narrative.

This movement toward the physical sites of safety and security in the town, indicated in the previously quoted passage, recurs in *Winesburg, Ohio*, as with the following

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>28</sup> Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life* (London: University of California Press, 1984), p. 145

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>29</sup> Ibid., p. 149.

description in the vignette 'Drink': 'In the main street of Winesburg, on the cold November evening, but few citizens appeared and these hurried along bent on getting to the stove at the back of some store'. <sup>30</sup> Again, the transit of Winesburg's occupants through its Main Street, alighting in the warmth of its various stores, relies on physical navigation along roads and sidewalks. Lucy Lippard in her influential study *The Lure of the Local* (1997) observes: 'inherent in the local is the concept of place – a portion of land/town/cityscape seen from the inside, the resonance of a specific location, that is known and familiar [...] Place is latitudinal and longitudinal within the map of a person's life'. <sup>31</sup> The characters' interactions with Winesburg explore this latitudinal-longitudinal narrative through transit and navigation of various sites of community, and the repeated references to these same topoi across the cycle marks a latitudinal continuation of space and place.

The sidewalk, perhaps the most ubiquitous topos not just in *Winesburg, Ohio* but in small-town narrative objectively, is a site of prominent narrative in Anderson's cycle, and the frequent movement between the sidewalk and other chorological sites (storefronts, houses) establishes in the text what Mieke Bal more broadly terms narrative 'rhythm'.<sup>32</sup> In 'Mother', a story concerning George sitting in his room at night details how 'in the street below feet tramped up and down upon a board sidewalk', an aural reminder to the young newspaper editor of the world beyond his window, slowly passing him by with each day he remains in Winesburg's static environment.<sup>33</sup> Symbols of quotidian place in small townnarratives, none more overtly than the sidewalk, often serve to gesture toward a life

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>30</sup> Ibid., p. 78.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>31</sup> Lucy Lippard, *The Lure of the Local: Sense of Place in a Multicentred Society* (New York: The New Press, 1997), p.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>32</sup> Mieke Bal, *Narratology: Introduction to the Theory of Narrative* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1997).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>33</sup> Anderson, Winesburg, Ohio, p. 9.

beyond as well as a reminder of provincial homogeneity; here is an example of the particularity of place gesturing toward the unknown abstraction of space beyond Winesburg, to which George eventually moves. It is no coincidence that in 'Nobody Knows', Louise cautiously warns George that she 'can't go far' as they walk across 'narrow', 'rough and irregular' sidewalks 'between the cracks of which tall weeds grew'. <sup>34</sup> The stagnant, antimodern reality of small-town life - the prevailing theme of subversive small-town narrative and epitomised by *Winesburg, Ohio* - is portended in every crack in the paving, legible in every missing brick. Here is a space that will not allow its actants to stray far, and a narrative that is defined by immobility.

Importantly, Anderson's treatment of sidewalks as the archetypical small-town topos is multivalent. Conversations regularly happen upon them; characters move from one interaction to another via them; and characters bear witness to various happenings in the town from the vantage of the sidewalk: 'in the main street of Winesburg, crowds filled the stores and the sidewalks. Night came on, horses whinnied, the clerks in the stores ran madly about, children became lost and cried lustily, an American town worked terribly at the task of amusing itself'. <sup>35</sup> Here, the melancholic sidewalks of George Willard's stories in the cycle, frequently empty and invariably the site of some kind of epiphany, are replaced with the thronging physical descriptions one would expect of an urban centre. Again, sensory detail, notably the coded aural descriptions of horses whinnying and children crying 'lustily', seems coded in a particularly localised manner. Jane Jacobs, writing in her influential urban planning text *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* (1961), writes of the city in a manner that applies, I argue, significantly to descriptions of the small town: 'streets and

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>34</sup> Ibid., p. 38.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>35</sup> Ibid., p. 84.

their sidewalks, the main public places of a city, are its most vital organs'. <sup>36</sup> She compounds this description of the sidewalk by asking that when one thinks 'of a city [...] what comes to mind? Its streets'. <sup>37</sup> Anderson makes a compelling case for thinking of the *small town* when one considers the sidewalk, such is *Winesburg, Ohio*'s complex, topophrenic relationship with this community space.

Despite Jacobs' protestations in her text's introduction – 'But I hope no reader will try to transfer my observations into guides as to what goes on in towns [...] towns, suburbs and even little cities are totally different organisms from great cities'38 – this chapter suggests there is a narrative quality to sidewalks, and the physical environment more generally, in the small town as in the city despite the fact it operates in a different geographical register. When Jacobs talks specifically of a coded American geographic space, namely New York's Lower East Side, she talks of the intimate community borne from their proximal cohabitation of familiar spaces, with one anecdote detailing how those temporarily leaving the city would relinquish their house keys to a local merchant's shop for safekeeping. This sidewalk sociability, as it may be termed, and its suggested ethos of bounded community among the anonymous urban sprawl, is thematically comparable to dominant small-town narratives and their equivalent detailing of small-town social protocol. Legible in the acts of immigrant communities in American cities is a flavour of small-town community which Anderson, among others, addresses through his narratives of comparable physical environments.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>36</sup> Jane Jacobs, *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* (London: Penguin, 1961), p. 39.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>38</sup> Ibid., p. 26.

For Anderson, his characters move along his sidewalks both as ghosts – Alice Hindman rarely ventures outside of her room – or as narrative ciphers for community migration from small towns to urban centres - George Willard's exodus fittingly concludes the text. When we think of Winesburg, as with Jacobs' great American cities, we think of its streets. These are streets where George Willard is so often described walking, with Winesburg's unseen voyeurs looking on from upper windows. These are streets that seem to divide the disenfranchised and mature from the hopeful youth. Each generational sect of Anderson's town is neatly bifurcated by Main Street; his young and restless sit on one side whilst the aged and forgotten remain partitioned upon the other. Ultimately, Anderson's cycle and its narrative stylistics – which are fundamentally tied to space and place – demonstrates the 'almost inexplicably powerful attachment' small-town residents have to 'routine sidewalk behaviour', to social exchange in its most rudimentary forms.<sup>39</sup> Woven together by the threads of fictional roads, routes, and paths, Winesburg, Ohio exemplifies how vital chorology is to small-town narratives, and how a topophrenic approach to small town space and place is a defining characteristic of small-town narrative.

Reading a text like *Winesburg, Ohio*, certainly a progenitor of what this thesis defines as small-town narrative, through contemporary theory constructs such as topoi and topophrenia allows us to parse its distinct narratological features; we can question why Anderson's language remains so rooted in naturalism and references to the particularities of *place* within the small town *space*. By breaking down the properties of such a narrative, here indicated by Anderson's specific narratological use of space and place, we can better

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>39</sup> Wuthnow, p. 39.

gauge how small-town narrative assumes creative form and begin to mark a generic construct in its own right.

## 'The mute, melancholy landscape': Discord in Edith Wharton's Ethan Frome

In his recent study of small-town America in the age of globalisation, Ryan Poll asserts that the small town exists as the quintessential American home space and community: 'one of the key markers of the dominant small town's identity is that it is the nation's home'. 40 Of course, Poll's ideas here refer to the dominant small-town narrative, which is decidedly not home to those it knowingly excludes. Moreover, the use of the word 'home' is vital not only to Poll's writing but also to this thesis and its chosen texts; it is an idea that recurs in the primary materials considered here as well as the critical interpretations surrounding them.

As raised previously, bell hooks writes of searching for an African-American 'homecoming' and pairs this with repeated references to her own small-town childhood home ('In our home we were surrounded by hills'). 41 Similarly, the artistic oeuvre of Norman Rockwell is regularly described as emblematic of home, as Miles Orvell writes: 'he was the dramatist of the safely and humorously familiar, and his images carried the warm feeling of 'home'.'42

As such, it is natural that small-town narratives, both textual and visual, regularly compartmentalise small-town experiences through detailed focus on the domestic space and all its attendant *topoi* (porch; kitchen; garden space) in order to achieve this central 'home' narrative. I will explore the importance of the small-town home space in Edith

<sup>41</sup> hooks, p. 10.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>40</sup> Poll, p. 6.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>42</sup> Orvell, The Death and Life of Main Street: Small Towns in American Memory, Space, and Community, p. 43.

Wharton's *Ethan Frome*, a somewhat atypical novel in her oeuvre in which the high-society fare of her New York City novels is traded for the bleak, hardscrabble agriculture of the aptly named Starkfield, Massachusetts. Taking the topologically familiar New England region, with its neat colonial houses, centrally located churches, and rich agricultural traditions, Wharton's novel upends these dominant narratives by focusing on the topos of home and its subversive narrative potential, demonstrating how even the most familiar small-town mythologies can quickly become undone.

Wharton's small-town text *Ethan Frome* couples the same psychological depth with physical preoccupations as a text like *Winesburg, Ohio,* figuring the small-town domestic space as a site of community unrest. Set in the frigid landscape of a New England winter, *Ethan Frome* follows the eponymous character and the ill-fated love he shares with his overbearing wife's sister, Mattie, all while they are sequestered in their spartan farmhouse and surrounded by the barren, snow-covered countryside of Starkfield, Massachusetts.

Curiously, Wharton's destabilising of New England as a 'refuge of sorts', as a 'symbol of spiritual hardihood' and 'cradle of American Democracy', seats her novel firmly in a counter small-town narrative tradition, reacting against the nineteenth-century New England idyll and presenting a village space that seems to resist settlement in any true sense. <sup>43</sup> The farmhouses are held to ransom by devastating blizzards, the roads and byways frozen so that little social interaction occurs upon them, and Starkfield becomes not a 'refuge' but a hostile, barren space. <sup>44</sup>

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>43</sup> Caroline Blinder, *The American Photo-Text 1930-1960* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2019), p. 166.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>44</sup> Ibid., pp. 166-168.

Wharton's small-town setting is notably related to the reader via a frame narrative, wherein the novel's narrator is a businessman stopping over in Starkfield temporarily. Given this framing device, Starkfield's physical impression upon the narrator, along with his perceptions of the wintery landscape buffeting it on all sides, is particularly heightened and Wharton dedicates a significant portion of her text to describing the physicality of the town. Important to this thesis' holistic ideal of *small-town narrative*, one such instance of this spatial description is coupled with a distinct oral inflection – 'If you know Starkfield, Massachusetts, you know the post-office [...] If you know the post office you must have seen Ethan Frome, and you must have asked who he was'. <sup>45</sup> This appeal to the reader, grounded in its gossipy intonation, anchors the story of the title character to the town itself – as if they are one and the same. This is furthered by Wharton's unnamed narrator who describes how he 'began to see what life – or rather its negation – must have been', impelled to such observations by the frigid, even hostile, town's physicality which he sees manifest in Frome's own physicality. <sup>46</sup>

Likewise, the narrator's descriptions of the town early in the text render it distinct from the interwar New England narratives later depicted in Norman Rockwell's illustrations and Thornton Wilder's *Our Town*; it instead takes on an air of the typical provincial backwater. The description afforded Ethan's farmhouse by the narrator, upon seeing it for the first time, is emblematic of Wharton's austere setting: 'I had been told that Frome was poor, and that the saw-mill and the arid acres of his farm yielded scarcely enough to keep his household through the winter'.<sup>47</sup> Wharton's descriptions of the domestic continue in this

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>45</sup> Edith Wharton, *Ethan Frome and Selected Stories* (New York: Barnes and Noble Classics, 2004), p. 36

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>46</sup> Ibid., p. 38.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>47</sup> Ibid., p. 41.

manner, establishing it contextually with the landscape, before exploring the interiority of such spaces in the novel's most dramatic moments. For example, when Wharton writes 'and [Ethan] himself knew of certain lonely farm-houses in the neighbourhood where stricken creatures pined and of others where sudden tragedy had come of their presence,' she preempts the equivalent tragedies to befall Ethan's own small-town domestic space in a moment of narratorial foresight, using the proximal language of 'farm-house' and 'neighbourhood' to create a shared world of small-town domestic disturbance. 48

The narratological significance of Wharton's small-town novel lies in her exploration of domestic interiors, in which both the physical and ideological space is mapped by bedrooms, kitchens, outhouses, and other sites of everyday domestic exchange. Often the 'vividly hopeless [...] rural winter isolation' that Nancy J. Dutton reads in Wharton's small-town setting makes its presence known in her interiors: 'northerly gales shook the thin clapboards and the snow beat like hail against the loose-hung windows'. <sup>49</sup> Wharton's novel occasionally borders on the rural Gothic with such descriptions, heightened by the tension within the domestic space between Ethan, his wife Zeena, and the true subject of his affection, Mattie. One instance when the three occupants each walk upstairs to bed assumes dramatic tension in the narrative, care of Wharton's physical fixations: 'The doors of the two bedrooms faced each other across the narrow upper landing, and to-night it was particularly repugnant to him that Mattie should see him follow Zeena'. <sup>50</sup> The description of this particular scene is reminiscent of a theatre stage; the domestic space becomes an isolating, claustrophobic space defined by seasonal frigidity and dark, foreboding rooms.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>48</sup> Ibid., p. 74.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>49</sup> Nancy J. Dutton, 'Appreciation of Winter and Locality in Ethan Frome', *The English Journal*, 93 (July, 2006), 31-34, (p. 31); Wharton, p. 66.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>50</sup> Wharton, p. 64.

The muted and repressed desires that sit at the heart of the novel are maximised through the spatial arrangement of the farmhouse, where thin walls and short hallways separate would-be lovers and enforce a loveless marriage.

Wharton's evocation of domestic interiority, particularly in moments of familial disquiet such as the described retirement to bed, is addressed by Scott Marshal when he writes:

Wharton believed architecture profoundly affects one's life; she felt that the right setting could influence one's happiness and success. Her home came to assume positions of surrogate husbands. Each house gave her what her husband and her lover... could not: order, tranquillity, stability, and the freedom from trivial obligations, which she deemed necessary if she was to continue her writing.<sup>51</sup>

In *Ethan Frome* Wharton subverts these positive domestic properties – order, tranquillity, stability – in order to explore ill-fated love; it is a love that is socially taboo and that occurs within the married home of a small-town setting, and so becomes the ultimate transgression. Further to this, this acknowledgement of Wharton's belief in the profound effects of physical environment on one's life is exemplary of topophrenia.

Like Marshal, Dutton finds similar parallels with Wharton's own biography and her small-town narratives when she writes, 'she, too, felt trapped in her marriage. She uses the insular society, poverty, familial obligations, and oppressive natural environment to express

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>51</sup> Scott Marshall, 'A Passion for Houses", *The Mount Estate and Gardens: Centennial Celebration* 2003: Designers Salute Edith Wharton and The Mount (Lenox: Edith Wharton Restoration, 1997), p. 14.

her despair'. <sup>52</sup> Taking this critical observation, we can begin to read *Ethan Frome* as a cipher for Wharton's own troubled relationship with ostensible domestic 'stability' and its attendant lifestyle; her narrative thus uses the physicality of the small town and the microcosm of the domestic home space to critique and parse the nature of everyday, married life. Both the town and the home become claustrophobic mirrors of each other. The topos of the home hybridises not simply the time and space of the novel into a single narratorial unit, but equally so it compresses the temporalities of Wharton's own biography into a single narrative space. The narrative cyclicality and inescapability of *Ethan Frome* is thus enforced through its distinctly hostile and unchanging setting; there is no reprieve offered in Starkfield, no promise of a thaw.

Wharton seems particularly interested in subverting the domestic into a space of stagnant and stultifying existence, a keen departure from the prevailing myths of New England life. Ima Honaker Herron notes of Wharton's novel:

The snow-bound villages of Western Mass. were still grim places, morally and physically: insanity, incest and slow mental and moral starvation were hidden away behind the paintless wooden house fronts of the long village street.<sup>53</sup>

Herron's observations directly link the small-town environment with the 'wooden house fronts' of domestic life, the use of 'fronts' seemingly a euphemism here for the duality of domestic life so clearly evinced in *Ethan Frome* and other small-town narratives. Wharton's small-town narrative revolves around this central domestic core, and the 'austere seclusion'

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>52</sup> Nancy J. Dutton, *The English Journal*, p. 32.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>53</sup> Honaker Herron, *The Small town in American Literature*, p. 139

found there is itself metonymical for the small-town environment objectively; *Ethan Frome* is a novel where small-town life is stagnant and repressed, legible in every snow-covered field, run-down barn, and darkened farmhouse. One of the town gossips, Mrs. Hale, notes the particularly unique living arrangements at the Frome homestead: 'It's a pity though, Mrs Hale ended, sighing, that they're all shut up there'n that one kitchen'.<sup>54</sup> The language here implies a sense of limited space and confinement in Wharton's 'isolated' rural domestic space; it is a place to be pitied and even feared rather than celebrated as a symbol of community.<sup>55</sup>

The domestic topos in *Ethan Frome*, then, becomes one of imprisonment and confinement. The home space is the site of a fraught marriage and a coveted affair; both come to cohabit the farmhouse indefinitely in the novel's bleak conclusion as Wharton rejects any notion that the small-town domestic space is a 'refuge' or shelter. Critics tend toward Wharton's biography in search of a reply to her writing, as Jenny Glennon observes in her article 'The Custom of Main Street': '[Wharton] felt pigeonholed as a writer of historical fictions, and her frustrations emerge in *The Writing of Fiction* (1925) where she complains about the "habit of the reader of wanting each author to give only what he has given before."'<sup>56</sup> Whilst it may be a stretch to suggest the 'pigeon-holed' confinement Wharton felt in her own literary career is legible in the equally claustrophobic Frome homestead, it's certainly possible that Glennon's observations ring true regarding Wharton's particularly fervent anti-utopian views of small-town American life; such anxieties inevitably made themselves manifest in the hostile circumscription of Starkfield.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>54</sup> Wharton, p. 136.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>55</sup> Ibid., p. 74.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>56</sup> Glennon, Jenny, 'The Custom of Main Street: Wharton, Sinclair Lewis, and Middle-Class Taste', *Edith Wharton Review*, 30 (Spring, 2014), 45-59, (p. 49).

Wharton's focus on spatiality, evocation of place, and domestic descriptions arises from a writerly need to rebuff the previous texts that had revered the small town, using the topoi of the familiar New England village archetype in a narratively subversive way. Honaker Herron quotes Wharton from her own biography, A Backward Glance (1934), where she writes: 'I had wanted to draw life as it really was in the derelict mountain villages of New England [...] utterly unlike that seen through the rose-coloured spectacles of my predecessors'. <sup>57</sup> Given the writers working prior to Wharton, such as Sarah Orne Jewett, this is a remarkable departure from the more typical physical descriptions in small-town narratives that were largely familiar, recognisable, and safely reassuring in their conformity. Instead, Wharton finds the small-town environment suited her tragic narrative best when it was described in its rawest conditions: an isolated rural winter. Bachelard's term 'topoanalysis' is useful in widening the theorisations of topophrenic narrative undertaken in this thesis, which he defines as comprising the 'systematic psychological study of the sites of out intimate lives'.<sup>58</sup> When the already private domestic space is seated within a localised, small-town context, as it is in Wharton's text, it takes on further intimate ramifications; the sexual tension denied Ethan and Mattie, coupled with Ethan and Zeena's fraught marriage, reaches fever pitch in the dark interior of the farmhouse in a manner both private and yet publicly perceived by the small town beyond.

The potent effect of the intimate domestic in Wharton's novel is evident throughout, and Sally Bayley's extensive writing on the role of the American homespace and its socio-cultural legacies is useful in unpacking its narrative potential: 'domestic territories – the

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>57</sup> Honaker Herron, p. 139; from Edith Wharton, *A Backward Glance*, (New York: Scribner, 1934), p. 293

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>58</sup> Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1994), p. 22.

front porch, front lawn and back-yard spaces - outposts of the twentieth-century domestic world. Extensions of the modern home life, these are places offering larger views, a glimpse of a wider horizon, an opportunity to reflect upon the life led within'.<sup>59</sup> Interestingly, Bayley taxonomizes the domestic space here via its constituent topoi – the porch, the backyard, etc. – in the same way that Wharton pays attention to the various, though limited, space in the Frome homestead – kitchens, parlours, upstairs bedrooms. Wharton's attention to the physical make-up of the domestic space, so central to her small-town narrative, is perhaps emblematic of a wider regional impulse, as marked by Bayley: 'and so it was that the puritan settlers of New England conferred a sense of inner space upon the geography they found'.<sup>60</sup> The 'inner-geography' of Wharton's text is marked by close attention to physical space, by the negotiation of the claustrophobic and confining domestic space, and through the subversion of historic New England regional idealisation. Indeed, the close proximity of the rooms in the Frome homestead mimics the intimate nature of small-town living, with the bedrooms themselves metonymizing the privacy of other homes, other farmhouses, and the repressed lives within them.

Herron continues to write that the 'bleak background of decaying Starkfield [was] an appropriate stage for the gnarled, embittered lives hopelessly bound to the Frome farmhouse'. 61 Of course, words like bleak, decaying, and gnarled are equally applicable to the farmhouse itself, as the mimesis between domestic and macro small-town descriptions in Wharton's novel become compounded. Just as we learn of Starkfield's 'sluggish pulse', and it is conceptualized as a 'starved garrison', the farmhouse itself is described as being

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>59</sup> Sally Bayley, Home on the Horizon: America's Search for Space, from Emily Dickinson to Bob Dylan (Peter Lang Ltd, 2010), p. 61.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>61</sup> Honaker Herron, p. 140.

'mute and cold as a grave-stone'; both the small town and the farmhouse itself are unified in their neglect. Wharton describes the 'unusually forlorn and stunted look of the house' and its appearance against the wider winter scene, once more challenging dominant symbolism of New England as a pastoral idyll and narrativizing provincialism in its less-overt setting. The reflection of Starkfield's provincialism in the farmhouse again becomes evident here. Wharton's topoi become estranged from the 'quintessentially American' experience of 'Puritan' America, as noted by Caroline Blinder in her discussion of New England; they are instead spaces of loss, anguish, and hostility. 63

Ultimately, *Ethan Frome* becomes a novel less about the tragic love story at its centre, and instead a cautionary text about small-town existence and the devastation that can be wrought from living such a remote, physically immobile life. It is no mistake that Wharton's brief moments of levity, even sentimentality, arise in the novel when Ethan and Mattie are far from home, usually travelling on the outskirts of the town or dreaming of a train to take them from it entirely. When sequestered within the confines of Starkfield and the farmhouse – the 'seclusion of the horse-hair parlour' – there is no movement, no temporary respite from the stultifying absence of liberty. For Wharton, the small-town domestic, like the desolate streets that constitute the town beyond it, are places of imprisonment and stagnation. Her tragic narrative relies exclusively on this concrete sense of place to heighten its plausibility; Wharton's small town, whilst a bleak environment, feels tangible and authentic because of its topophrenic construction that is familiar though subversive.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>62</sup> Wharton, p. 39.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>63</sup> Blinder, p. 171.

The narratological investigations posed by my study suggest that in small-town narratives of this kind, recurrent motifs, elements such as topophrenic description, as well as indeed a heightened spatial consciousness, contribute to a common genre. The narrative cyclicality of *Ethan Frome*, a text defined by absences and unfulfillment, is predicated on the static nature of its setting. Like many other small-town narratives considered in this thesis, namely *Winesburg*, *Ohio* and *Spoon River Anthology*, Wharton's cyclical narrative structure is a precise commentary on the nature of small-town life; it is provincialism and insularity in prose form. When her descriptions are parsed down to their chronotopic constituents, what remains is a defining image of a spatial, and indeed experiential, poverty: 'huddled against the white immensities of land and sky, one of those lonely New England farmhouses that make the landscape lonelier'. <sup>64</sup>

## Prairie towns and pastoralism in The Song of the Lark and My Antonia

The descriptions of roads, routes, and other throughways of small-town America vary according to region, with Anderson's ordered Midwestern town and Wharton's familiar, though isolating, New England village differing in description to the more disparate physical construction of prairie towns in the narratives of Willa Cather. All remain, however, deeply indebted to small-town physicality as both a setting and a narrative device. The arcs of Cather's small-town protagonists, notably Thea Kronborg and Jim Burden (from *The Song of the Lark* and *My Antonia*, respectively), seem to be pre-empted in the descriptions of the spaces they inhabit: 'the road from the post office came directly by our door, crossed the

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>64</sup> Wharton, p. 45.

farmyard, and curved round this little pond, beyond which it began to climb the gentle swell of unbroken prairie to the west'.<sup>65</sup> Here, the road connects the various amenities of small-town life and services them, but disappears into the vast swath of American wilderness, a distant and anonymous space that Jim and Thea ultimately light out for from their provincial homes.

The physical descriptions of Cather's settings, from roads to buildings to surrounding landscape, all seek to construct a familiar small-town community in a region where they are less ordered than the Midwest or New England – Cather achieves this through a topophrenic narrative style that imbues small-town spaces with a familiar syntax, visible even when the geography itself is different. In *My Antonia*, the roads are described variously as 'broken' and as running 'about like wild things', underscoring the regional differences in small-town environments between her texts and those of her contemporaries. The roads become metonymical for the untamed prairie towns of Nebraska and the Great Plains where her works are set. Cather seems to answer the 'question informing all her fiction [...] what does it mean to be in the wilderness, the barrenness?' through her use of familiar topoi that reconcile the frontier with the small town. For Cather, to be in the wilderness means to construct and hold on to some vestige of community life, to stake a claim on the vast, rolling landscape through knowable physical space.

Through this construction, she invokes an equivalent sense of small-town community like Anderson through reference to distance and an adoption of cartographical, geographically-specific language. For example, she describes Jim riding his horse, Dude, 'six miles east of us' along the road to the post office; in *The Song of the Lark*, Cather refers to

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>65</sup> Cather, *My Antonia*, p. 15.

the physicality of her town 'when Moonstone was first marked down on the map'. 66

Elsewhere, more references to proximity denote neighbouring towns and communities —
'Copper Hole was a settlement fifteen miles northwest of Moonstone' — whilst others are
measured by their physical comparisons to Cather's central communities: 'Concord, Kansas

[...] it's the jumping off place, no town at all. Some houses dumped down in the middle of a
cornfield. Not even a saloon to keep things going'. 67 These communities are othered by
their physical descriptions, and Cather seems to read in the isolated houses 'dumped' in the
'middle of a cornfield' the same deprived existences playing out behind its doors. By
comparison, the prairie towns of Black Hawk and Moonstone seem more hospitable, with
their descriptions even venturing toward dominant and idyllic on occasion. Cather's
treatment of small-town life is far more nuanced, as will be explored elsewhere in this
thesis, but her physical descriptions and invocation of spatial chronotopes — saloons, roads,
maps - certainly promote a familiar sense of small-town narrative.

Cather's topophrenic narrative seems to lean heavily on physicality and structure to compensate for the less immediate familiarity of frontier towns compared to, for example, a Midwestern town like Winesburg. Her descriptions of Black Hawk, in particular, are very much preoccupied with establishing it as a familiar and knowable space that is analogous not only to the nation's dominant small-town archetype – the New England village – but also to her own hometown of Red Cloud, Nebraska:

Black Hawk, the world in which we had come to live, was a clean, well-planted little prairie town, with white fences and good green yards about the dwellings, wide dusty streets, and

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>66</sup> Ibid., p. 23; The Song of the Lark, p. 38.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>67</sup> Cather, The Song of the Lark, p. 144; Ibid., p. 156.

shapely little trees growing along the wooden sidewalks. In the centre of the town there were two rows of new brick "store buildings", a brick school-house, the court-house, and four white churches. Our own house looked down over the town and from our upstairs windows we could see the winding line of the river bluffs, two miles south of us.<sup>68</sup>

These descriptions would be at home in the theatrical works of Thornton Wilder, such is Cather's utopian register; likewise, the 'white fences and good green yards' pre-empt the colourful communities of Norman Rockwell's dominant small-town scenes to be discussed later. Again, the topoi of Main Street commerce and community ('a brick schoolhouse, the courthouse, and four white churches') emphasise the importance of anchoring local institutions together to those who frequent them. Cather's pastoral rendering of Black Hawk is discussed by James E. Miller: 'My Antonia' is remarkable for nostalgically evoking the past without blurring its harshness and its brutalizing weight'. <sup>69</sup> The nostalgic evocation of the past here is evident, from the neat demarcation of public and private space care of the 'white fences' to the trees shading the sidewalks. Again, the topoi of small-town narrative become 'artistically visible' by nature of their mutuality, and the shape of a genre likewise presents itself through this familiar network of symbols that speak across dominant and counter small-town narratives.

Cather's 'harshness' and 'brutalizing weight' of the American past take root in the latter stages of her novel, when the very community described above is seen in retrospect.

Writing on the road that Jim takes back across the prairie on his return from the East Coast,

Miller notes that 'this road is not, of course, simply Jim and Antonia's road. It is America's

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>68</sup> Cather, My Antonia, p. 91.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>69</sup> James E. Miller, 'My Antonia and the American Dream', Prairie Schooner, 48 (Summer, 1974), 112-123, (p. 117).

road, leading not into the future, but into the past, fast fading from the landscape, fast fading from memory'. There, Miller argues that Cather's insistence on physical descriptions of the small towns in her novels is part of an elegiac narrative, and it is this very tradition that is traceable across the texts considered in this thesis. Cather elegises the changing landscape of the frontier, noting at one point how 'the roads no longer ran about like wild things, but followed the surveyed section-lines'. This quote in particular is reminiscent of what Tuan calls the 'sentiment for nature and rural ways' which he argues is 'fostered by the pressures of urban life'; here we see how urban modernity has wrought its subtle physical changes on small-town spatiality.

Cather's sense of place is integral to the wider narrative of her 'prairie trilogy'. The small town is a place of complicated community, where gossip and prejudice resides in a recognisable and highly reproduced physical setting, and such complications are teased out through physical description. As Robert Wuthnow succinctly puts it, 'the passing folk and frontier life that her narratives captured glimpses of at full noontime and inevitable twilight'. This writerly reproduction of the small-town proper, describing not simply the brick-and-mortar of Main Street but also the nuances of 'green good yards' and store awnings, is fundamental to the construction of a small-town narrative model. As with an adherence to oral culture, discussed in the previous chapter, the physical sites of everyday life are recognisable, affective aspects of narrative and help replicate an authentic sense of experience.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>70</sup> Ibid., p. 123.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>71</sup> Cather, My Antonia, p. 77.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>72</sup> Tuan, p. 236.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>73</sup> Dorman, p. 35.

In spite of Cather's occasional invocation of the pastoral tradition, her treatment of the small town is certainly not utopian as will be discussed through her characterisation of immigrants in the following chapter. Nonetheless, she does infrequently use sentimental language regarding the physical town because she finds in these frontier towns a sense of 'renewal, a sense of freedom'. 74 Dorman takes this further by describing the 'landscapes like the ones Cather painted, obscure places, backwaters, anywhere there were people with old songs, or crafts, or stories, or memories – the attenuated remnants of the older America'. 75 This reading can be, I argue, applied to topophrenia which, in small-town narrative, sees memory and historic tradition of small-town life become inextricable from their physical surroundings. The 'old songs, crafts, stories' of rural America become inscribed in Cather's setting; she writes of the 'familiar streets' which 'led to the houses of good people who were putting the babies to bed, or simply sitting still before the parlour stove, digesting their supper'. 76 Her narratives tie the dominant myths of small-town community to the visible, local infrastructure of roads, homes, and stoves. It is not simply the town's physicality she is mapping, but her narrative's as well. It is, as Tally posits it, the very definition of a 'place-mindedness'.

Elsewhere, Cather is interested in exploring what Anthony Channell Hilfer describes as the 'thwarted impulses [...] [the] buried life'; like Sherwood Anderson, Cather is attentive to the subversive psychologies of small-town life that surface during its narrativization.<sup>77</sup> Her descriptions of Moonstone in *The Song of the Lark*, for example, are markedly different from the small-town descriptions in *My Antonia*: 'The town looked small and black,

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>74</sup> Ibid., p. 37.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>75</sup> Ibid., p. 87.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>76</sup> Cather, *My Antonia*, p. 134.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>77</sup> Anthony Channell Hilfer, *The Revolt from the Village 1915-1930* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1969), p. 35.

flattened down in the snow, muffled and all but extinguished'.<sup>78</sup> Cather seems to oscillate between dominant and subversive small-town narratives; the 'clean' and utopian descriptions of Black Hawk differ significantly from the bleak descriptions of snow-covered Moonstone – importantly, these two approaches regularly overlap and blur in each text. Similarly, her topophrenic narrative style takes the familiar environment of small-town streets, sidewalks and store fronts and imbues them with a sense of melancholy: 'The icy street and the shingle roofs of the houses were grey too. All along the street, shutters banged or windows rattled, or gates wobbled'.<sup>79</sup> Cather's atmosphere here is one of foreboding, informed by curiously gothic descriptions of unquiet buildings. Richard Giannone notes how Cather is equally interested in exploring the 'inner region', the psychological aspects of rural life, which seems to be pre-empted in the homes and buildings that appear restless, even tormented, in their descriptions.<sup>80</sup>

Small-town life, Cather seems to suggest, is lived both within and without the topoi of community and her writing gestures to this dual narrative. In this extended physical observation by Jim in book two of *My Antonia*, Cather shows this dual narrative most clearly:

In the morning, when I was fighting my way to school against the wind, I couldn't see anything but the road in front of me; but in the late afternoon, when I was coming home, the town looked bleak and desolate to me [...] When the smoky clouds hung low in the west and the red sun went down behind them, leaving a pink flush on the snowy roofs and the

<sup>78</sup> Cather, The Song of the Lark, p. 14.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>79</sup> Ibid., p. 186.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>80</sup> Giannone, *Prairie Schooner*, p. 27.

blue drifts, then the wind sprang up afresh, with a kind of bitter song, as if it said: "This is reality, whether you like it or not.<sup>81</sup>

The schoolhouse and the roofs of homes and storefronts all point to the knowable topoi expected from Cather's small-town descriptions, but the 'bleak' and 'desolate' rendering of Black Hawk here marks a subversive destabilising of the dominant small-town myth. The 'songs' and other 'folkways' that Robert L. Dorman notes of Cather's rural narratives, legible in the rustic aesthetic of her 'stick and timber' prairie towns, becomes instead 'a kind of bitter song' in this particular moment. Like the small-town epiphanies of Anderson's George Willard, Jim Burden appears to read the 'buried life' of small-town America in the very physical environment he once loved, and concludes that small-town stagnancy ultimately becomes its dominant mode.

Alongside Cather's treatment of familiar small-town topoi, it is her invocation of landscape more generally that is the most telling of her spatial preoccupations. In the tradition of American small-town literature and art, from fin-de-siècle local colour writing to Depression-era genre painting, the felt presence of American landscape is potent. Beyond the borders and confines of small-town America is, historically, the American wilderness, depicted in dominant myth narratives through either frontier pastoralism or as a cipher for encroaching modernity and industry. James Hanlon's writings on landscape and narrative are illuminating in this regard, particularly his paraphrasing of Pierce Lewis when he writes that landscape is 'our unwitting autobiography, reflecting our tastes, our values, our aspirations, and even our fears, in tangible form'.<sup>82</sup> His further elaborations that landscape

<sup>81</sup> Cather, *My Antonia*, p. 108.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>82</sup> James Hanlon, 'Everyday Landscapes: Past and Present, Presence and Absence', *Material Culture*, 43 (Fall, 2011), 1-5, (p. 1).

is a 'way of seeing, an ideological construct, [...] an active constituent of social life,' greatly aids this thesis' narrative study.<sup>83</sup> Both landscape and small-town America are variously described across a range of criticism with this rhetoric of 'construction' and ideology, from J.B Jackson through Miles Orvell, and so the pairing of each in the narratives discussed in this thesis is a vital and necessary one.

For Cather, the landscape itself – depicted variously in *My Antonia* and *The Song of the Lark* as a sublime frontier space as well as an intimidating wilderness – becomes a unique space in her small-town narratives that provides important contrast to the specific, 'place' communities of 'Main Street' around which her stories are centred. Unlike Anderson, to whom the agricultural Midwest remains a largely anonymous subject in *Winesburg, Ohio,* Cather places more emphasis on the contrasting topology of small towns and frontier wilderness. As with the contrast between rurality and urban life in small-town narratives, so too is Cather interested in the tensions available to the frontier town between planned community and wider landscapes. She seems to anticipate Peter Brown and Michael Irwin's observation regarding the 'endless reciprocity of literature and place,' specifically through her unique narratorial relationship between the American macro landscape – the frontier, wilderness, and plains – with the community diorama of small-town America at the centre of her texts. <sup>84</sup> Again, as Tally tells us, 'the representation of place, broadly imagined, necessarily brings with it a literary sensibility'. <sup>85</sup>

The notion of the pastoral frontier space features heavily in Cather's work, whose prairie trilogy is indebted to the vast swaths of untouched wilderness that buffet her towns

83 Ibid.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>84</sup> Brown and Irwin, p. 15.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>85</sup> Tally, p. 9.

on all sides. As David E. Nye writes of these same landscapes in his study *Narratives and Space* (1997), this American landscape is foundational to her small-town reproductions: 'thus the American West was long perceived as "virgin land", an empty region waiting to be appropriated. This peculiar sense of space is legible in the boundaries of the western States [inc. Colorado]'. <sup>86</sup> He goes on to talk of the 'abstract American sense of space, which is conceived of as a *tabula rasa*' in Cather's works, and her towns of Moonstone and Black Hawk, for all their vices and stunted characteristics, are proof that small-town communities are a significant etching on the ostensible blank-slate of American wilderness. From a narratorial perspective, it is tempting to refigure this terminology as a *fabula rasa*, a landscape upon which stories – in this instance, those of the small town – become legible in Cather's works. If vast American landscape can indeed be figured as a 'clean slate' then the intimate communities that populate her novels, otherwise dominated by the vastness of the frontier, seem to mark an etching of a new narrative or story upon this blank setting. The frontier is written anew with the focus shifting away from macrocosmic notions of wilderness to the microcosmic existence of small-town America.

Frequently the 'ordered' nature of Cather's provincial settings and the wild climes of the surrounding country overlap in her narratives, as with this description of Moonstone and the Colorado landscape beyond: 'The absence of natural boundaries gave the spirit of a wider range. Wire fences might mark the end of a man's pasture, but they could not shut in his thoughts as mountains and forests can'.<sup>87</sup> The sprawling narratives of Cather's prairie stories seem to respond in kind to such descriptions through their own meandering style,

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>86</sup> David E. Nye, *Narratives and Space: technology and the construction of American culture* (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 1997), p. 3.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>87</sup> Cather, *The Song of the Lark*, p. 305

featuring a large cast of characters and their continued migration both within the small-town proper and in the landscape beyond. Cather's evocation of the *fabula rasa* can be associated with a construction narrative, one in which her characters are building the small-town environment, and its attendant stories and experiences, actively and derive their motives for doing so from the landscape directly. 'There was nothing but land, not a country at all, but the material out of which countries are made,' Jim Burden notes in *My Antonia*, a summary which seems to characterise the small town as a genesis site for American identity. 88 Here, too, Cather's work anticipates George L. Henderson's idea of *landschaft*:

This discourse makes landscape more or less synonymous with the rural, with community, more or less small in geographic extent, more or less characterized by a balanced fit between people and land, more or less sustained by the use of local resources under the terms given by a more or less shared, vernacular technology.<sup>89</sup>

Here, there is a blurring and hybridizing of the small-town landscape with the wider frontier environment, a core narrative theme given her central focus on immigration, community 'othering', and movement to and from the small-town community. Cather's novels reduce the disparity between the small town and the wilderness, between the familiar domestic world of local communities and the apparent tumult of frontier space. In her own frequent descriptions of the towns in her novels, and indeed the fixation on place by her characters, Cather gestures toward this notion of construction directly as a small-town narrative author.

<sup>88</sup> Cather, My Antonia, p. 11.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>89</sup> George L. Henderson, 'When We Talk About Landscape', *Everyday America: Cultural Landscape Studies after J.B Jackson*, ed. by Chris Wilson and Paul Groth (London: University of California Press, 2003), p. 183.

She appears to evoke in her narrative an ideal that James Oliver Robertson defines in the following terms: 'America became (especially quintessential, frontier America) [...] in myth and folklore, a place of barn raising and house raising, of quilting bees and church socials, of barn dances and harvest suppers, of community efforts to build and support churches and schools'. 90 Robertson endorses the dominant small-town myth whilst also gesturing toward the same ideals visible in Cather's work and her small-town descriptions. With that said, Cather's small-town representation of gossip and conservatism, the enemies of her protagonists and the biggest impetus behind their eventual flight, corrects any endorsement of dominant narrative in the manner described by Robertson; hers is a complex representation of small-town America in the West, in which dominant and counter narratives regularly conflict.

The small town (figured as particular) and the American landscape beyond (figured as abstract) are explored through manifold, interrogative narratives that explore the social mores of rural communities and those who react against the ideals of small-town life. The frontier becomes a kind of all-encompassing topos that the small town, comprised of its own specific micro-topoi, is contrasted against in a narrative of community versus wilderness. What seems an unlikely comparison with *Ethan Frome* becomes evident here when Cather's narrators and the space around them become interchangeable. Jim notes early in the novel how 'between that earth and that sky I felt erased, blotted out. I did not say my prayers that night: here, I felt, what would be would be'. 91 The vastness of the frontier, contrasted with the small settlement of Black Hawk, causes this strange epiphany —

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>90</sup> James Oliver Robertson, American Myth American Reality (New York: Hill & Wang, 1980), p. 127.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>91</sup> Cather, My Antonia, p. 11.

Jim is reduced to a constituent of this wider chronotope, perhaps a commentary on the homogenising forces of small-town provincialism.

As Ima Honaker Herron notes of Willa Cather's novels, 'throughout her fiction [...] Miss Cather has looked steadily at the life of the little town and has seen it whole'. 92 To 'see it whole', to narrate the small town and its various psychologies and myths, one must reproduce the very setting itself with clarity, authenticity, and confidence. When we are told in the very opening pages of *The Song of the Lark* that '[the doctor's] offices were in the Duke Block, over the drug store', and that 'the saloon next door was just closing,' we take such descriptions for granted because of the tradition Cather is upholding in her writing.<sup>93</sup> Her narratives of gossip, migration, and everyday ritual are bolstered by her true-to-life physical settings. The 'brick and mortar', or rather the 'stick and timber', of small-town life announces itself as her narrative constant, distinct from exclusively pastoral frontier narratives and especially from the urban settings of modernity to which her protagonists flee. Tremaine McDowell provocatively asks: 'subtract the setting from one of [Cather's] early or one of her late novels and what is left?'. McDowell's rhetorical question can be read as a pointed dismissal of Cather's talents, suggesting space and place dominate to the point of obfuscation, but it can also be read as a proclamation of Cather as a foremost writer of space and place. The point being one cannot subtract setting from Cather's work as her work is place; I suggest this itself is emblematic of Cather's small-town narrative inclinations.

This thesis asks the same question not simply of Cather, but of all writers and artists who engage with the small town. Chorological narratives, in which the familiar topoi of

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>92</sup> Honaker Herron, *The Small Town in American Literature*, p. 396.

<sup>93</sup> Cather, The Song of the Lark, p. 11; Ibid., p. 14.

small-town life are reconstructed, visualised, and narrated, are a vital aspect of the small-town generic model and a signifier of a specific mode in American culture. Take away the setting from these narratives, and you are left with an idea, a spectre, of American community. To think of Main Street and to write of it, one must first *build* it in the cultural imaginary.

## 'Cherished fiction of American homogeneity': Norman Rockwell, Thornton Wilder, and the small-town visual imaginary

It was during Norman Rockwell's tenure as a cover artist for *The Saturday Evening Post*, a magazine that reached a peak circulation of seven million in 1960, that his most concrete narratives of small-town life became known. <sup>94</sup> As Jennifer A. Greenhill notes in her essay on Rockwell's racial politics in the context of one of his most iconic paintings, *Shuffleton's Barbershop* (1950), he was an artist to whom 'the period impulse to document and preserve such timeworn establishments representing the values of the American small town' remained his *raison d'etre*. <sup>95</sup> Elsewhere, Allan Wallach states that '[Rockwell's] *Post* covers reveal him playing variations on familiar genre themes: the courting couple, the farmer gone fishing, the worker asleep on the job [...] the young man leaving home'. <sup>96</sup> Wallach's reference to genre painting here situates Rockwell in a very distinct tradition in American art history and this thesis contends that the small town provided particularly fruitful

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>94</sup> Tony Silber, 'The Classic Americana Of The Saturday Evening Post, All 197 Years Of It, Now Available Online', *Forbes*, <a href="https://www.forbes.com/sites/tonysilber/2018/11/07/the-classic-americana-of-the-saturday-evening-post-all-197-years-of-it-now-available-online">https://www.forbes.com/sites/tonysilber/2018/11/07/the-classic-americana-of-the-saturday-evening-post-all-197-years-of-it-now-available-online</a>/, [Date accessed: 23<sup>rd</sup> August 2021].

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>95</sup> Jennifer A. Greenhill, 'The View from Outside: Rockwell and Race in 1950', *American Art*, 21 (Summer, 2007), 70-95, (p. 72).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>96</sup> Wallach, p. 283.

material to genre painting of the period, with Rockwell's attention to its physical construction, layout, and sites of community interaction presenting it as a vital aspect in developing a visual small-town narrative. Topophrenia, then, exists beyond the literary and the written text; Tally's notion of the cartographic imperative is certainly visible in Rockwell's decades-long relationship with small-town representation.

Todd S. Gernes addresses the manifold narratives of genre painting when he states that genre painting is not simply about 'homely scenes of everyday life but constructions, representations, and distorted social types, symptomatic of the contradictions and anxieties embedded deep in the nation's political unconsciousness'. <sup>97</sup> As has been discussed at length across the primary and secondary material of the small town, its position in American culture is certainly bound to these 'contradictions and anxieties' in not just the political but the cultural 'unconsciousness' of the nation, too. One can suggest with some confidence that the conflation Gernes makes between 'homely scenes of everyday life' and wider anxieties finds its meeting point in the small town itself. So it is that Rockwell's work operates in a dominant mode to endorse these ongoing contradictions about American identity and community. This is emblematic of the 'uneasy' psychology present within place-mindedness that Tally theorises; Rockwell's initially utopian works open themselves up to readings of wider anxieties of topophilia, specifically a love for the rural, and encroaching modernity.

Small-town America becomes a vital setting and focaliser for Rockwell, a quintessential American genre painter to whom the quotidian scenes of daily life assume narrative significance as a means of deferring the 'contradictions and anxieties' of

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>97</sup> Todd S. Gernes, Review of Elizabeth John, *American Genre Painting: The Politics of Everyday Life*, (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1991).

modernity. He does this, chiefly, through physical reproductions of small-town life and by formally adopting a common system of topoi in his small-town vignettes and anecdotal illustrations. The effect is a consummate depiction of a physically reproduced, *dominant* small-town narrative which feels navigable, and authentic, because of its mutual reproduction elsewhere, operating in the same chorological register as verbal texts such as *Our Town*.

There is no greater evidence for Rockwell's clear desire to reproduce small-town

America as a physically authentic construct in his artwork than his own admission in the

posthumous foreword to Laurie Norton Moffatt's Norman Rockwell: A Definitive Collection

(1986):

Without thinking too much about it in specific terms, I was showing the America I knew and observed to others who might not have noticed and perhaps, therefore, this is one function of the illustrator. He can show what has become so familiar that is no longer noticed. The illustrator thus becomes a chronicler of his time.<sup>98</sup>

For Rockwell, limning the physical world of small-town life and imbuing such spaces with narrative was his duty as a 'chronicler of his time'. So many of his works, then, from pencil sketches to oil paintings, capture this essence of small-town physical narrative in a manner that gestures toward some larger community commentary, or invites viewer participation with his own small worlds.

Although Rockwell's focus is frequently on the vignette or slice-of-life scene, there are several illustrations that depict his interest in Main Street as a spatial construct. *Post* 

<sup>98</sup> Moffatt, Norman Rockwell: A Definitive Catalogue, p. xi.

Toasties (1920) (fig. 9), an advert for the eponymous cereal of the period, shows a child considering the product offered by an adolescent vendor whilst the main street of the town fades into the background behind them. What dominates is the house at the centre of the illustration, with its wraparound porch, striped awnings, and clapboard façade all contributing to the familiar physicality of small-town New England life. The greenery supplied by the town's many trees and the partially obscured colonial houses that sit just beyond Main Street mark Rockwell's clear interest in small-town space. To imagine the lives of the central characters in Rockwell's advertisement narrative, their world must necessarily be gestured to through this main street architectural focus. Later sketches in his career, such as Pennsylvania Cut Stone House (1930) and Half-Timbered Tudor House (1930) show Rockwell's interest in the intersection between vernacular architecture and small-town space, with clear attention being paid to how community domestic spaces can be reconstructed visually. Even when only a portion of such constructions are revealed, as with Post Toasties and the obscured buildings of the nameless small town beyond, the consummate effect of small-town architecture and spatiality is potent. The pervading sense that Rockwell's many assorted characters inhabit a small-town space that's knowable, and coded in the dominant tradition of pastoralism and idealisation, is vital to understanding his work and its enduring popularity.

The buildings and locales of Main Street are not merely incidental to his rural scenes but are fundamental to the construction, both physically and spiritually, of his dominant, heavily utopian scenes. More playful *Post* covers, such as *Welcome to Elmville* (1929) (fig. 10), show a small-town policeman setting a speed trap behind the rustic, hand-painted sign for the titular town. The arrow, pointing in the direction of the magazine's overleaf content, implies the continuation or discovery of the small town itself elsewhere in the publication

and, like much of his work, speaks to the vignette as a means of gesturing implicitly to small-town America. The 'cartographical imperative' of topophrenic narrative is legible here through literal signage that, metaphorically, conveys us to the small town beyond.

In Walking to Church (1953) (fig. 11), a small-town scene is evoked as a family (mother, father, three children) walk along the sidewalk to church. Passing brownstone townhouses as they walk, and a storefront bearing the lettering 'Silver Slipper Grill', the familiar motifs of small-town America that Rockwell illustrated so frequently throughout his career are many here. The barbershop pole on the right of the painting, a gesture not simply to a place of sociability but also to one of Rockwell's most enduring small-town scenes (Shuffleton's Barbershop), acts as a subtle synecdoche for the familiar, small-town institutions described across the texts in this thesis. Elsewhere, the steeple of a church just visible over the rows of townhouses becomes the community beacon to which the family navigate. This symbol acts both an allusion to Vermeer's The Little Street (1657-58) and as a clear invocation of the puritanical, small-town New England tradition so prevalent in Rockwell's work.

What is most interesting about this illustration, and how it teases out the microcosmic details of everyday life, is the fact that *Walking to Church* is taking place in an urban environment, specifically the 'small city' of Troy, New York. With that said, Rockwell's use of the store front and barber pole, and the visual connotations they each gesture toward within his larger small-town oeuvre, orientate the work toward those same small-town referents visible elsewhere in his work. Familiar motifs and recurring symbols all unify his anecdotal narratives of everyday life under the banner of the local. Richard Halpern notes that Rockwell's 'small-town consanguinity' is often visible in the likenesses of his portraits, but this chapter seeks to apply this consanguinity to Rockwell's presentation of

American space, from vernacular architecture to sidewalks and store fronts. Even urban environments bear the flavour and texture of his more common, more defining small-town scenes because of their linked topoi. In a manner analogous to Cresswell's 'place-ballet', Rockwell's scenes are united by a mutual interest in the intimate sites and spaces of daily life; it is natural then, with an artist as small-town orientated as Rockwell, that we might read how this interest bleeds into his other scenes of American space and place.

'All of Rockwell's imagery, capturing the particularities of everyday life, speak in unison of the order of the small town universe,' writes Miles Orvell, and in *Walking to Church* we see this narrative universe objectively described. <sup>99</sup> Even when the setting is outside of the discrete environs of small-town America, Rockwell has an uncanny ability to narrate a moment that is physically syncopated with small-town life. Even a city scene takes on small-town proportions, becomes indistinguishable to the other vignettes and anecdotes painted throughout his career. Rockwell can be described as a small-town artist to whom local narrative is an operative tradition, given that even his works not explicitly set-in small-town environments carry with them the undeniable thematic suggestion of these more familiar, more recurrent scenes in his oeuvre.

Another simpler example of this technique in action is in Rockwell's sketch series

Night on the Troop Train (1943) (fig. 12) in which one sketch shows a young male soldier

gazing out of the window from his train carriage. The title of this sketch - 'He's passing his

home town' – alludes to the unseen spatial indications of the small town in which the

soldier was presumably born and raised. Like Wilder's Our Town, as will be discussed later,

there is an unseen implication here of a familiar network of referents (a rural church; Main

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>99</sup> Orvell. p. 44.

Street; a barn) that is projected by both the subject of the image and the audience themselves. Those familiar with Rockwell's work will know the scene visible beyond the frame, without the need to see it sketched at all, such is the power of his sustained visual narration.

Of course, Rockwell's penchant for the microcosmic, for gesture and implication, in his small-town scenes is not an exclusive mode. Some of his most concrete commentaries on small-town space and physicality are rendered in illustrations that seem to provide crosssections, or objective studies, of local communities. Stockbridge Main Street at Christmas (1967) (fig. 13) is a striking, late-career composition that shows the titular town, Rockwell's hometown, from a vantage across from its Main Street. Storefronts, bedecked in the festive glow of fairy-lights, cast their warmth upon freshly fallen snow as shoppers socialise, play, and rest along the sidewalk and surrounding community space. The market, town hall, church, and other community hubs are presented in a visual continuum from Rockwell's vantage, a cross section of Main Street community that is instantly recognisable as smalltown America in its dominant ideographic form. Blake Howe, although writing specifically on Shuffleton's Barbershop, opines that Rockwell's specificity in spatial reproduction is his greatest tell as a small-town narrator: 'the extreme specificity and exactness of Rockwell's representation imbue the painting with the atmosphere of small-town New England becoming not just a painting but an iconological slice of the details of a particular community'. 100 Howe's observations here can be extrapolated across Rockwell's oeuvre, and particularly so when grand small-town representations like Stockbridge Main Street at *Christmas* are concerned.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>100</sup> Blake Howe, 'Norman Rockwell's "Shuffleton's Barbershop": A Musical-Iconographical Riddle', *The Musical Quarterly*, 90 (Spring, 2007), 6-42, (p. 14).

One of the defining narratorial qualities of small-town America that finds itself reproduced indefinitely across small-town texts is the use of nostalgia, a symbiosis that dominates even in the bleakest and most bitter of small-town narratives. For example, in *Winesburg, Ohio*, a text grounded in melancholy provincialism, Anderson's characters dream of 'a kind of pastoral golden age', a chimera that is, importantly, a physical one. Richard O. Davies writes at length of the relationship between small-town America and nostalgia, encapsulating the cultural capital of Rockwell's successful career as he does so:

Nostalgia has it that inhabitants carried out their lives, as ever fewer do today, in a single spot. They conducted the majority of their transactions, great and small, in a single place. They played out their lives and fates on ground they knew to be home. In the confines of a relatively stable, if not fixed circle, they shared events, stories, and suspicions. For them, space, place, locale, community and home were one. They formed a single microcosm composing nation, world and humanity. 101

This central tenet of dominant small-town ideology – that it is constructed as a 'single spot' where 'nation, world and humanity' are fostered in unassuming, homely surroundings – is the through-line that connects Rockwell's macro and micro images of small-town life, visible in the darkened room of a barbershop after hours just as it is on a busy Main Street at Christmas.

The physical reproduction of vernacular small-town architecture, epitomized in the Colonial Revival style of Stockbridge's Main Street; the generational representation of small-town inhabitants living in, and enjoying, such a physical environment; and Rockwell's

 $<sup>^{\</sup>rm 101}$  A Place Called Home: Writings on the Midwestern Small Town, p. 5.

insistence on detailing the accoutrements of seasonal rural life — shopping, snowball fights, bringing home a felled fir tree — all promote an immediate sense of topophrenic narrative. Robert E. Innis terms this more generally as a 'sense of place' and offers three key criteria: 'lively awareness of a familiar environment'; 'a ritual repetition'; and 'a sense of fellowship based on shared experience'. <sup>102</sup> All of these dominant small-town narrative criteria find themselves readily depicted in Rockwell's works, across his career, and the familiar topoi of small-town life are given colour, shape, and definition in his oeuvre. The inherent visuality of Rockwell's medium, as opposed to the verbal texts of Anderson, Wharton, and others, ensures that the topophrenic nature of small-town narrative is physically rendered and becomes tangible. Whereas Anderson might describe the social space that exists below a storefront awning, Rockwell gives such space physical proportions and depth so as to bring us closer to these already intimate narratives. His work narrates a down-home past to which Rockwell's intended audience aspires, doing so by depicting the familiar and recognizable spaces of the dominant American small-town mythos and the 'comfort, safety and presumed sanity of the mythical small town', <sup>103</sup>

### **Our Town** and rebuilding the New England Village

Rockwell is not alone in using the physical dimensions of recognisable American community space to achieve a persuasive, nostalgic narrative. Another canonical, dominant small-town narrative text which similarly manipulates the features of the American 'local' is Thornton Wilder's *Our Town* (1938). Using the historic idyll of the New England village, and appealing

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>102</sup> Robert E. Innis, 'America as Assemblage of Placeways: Toward a Meshwork of Lifelines', *The Journal of Speculative Philosophy*, 31 (2017), 40-62, (p. 54).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>103</sup> Orvell, p. 206.

to conservative traditions which are endorsed throughout their work, Wilder and Rockwell trade in nostalgia and memory, relying on the memories and willing participation of their intended audience to preserve and archive such narratives forever. It is through recreation and, in Wilder's case, suggestion and implication of the built small-town environment that they achieve this narrative intention.

Reportedly the most popular play in the U.S by number of annual performances, *Our Town* remains an indelible portrait of small-town, New England life prior to the Depression that relies on the invocation of small-town memory and dramatic suggestion in its construction. <sup>104</sup> Grover's Corners, with its earlier cited 'coordinates' and air of realism, is a rural utopia that cannot be found on any map, in spite of Wilder's geographic specificity. Its Main Street is lined with the usual amenities of regional America (a barbershop, a tavern, 'Mr. Morgan's drugstore', a grocery shop). It is seated in the shadow of 'our mountain' and enveloped by verdant farmland. It is a place where, before the automobile came and mobilized America, a dog 'could go to sleep all day in the middle of Main Street and nothing come along to disturb him'. <sup>105</sup> Put simply, it is a hermetic utopian community of the kind which dominant small-town mythology is indebted to.

Mapped by a common system of rural referents, from town halls to town squares, storefronts to train stations, Wilder renders Grover's Corners as the objective American utopia through his own cartographical imperative. Like Rockwell's visual small-town repertoire, Wilder relies on a topophrenic style of theatre in which small-town visual

<sup>104</sup> Whilst there is no readily available quantitative data for this claim, it is regularly cited by the theatrical world and dramatists alike. Director and MacArthur Grant Fellow David Cromer, speaking to Almeida Theatre on his own production of *Our Town*, makes this claim here: <a href="https://almeida.co.uk/our-town-david-cromer-rehearsal-room-talk">https://almeida.co.uk/our-town-david-cromer-rehearsal-room-talk</a>, [Date accessed: 24<sup>th</sup> August

2021].

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>105</sup> Wilder, p. 65.

architecture is framed around audience place-memory and suggestion. Again, the regional inflection of his work confirms the New England village as a space 'pregnant with meaning in the construction of American identity'. <sup>106</sup> Despite this emphasis on setting, *Our Town* famously uses no illustrated backdrops, no staging props, no adornments, furnishings, or decorations. The production typically makes use of a dozen or so wooden chairs, a few tables, and two ladders. There is no visual indication on stage that Grover's Corners exists, that a setting of any kind exists; it is Wilder's metanarratorial figure of the 'Stage Manager', and the invocation of his audience's collective visual memory, that wills Grover's Corners into being.

Yi-Fu Tuan's notion of topophilia is again useful here: such are the bonds between Wilder's intended audience and their assumed rural roots, ersatz or otherwise, that *Our Town* renders, with minimal physicality, the dominant image of small-town America in theatrical space; those 'affective bonds' of Tuan's theory transcend physicality. *Our Town* metaphysically renews the dominant myths of small-town America through this unique dramaturgy, allowing character and audience alike to inhabit these chronotopes through memory, nostalgia, and suggestion. Other spatial theories are useful in this context, notably Mikhail Bakhtin's concept of the chronotope which describes how space becomes 'charged and responsive to the movements of time, plot and history.' <sup>107</sup> The audience participation that *Our Town* is predicated on speaks to this 'movement' that a chronotope needs in order to take form. The same can likewise be said of Rockwell's fixed, ostensibly plotless images

 <sup>&</sup>lt;sup>106</sup> Brooke Wortham-Galvin, 'The Fabrication of Place in America: The Fictions and Traditions of the New England Village', *Traditional Dwellings and Settlements Review*, 21 (Spring, 2010), 21-34, (p.23).
 <sup>107</sup> Mikhail Bakhtin, 'Forms of Time and the Chronotope in the Novel', *The Dialogic Imagination*, ed. by Michael Holquist, trans. by Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981), p. 84.

and vignettes, which inspire a mental navigation on the part of the audience in lieu of narrative plotting customary in verbal small-town texts.

This idea of visual suggestion as a chorological narrative technique in small-town texts is evinced near the start of the play, where the stage manager describes a series of rural vignettes taking place in the village and remarks to the audience, 'you all remember what it was like'. 108 Wilder directly appeals to a collective consciousness here, and the use of the past tense betrays his wider lamentations on small-town America's mythic obsolescence; the play itself consciously assumed a highly specific audience. By conjuring these nostalgic memories of hometowns both old and new, both lived and imagined, via each audience member, Grover's Corners is projected brick-by-brick. The audience's collective psychologies pave its roads, furnish its houses, and people its sidewalks with their own lived experiences; it becomes a kind of dramatic telepathy.

Miles Orvell, who describes the dominant American small town ideal as both a lodestone of common experience as well as an exclusionary space, comments upon these ideas of collective memory: 'Main Street was what we all shared, it was symbolically where we all lived, it was the common space, the public space, as opposed to the private, as if all Americans lived in one immense small town'. <sup>109</sup> Wilder's play embraces this ideology, in particular this troublesome homogenizing of American experience under the collective 'all'; he imagines Grover's Corners without any visual signifiers, and uses the metaphysical architecture of memory and sentiment to build his quaint rural burg. In fact, Wilder himself was vocal about the importance of such techniques in theatre throughout his career:

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>108</sup> Wilder, p. 35.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>109</sup> Orvell, p. 2.

When you emphasise place in the theatre, you drag down and limit and harness time to it.

You thrust the action back into past time, whereas it is precisely the glory of the state that it is always 'now' there. Under such production methods the characters are all dead before the action starts. 110

The paradox here is that Wilder uses the tropes and fashions of a pre-war American cultural landscape, the very 'past time' which he finds so repellent, to give his play shape and setting. He successfully narrates a small-town environment through a past image, with minimal staging and other visual cues. Most telling, however, is his emphasis on the immediate and the 'now'. His 'action' of projecting collective consciousness from stalls to stage presents a vision of how small-town America might look, or has perhaps never looked at all such is its contrived nature.

Wilder's recuperation of a nineteenth-century idyll, authored in the 1930s, appeals to the small town as an atemporal space or indeed a space in which time can, in dominant narratives, be deferred. Bert Cardullo comments toward this end, writing:

The inhabitants of Grover's Corners, New Hampshire, have the time and space to pay attention to the rising sun and the flight of birds, to observe the change of seasons and the growth of children, to savour the roses blooming and the coffee brewing. But they have the time and space to do these things because they live in a time and place when and where there apparently was more time and space to devote to the "small pleasures" of living:

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>110</sup> Wilder, p. 11.

1901-1913, before World Wars I and II established the United States as an industrial-military superpower. <sup>111</sup>

The idea that Wilder is appealing to an 'almost innocent or idyllic era' at the height of the Depression is not a novel one, but it is vital in understanding how topophrenic narrative is inextricable to small-town texts and specifically, in this case, *dominant* small-town texts. 112 Grover's Corners, as a textual world and a dramatic stage environment, exists outside of time and space and appeals to the nostalgic, utopian mythologies of small-town life that prevailed in the late nineteenth-century. As Robert W. Corrigan claims, Wilder 'destroys time' and thus achieves the effect of 'any time, all time, each time;' in doing so, Grover's Corners becomes the ultimate dominant narrative example of the small town *as* chronotope, a place where past narratives are archived and preserved evermore, and practiced daily via routine and ritual. 113

A fundamental part of this thesis is the idea of performance (see Chapter Four), particularly as to how space, place, and community is performed or interacted with in a manner that gives it narrative importance and impetus. *Our Town*'s sparse physical environment is in many ways performed by the audience directly, as has already been discussed, but so too is the intra-play environment deliberately interacted with for narrative effect. The Stage Manager, who is a curious hybrid of omniscient mediator and mayoral figure, is largely responsible for orchestrating such performances throughout the run of the play, acting as chaperone through *Our Town*'s 'physical' setting. His integration into the

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>111</sup> Bert Cardullo, 'Whose Town Is It, Anyway? A Reconsideration of Thornton Wilder's "Our Town", *CLA Journal*, 42, 1, (September, 1998), 71-86, (p. 74-75).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>112</sup> Ibid, p. 75.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>113</sup> Robert W. Corrigan, 'Thornton Wilder and the Tragic Sense of Life', *Educational Theatre Journal*, 13 (October, 1961), 167-173, (p. 172).

narrative world of the play itself is important here, such as when he assumes a performative role as a drugstore attendant midway through the play and serves George Gibbs and Emily Webb, George's childhood sweetheart.

He sets the imaginary glasses before them.

Stage Manager: 'There they are. Enjoy 'em'.

He sees a customer, right.

Stage Manager: 'Yes, Mrs. Ellis. What can I do for you?'

He goes out right. 114

The Stage Manager, Wilder's most innovative narrative device, is both tour-guide and officiant of Grover's Corners spatial construction. He steps in and out of scenes at will, performing space just as easily as describing it. The drugstore scene is typical of small-town American ritual; the institution itself is in many ways, along with 'Main Street', a dominant synecdoche for rural communities across the nation. From Norman Rockwell's sentimentalizing of equivalent small-town institutions to later examples such as Frank Capra's archetypal American hometown of Bedford Falls in It's a Wonderful Life (1946), the drugstore is an important commercial and social hub of small-town America. Such institutions are crucial to Wilder's visualisation of the small-town myth. They transcend, in his own words, 'time and place' to achieve a total production of this enduring American ideal.

<sup>114</sup> Wilder, p. 36.

Brooke Wortham-Galvin, writing on the 'fabrication' of New England utopias in Wilder's play and other literary works, remarks upon the region as 'a place where people use the physical capital of close proximity and small-town morphology to reinforce the social capital and mores of an imagined village'. 115 It is these very institutions described by Wilder – drug stores, schoolhouses, town halls – that Wortham-Galvin finds so illuminating. She notes the potentiality for the region itself to assume an 'imagined', transcendent position in America's cultural DNA, and so it naturally offers fertile ground for the projection and creation of Grover's Corners; the archetypal New England village. Ultimately, Wilder creates a vision of an imagined *dominant* American real, a composite of half-remembered childhoods and summer vacations anchored to a single place. It is a geographical impossibility with a set of plottable coordinates. Grover's Corners is a hybrid environment of various community tropes, and is sustained by a belief in its purity and truth by an audience longing for a past that is not their own; this latter point sustains much of the dominant small-town mythos as it exists in popular culture.

On the concept of space, place and geography in narratological terms, Mieke Bal makes the distinction that 'space' is 'sandwiched between that of focalization, of which the representation of space constitutes in a way a specialized case, and that of place, a category of fabula elements'. <sup>116</sup> She goes further to write that 'the concept of place is related to the physical, mathematically measurable shape of spatial dimensions,' and that it is how these places are 'seen in relation to their perception' in which we derive the concept of 'space'. <sup>117</sup> Bal's insistence that place, to be inferred correctly, needs physical proportions is

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>115</sup> Brooke Wortham-Galvin, 'The Fabrication of Place in America: The Fictions and Traditions of the New England Village', *Traditional Dwellings and Settlements Review*, 21 (Spring, 2010), 21-34, (p. 29).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>116</sup> Bal, p. 133.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>117</sup> Ibid.

problematized by Wilder's unique dramatization. <sup>118</sup> From its title to its faux coordinates and sparse set design, *Our Town* is an objective treatment of specific American space, one recognizable and familiar to its intended audience though lacking in 'mathematically measurable shape'. With that said, Bal goes on to write that 'in many cases, however, space is 'thematized': it becomes an object of presentation itself, for its own sake'. <sup>119</sup> So it is, then, that *Our Town* becomes an objective portrait, or a 'thematized [...] presentation', of small-town American life through the narrative qualities of theatrical production. Small-town space and geography are invoked not simply in prose texts but in visual and dramatic texts also, where the 'semiotic objects' of small-town America – here proposed to be the common referents and institutions described across the primary material discussed – form a new small-town narrative model. <sup>120</sup>

Ultimately, for both Rockwell and Wilder, the vignette or 'iconological slice' of small-town life, denoted by careful attention to a specific physical referent that will elicit recognition and reminiscence in their audience, is freighted with the tropes and criteria of small-town narrative. Rockwell's 20s and 30s *Post* covers, befitting the magazine's house style at the time, demonstrate this ideal most prominently through their central illustration framed by a large white background. Like scenes from a play, Rockwell's illustrations denote small-town life happening in an isolated, microcosmic moment; even *Gramps at the Plate* (1916), in which an elderly man stands ready to receive a baseball pitch, exudes a small-town feeling that belongs in the same dominant traditions as Wilder's play where such rural recreation was routine. As the two most prominent authors of dominant small-town

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>118</sup> Ibid., p. 141.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>119</sup> Ibid., p. 133.

<sup>120</sup> Ibid.

mythologies considered in this thesis, it is unsurprising that their mutual endorsement of conservative and exclusive small-town space should intersect so deliberately in matters of nostalgia and memory. Their present, contemporary narratives are anchored to an idyllic past, and by making it physical they, again, make it real.

#### Conclusion

There is, undoubtedly, a narrative potential and significance to verbal and visual small-town text's invocation of place and spaces; they are not backdrops, but rather the characteristics and traits of small-town life made physical. The sites of small-town interaction, whether emblematic of community spirit or bleak isolation, are vital to the writers and artists who celebrate and critique this most ubiquitous of American community constructs. Print editions of Sherwood Anderson's Winesburg, Ohio and Sinclair Lewis' Main Street, two of this period's most famous critiques of small-town life, are regularly marketed with cover art that focuses on the architecture and ambience of 'Main Street' – from Edward Hopper's melancholy sidewalk scenes to the more incongruously idyllic scenes of Gale Stockwell's New Deal art; to think of small-town narrative of this period is to see its physical reproduction directly. Stockwell's Parkville, Main Street (1933), used as the cover for the Penguin Classic edition of Winesburg, Ohio, is a particularly interesting choice given it's 'brilliant reds, greens, and blues' and overall 'cheerful image of small-town America', descriptions which are decidedly juxtaposed with Winesburg, Ohio's prevailing melancholy and monochromatic portrayal of rural life. 121 As Chris Wilson and Paul Groth remind us in

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>121</sup> Taken from the Smithsonian American Art Museum's online listing of the artwork: https://americanart.si.edu/artwork/parkville-main-street-23073> [Date accessed: 28/07/2021]

Everyday America: Cultural Landscape Studies after J. B. Jackson (2003), there sits at the heart of American artistic and cultural production 'the discovery of everyday built spaces as significant evidence of social groups, power relations, and culture'. <sup>122</sup> So it is, then, that Midwestern 'revolt from the village' writers, nostalgic illustrators of the interwar period, and Depression-era dramatists all find a mutual valency in the construction and description of small-town America, from every sidewalk crack to storefront window.

The narrative purpose of these spaces is crucial; these are not simply abstract settings that enable some grander narrative; they *are* the narrative. For Sherwood Anderson, it is vital that his short story cycle's repetitive commentary on the banal lives of rural Midwesterners should be complemented by a setting that seems to enable this futility. Winesburg is a compact, insular town void of any particular identity; its characters wander its Main Street and various side roads often in vain for some kind of stimulation, some kind of relief, and rarely are they rewarded.

Likewise, the bleak town of Starkfield in Edith Wharton's *Ethan Frome* enables a story rife with repression and futility; it is a community that heightens all sense of immobility because of its awkward, isolated construction. Farmhouses lie beached against drifts of snow, cut off from the thoroughfare of Main Street, and so the dark and violent narratives taking place within these frigid domestic environments become amplified. The claustrophobia of the lonely parlours and kitchens in the New England farmhouse are used to neatly personify the repressed egos of their inhabitants, and Wharton finds that to tell her story of a failed marriage and clandestine, impossible love she needs the unique *topos* 

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>122</sup> Everyday America: Cultural Landscape Studies after J.B Jackson, p. 1.

afforded her by an isolated small-town community, one unused to so damning a portrait in wider cultural mythologies.

Across this thesis is the contested binary of dominant and counter small-town narrative, and here too, in spatial construction and topophrenic narrative, do we see the tensions that lie at the heart of nostalgic, idyllic small-town narratives. Norman Rockwell's illustrations, so numerous and thematically similar, ensures a common syntax in his imagined world of New England myth so much that even scenes of an apparent urban nature can easily be read as narratives of more local and intimate community. Likewise, his vignette, slice-of-life style ensures that the characteristics of a single store front or living room bespeak a wider iconological space that is reproduced indefinitely, beyond the edges of the illustration. In dramaturgy, Thornton Wilder achieves a very similar effect in his choreographed mimicry of Grover's Corners – his own New England idyll is performed into being through a combination of familiar quotidian actions as well as the reliance of collective audience memory.

'Collective' as this memory may be it is inherently exclusive and belongs only to the audience Wilder intended for *Our Town* - the same white, middle-class demographic who populate Grover's Corners, or who look at Rockwell's art as they turn the pages of *The Post*. What we see in Rockwell and Wilder is a repurposing of the same themes of cyclicality, familiarity, and routine via a narrative which holds these traits to be virtuous. The small town's familiar construction and spatial layout in these respective mediums is designed to promote the established mythos of which it's a part and provide a space for a select audience to inhabit both visually and mentally. Their world is unchanging, their narratives doubly so, because they construct a spatial world that resists modernity.

Franco Moretti calls genre a 'temporary structure', dispelling the myth that it is the redoubt of a solid, unchanging ideology. 123 Instead it's something that merely houses a set of principles and features so that they can be moved again, repurposed and possibly renamed. We might say the same of small-town narrative which finds in its representation of spatiality a fixed structure in the architecture of 'Main Street', something which we can readily see is far more than a physical set of angles, bricks, and roads. It is instead at the heart of texts which, whether they are dominant or counter narratives, ultimately seek to unpack America's most recurrent community spaces and ask questions of its past and present: 'if it can be done with words, then maps are superfluous'. 124

As for topophrenic narrative, Tally's cartographical imperative is legible across smalltown narrative; Anderson's own hand-drawn map of Winesburg, Ohio is testament to the need to give even fictional space a plotted permanence. Likewise, we have seen texts that not only bear no maps but possess no physical construction whatsoever (Our Town), yet we are offered coordinates in a bid for authenticity and permanence. Small-town narrative is so ubiquitous, so definitive in its own generic construction, that it does not necessarily need maps or, in the case of Wilder's performative choreography and Rockwell's brushstrokes, words. It can be suggested, and implied, in myriad ways. Is this not the bedrock of genre, which this thesis contends small-town narrative to be? To exist without word or image, but ideologically and across forms? Small-town narrative can indeed be mapped, but what we find when we analyze its physical descriptions is that, for better or worse, the road ahead is often already familiar.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>123</sup> Franco Moretti, *Graphs, Maps, Trees: Abstract Models for Literary History* (London & New York: Verso Books, 2007), p. 14.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>124</sup> Ibid., p. 35.

# Three: On The (Rural) Road: Mobility, Migration, and rural-urban exodus in small-town narrative

The linked concepts of migration and movement inhere across American historical and popular culture; in the words of Diarmuid Hester we might say that 'to be American is to be on the road'.¹ Whether in reference to migratory patterns across North America, particularly the so-called 'Great Migration' – or, as Alferdteen Harrison calls it, the 'Black Exodus' - of the early-to-mid twentieth-century; the rise of automobile culture and America's resulting spatial compression; or the rural-to-urban movement that dominated Depression-era America, the terms 'migration', 'mobility' and 'movement' are highly malleable in the context of American cultural studies.² Three interpretations of these terms – immigration; transience; rural-urban divisions – form the principle study of this chapter, wherein rural, local America and its attendant texts will be used to unpack and examine America's 'journey narratives'.³

It is precisely this term 'narrative' around which discussions will herein be orientated, showing migration and movement to be not simply the stalwarts of cultural studies but as vital narrative components in the creation of *small-town* stories, where the conflicting concepts of stasis and transit seem to be felt most acutely. This chapter will further the macro discussion of my thesis wherein the small town is posited as a narrative form in its own right, using a familiar set of referents associated with movement and

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup> Diarmuid Hester, 'Highway to Hell? Images of the American Road in Kelly Reichardt's *Old Joy*, *Wendy and Lucy*, and *Meek's Cutoff*,' *Journal of American Studies*, 52 (2018), 810-827, (p. 811).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>2</sup> Black Exodus: The Great Migration from the American South, ed. by Alferdteen Harrison (Jackson & London: University Press of Missouri, 1991)

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>3</sup> Peter Freese, 'The "Journey of Life" in American Fiction', *Hungarian Journal of English and American Studies* (HJEAS), 19, (Fall, 2013), 247-283.

mobility - trains, automobiles, migrants, and movement – to highlight a language common once again to both verbal and visual small-town texts.

Of course, the paradigmatic narratives of American movement and mobility largely orbit the same familiar iconography and reference points: ubiquitous photographs of Los Angeles' Four-Level interchange; perennial artistic representations of the Brooklyn Bridge; the white, masculinist road trips of the Beat generation. As Charles Stephenson deftly puts it, 'the question of geographic mobility has long been a mainstay of American historical writing and American myth-making'. From Gertrude Stein, opining on America's incessant mobility, to Joseph Brinckerhoff Jackson's term 'auto-vernacular', there has been a continued search across the twentieth-century and beyond for a language with which to describe what might be termed America's interstate ideologies. The dominant cultural output of twentieth-century America has been defined by the stories of the nation's restless masses, putting foot to pedal and wheels to blacktop on a 'quest for intimate community;' this is a quest visible from European migration to the frontier, the development of automotive culture in modern America, through to the social displacement of the Great Migration. S

If we are to understand American migration and mobility narratives more clearly, then I argue attention must turn away from these dominant, canonized narratives of urban America and toward a more localised encapsulation of American movement. As such, the small-town narratives of the early-to-mid twentieth-century, across both verbal and visual

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>4</sup> Charles Stephenson, 'Determinants of American Migration: Methods and Models in Mobility Research', *Journal of American Studies*, 9.2 (1975), 189–97, (p. 189).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>5</sup> Robert Owen Gardner, 'The Portable Community: Mobility and Modernization in Bluegrass Festival Life', *Symbolic Interaction*, 27, (Spring 2004), 155-178, (p. 155).

texts, offer nuanced and compelling representations of American migration. Hester's claim that 'the shifting motility of America engenders a fear of being forever lost' rings true when comparing migratory narratives to those of the small town itself. As has been discussed at length across Chapters One and Two, the small town is perpetually narrated as being on the cusp of imminent departure, both from the soil upon which it is built and from the minds of those who think and dream of it. In 'revolt from the village' narratives, in particular, flight and departure are fundamental tenets of small-town existence. Robert Putnam, whose research into American communities has contributed greatly to my understanding of small-town social networks, notes how 'liberation from ossified community bonds is a recurrent and honoured theme in our culture', with 'community bonds' acting as, I argue, synecdoche for the nation's small towns whilst 'liberation' is suffused with imagery of automobiles, trains, and any other means of conveyance *away* from community or, this thesis posits, from small-town America specifically.

It might be said, then, that there is an inversely proportional relationship between the heightened sense of liberation and movement within the American people and a decline in small-town sensibilities. Such an observation is highlighted in, for example, Theodore Dreiser's *A Hoosiers Holiday* (1916), a travelogue undertaken with Franklin Booth which explores America through an early iteration of the road trip and in which, Gary Totten notes, disdain for the small town is born directly from the promises of new American migratory

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>6</sup> Given the multiple interpretations and terms being discussed in this chapter, the term 'migration narratives' and its variants will refer to, unless otherwise stated, narratives concerned with: immigration; vehicular movement; rural-urban migration; and other associated themes concerned with mobility, motility, and movement.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>7</sup> Ibid., p. 826.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>8</sup> Robert D. Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2000), p. 24.

possibilities: '[with] the nationalistic feeling that the new highways engendered, Dreiser and Booth soon identify certain attitudes of small town America that they find distasteful'. As Americans became mobile, and acquired the means to take flight and escape, so too did perceptions of their small-town American roots shift toward that of the sceptic, viewing such insular localities as the 'stagnant holdovers from a temporal past'. 10

This chapter will parse the nature of early twentieth-century American migration through three distinct frameworks. The first of these considers literal mobility – vehicular transport, roads; routes, the mapping of landscape – and its presence in small-town narrative as both a harbinger of freedom and as a threat to so-called American 'innocence'. By considering the proliferation of automobile culture as well as the railroad in rural America, I will take claims like Brian Ireland's – 'the road has always been a significant and persistent feature of American culture' and use small-town verbal and visual texts to interrogate how rural American mobilization is freighted with narratorial anxiety and tension. By again looking at the prose of Austin, Cather, and Anderson, as well as the Depression-era photography of the Farm Security Administration, conclusions will be drawn pertaining to how the road figures in small-town representation as a metonym for encroaching modernity, the loss of adolescence, and as an index of America's stark social and cultural divisions.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>9</sup> Gary Totten, "American Seen": The Road and the Look of American Culture in Dreiser's "A Hoosier Holiday": *American Literary Realism*, 39 (Fall, 2006), 24-47, (p. 29).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>10</sup> Stacey Denton, 'Nostalgia, Class and Rurality in "Empire Falls", *Journal of American Studies*, 45 (August 2011), 503-518, (p. 503).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>11</sup> The term 'innocence' frequently appears, often derogatively, in criticism of small-town America and its texts. Key examples from this study include: Robert Pinksy, *Thousands of Broadways: Dreams and Nightmares of the American Small Town*, (London: University of Chicago Press, 2009); Nathanael T. Booth, *American Small-Town Fiction 1940-1960*); *A Place Called Home: Writings on the Midwestern Small Town* (St Paul, Minnesota: Minnesota Historical Society, 2003).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>12</sup> Brian Ireland, 'Errand into the Wilderness: The Cursed Earth as Apocalyptic Road Narrative, *Journal of American Studies*, 43 (December, 2009), 497-534, (p. 498)

My second framework for approaching American migration includes theories of racial identity, social othering, immigration, and other representations of marginalised figures in small-town literature and visual texts. It is from the 'other side of the tracks' in small-town America, a frequently-cited euphemism for the segregated residences of migrant demographics, that we can hear distinct voices of American migration which better shape and define small-town narrative. In dominant, paradigmatic narratives such as *Our Town* (1938), the white, conservative dominance of small-town America casts a significant shadow over the non-white rural denizens of 'Polish Town'. Conversely, in the works of photographer Ben Shahn, great efforts are made to incorporate Black identity and narratives into the story of small-town America, and to privilege non-dominant stories which counter the white-native construction of traditional small-town narrative. This narratorial tension between elision and presence is a crucial aspect to the formation of small-town narrative as a distinct genre.

Thirdly, this chapter will consider the rural-to-urban exodus narrative that so neatly defines 'revolt from the village' literature and will consider how this is tied to wider theories of American mobility, identity, and, particularly, adolescent maturation. Whether considering George Willard, escaping the melancholy byways of Winesburg to 'paint the dreams of his manhood' in a distant urban centre, or unpacking the equivalent flights of Olivia Lattimore and Thea Kronborg (*A Woman of Genius* and *The Song of the Lark*, respectively) whose prodigious talents take them from their small towns and back again, I will seek to understand how small-town narrative uses this core journey motif in a distinct mode.

Ultimately, I will attest that this tripartite structure to American migration and mobility is most legible in small-town American narrative and is a vital constituent in the

formation of such narrative. Underscoring the interpretation of these three theme variants is an attention to narrative pressure and impetus. By close-reading these themes and analysing the narrative effects that result – from stasis and immobility to linear progression and movement – the shape of small-town narrative and how it is dictated by these core ideals becomes legible in every Main Street and byway, every asphalt road and dirt track.

### Towns, Trains, and Automobiles: Small-town narrative and American mobilization

The link between independence and automobile travel is a keystone in American literature and culture, and it likewise becomes manifest in small-town narrative. The promises of a 'too-huge world vaulting us' forward, as elegized by Jack Kerouac in his opus to American auto-migration, *On The Road* (1957), find equal root in rural literature of the early-to-mid twentieth-century. In *American Myth, American Reality*, Robertson makes the following assertion regarding America's indelible relationship with movement and modernity: 'It is almost impossible for Americans today to conceive of individual freedom, of independence or happiness, without some means of motor-driven transportation – the car primarily, or the motorcycle, truck'. <sup>13</sup> In 'revolt from the village' texts, imagery concerned with movement and modernity, of the automobile and other forms of motive escape, inheres and marks the vagaries of American migration. Ryan Poll, writing on this 'revolt' sub-genre, argues that 'the dominant village as an ideological form [...] must be critiqued and conceptually transgressed', with his final verb choice contributing to this innate sense of movement *away* from the small town; even criticism and analysis of the small town

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>13</sup> Robertson, *American Myth American Reality*, p. 192.

construct must, by necessity, move to and fro, zoom in and out, and consider both micro and macro narratives of American space and identity.<sup>14</sup>

These very ideas factor into the works of two key writers of 'revolt' literature – Mary Austin and Willa Cather – whose novels *A Woman of Genius* (1912) and *The Song of the Lark* (1915) deal with ideas of the American road, automobile culture, and the geography of modern escape denoted by roads and distant urban centres. It is to the latter which these respective protagonists variously flee to and return from, permanently changed from their rural upbringing.

Mary Austin's individualistic protagonist Olivia Lattimore, emblematic of youthful escape and possessing of a prodigious talent befitting the cosmopolis to which she flees, is contextualised through road imagery from the novel's beginning:

When I saw the flakes of black loam dropping from the tires, or the yellow clay of the district caked solidly about the racked hubs, I was stirred by the allurement of travel and adventure, the movement of human enterprise on the fourwent ways of the world.<sup>15</sup>

A dominant narrative of American cultural mythology is presented here, notably the idea that the road and all who use it are somehow predestined for betterment and opportunity. To state so early in the novel that Olivia 'was stirred by the allurement of travel and adventure' is to establish an immediate sense of migration and mobility, of discontent with the parameters of small-town life. Janis P. Stout explores these ideas in her writings on Austin: 'the linkage here of departure and geographic movement with self-fulfilment and

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>14</sup> Poll, p. 39.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>15</sup> Austin, p. 6.

self-definition is one of the first premises of the novel'.<sup>16</sup> The geography of rural and urban America, and more importantly the space between these two poles, is at the heart of small-town revolt literature and Austin limns this particular anxiety – something Kenneth M.

Johnson and Calvin L. Beale call the 'Friction of Distance' – with nuance and depth. Indeed, Austin immediately inaugurates a theme of narrative pressure that we see is common in 'revolt' literature; from the off, her characters are pulled away from the centre of their provincial hometowns toward distant locales. <sup>17</sup>

This nuance of American migration and mobility extends to references to the railroad as well as automobile culture, given such modern infrastructure permanently altered small-town ideology and attitudes toward movement, as Austin pays reference to: 'the new railroad was persuaded to leave Montecito four miles to the right and make its junction with the L and C at Taylorville'.¹8 The history of railroad construction and its ostensible small-town 'gerrymandering', wherein certain towns would be bypassed, often fatally, in favour of towns backed by lobbyists and boosters, is well-documented in rural narrative and Austin marks the significance of this in her rural text. The fact that Taylorville is still depicted in such an unfavourable light by Olivia – 'the bulk of wretchedness everywhere' 19 – in spite of this favourable geographic location is emblematic of Austin's wider deconstruction of dominant, small-town community mythologies. Even when served by the railroad, she seems to suggest, a town like Taylorville is incapable of any kind of movement or progress. Of course, the train and the railroad are charged symbols in

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>16</sup> Janis P. Stout, 'Mary Austin's Feminism: A Reassessment', *Studies in the Novel*, 30 (Spring, 1998), 77-101, (p. 87).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>17</sup> Kenneth M. Johnson and Calvin L. Beale, 'The Rural Rebound', *The Wilson Quarterly*, 22 (Spring, 1998), 16-27, (p. 8).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>18</sup> Austin, p. 45.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>19</sup> Austin, p. 4.

American culture and they serve more significant purposes regarding mobility when presented in such narratives; as Nathanael T. Booth attests in *American Small-Town Fiction* 1940-1960, the railroad emphasises the small town's 'isolation from the rest of the world' just as it fundamentally connects it to that very same world beyond its borders.<sup>20</sup>

Examining the central concern of this thesis – the small town as a narrative form – further through the conceit of mobility and travel, reveals rural fiction's predisposition toward such storytelling modes, as Mark Storey details in his text *Rural Fictions, Urban Realities* (2013) when describing Joseph Kirkland's rural writing: 'a new era of transportation determines the rhythm of scenes [...] in a way that the horse-drawn carriage did not, and so demands a certain narrative realism that necessarily cancels out the residues of previous generic modes'. Storey's arguments, principally organized around the notion that the 'buried' narratives of rural American fiction bear significant traces of modernity, are in consonance with this study's proposition of small-town narrative as a unique generic form. Storey writes of 'previous generic modes' willingly jettisoned in rural fiction, as well as stating that 'a range of genres speak simultaneously within [rural fiction]', and the specific focus on trains, mobility, and the attendant modern practices of industrialization (standardized time, spatial compression) in his first chapter show these 'genres' to be at once familiar and varied to the point of ambiguity.

This thesis argues for a reading of the small town and equivalent 'rural fiction' as a narrative form, with this chapter using the conceit of train travel and mobility to show how the narratives of Austin, Cather, and Anderson, for example, each present an American space which is mediated and framed by competing external narratives and genres. As Storey

<sup>20</sup> Booth, p. 25.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>21</sup> Mark Storey, *Rural Fictions, Urban Realities* (Oxford Scholarship Online: May 2013), p. 35.

writes, 'the train becomes a shared imaginative reference point' and, when we consider the train's ubiquity in small-town narrative, or even its extended metaphorical use in scholarship such as Booth's opening chapter to *American Small-Town Fiction 1940-1960*, titled 'Columbus on the Platform', we can argue for a 'shared' consciousness concerning small-town America and its narratives. Whilst this chapter contends this 'shared' syntax across small-town narrative through the specifics of migration and mobility, 'Talk of the Town' more generally suggests that it is the various, shared 'imaginative reference points', from trains to sidewalks to places of social gossip and community, which shape small-town America into a narrative form.

Common to writers of the 'revolt period', as it might be termed – namely Austin,

Cather, and Anderson – is a dual sense of spatial distance, which materialises through
migratory imagery. There is in both Austin and Cather, for example, the notion of America's
vast geography and rural remoteness, marked in the Midwest and the Plains of their novel
by rolling acres of uniform prairie pocked with the occasional farmhouse. With the former,
there is the sense of opportunity and experience, coded invariably as a modern, urban ideal,
that exists somewhere beyond the grain elevators and cow-barns of the small-town rural.

This duality – between the local and 'out there' – is encapsulated perfectly in the following
declaration by Olivia whilst she is still confined to the small town: 'what I had news of, was a
country of large impulses and satisfying movement. I felt myself strong, had I but known the
way, to set out for it'.<sup>22</sup> The implications here of news arriving at the small town via the
railroad, alongside burgeoning automobile culture, is certainly common in small towns, but
the pairing of this idea with feelings of restriction – 'had I but known the way' – typifies this

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>22</sup> Austin, p. 88.

dual awareness of small-town space and mobility cited previously. Austin's text suggests

American migration is a youthful desire, one denied and ignored by the conservative, older generations of Taylorville.

Olivia's frequent references to roads and routes, linked equally to migration and mobility as they are to the previous chapter's spatial arguments – generate a sense of small-town inertia and a desire for movement, for conveyance from the rural to the urban. Olivia notes, of Taylorville's Main Street, the 'tool and hoe works' which mark the 'points at which it becomes country road and thus blurs indefinitely with the wide landscape'. <sup>23</sup> The road's abrupt stop in the narrative is a less than subtle metaphor for Olivia's confinement, and the physical reminder of this confinement as she navigates the town is perhaps her biggest impetus for her eventual flight. Olivia herself describes movement and migration as 'the conscious movement of us all toward liberty', and so sees the road and all it promises as an unequivocal means of escape. <sup>24</sup>

The narrative impetus that these referents have in *A Woman of Genius* are immediately clear, and they engender Olivia's flight. Hester's provocative claim that 'roads function as paths for countercultural resistance, self-definition, or the expression of nonnormative desire' finds its roots in 'revolt from the village' texts; Olivia's precocious talent and desire to see the world beyond Taylorville is coloured with ideas of counterculture and nonnormative desire.<sup>25</sup> Stout argues that 'that first departure makes possible [Olivia's] later launching of herself toward her "shining destiny", a journey on which she is more fully in control', and likewise addresses Austin's own biography where her

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>23</sup> Ibid., p. 5.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>24</sup> Ibid., p. 237.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>25</sup> Hester, *Journal of American Studies*, p. 814.

marriage to the 'inexpressive' Stafford Wallace came undone following the success of *The Land of Little Rain* (1903), where her 'temporary absences' became permanent and she embraced a desire to move and relocate.<sup>26</sup>

Austin's own creative autonomy was predicated on migration and movement, as Stout further writes: 'she rambled and visited Indian villages, leaving household chores undone, and went away intermittently for stays in Los Angeles or San Francisco in the company of literary figures from whom she was learning her profession'. The parallels between Austin's biography and Olivia's narrative trajectory are clear — an innate mobility drives both of them from the strictures of their conservative, domestic home lives. Austin's text is imbued with notions of mobility and movement, through both specific references to vehicular transport, roads and infrastructure, as well as more conceptual notions of cyclicality and flight. Her conclusion of such movement - 'they're always the same, the places we set out from; but we... we are never the same' 28 — seems a fitting summary of small-town mobility where the landscape may change, seen as a blur glimpsed from the window of a train carriage, but the roots of provincialism hold fast against any kind of movement. It is this narrative cyclicality which recurs across revolt literature.

Written in an uncannily similar register to Austin, the middle text of Willa Cather's so-called prairie trilogy – *The Song of the Lark* – follows an almost identical plot concerning female flight from the small town and offers up similar mobility-orientated language in its narrative. Thea's narrative trajectory of revolt, which sees her leave and return to the

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>26</sup> Janis P. Stout, 'Mary Austin's Feminism: A Reassessment', *Studies in the Novel*, 30 (Spring, 1998), 77-101, (p. 87).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>28</sup> Austin, p. 237.

provincial town of Moonstone, Colorado on several occasions throughout the text, is tied firmly to the ebbs and flows of the railroad and the intrinsic promise of freedom therein: 'She realised that there were a great many trains dashing east and west on the face of the continent that night, and that they all carried young people who meant to have things'.<sup>29</sup> Cather's small-town narratives, epitomised by both this text and *My Antonia* (1918), are often written in a similarly elegiac register and here the notion of American mobility is heavily romanticised. The geographic language of 'dashing east and west' gestures toward a macro-American mobility, seemingly accessible to all but Thea during her night-time epiphany. Once more, the reference to 'young people' helps to prove true the claim, as with Austin, that American mobility was associated with adolescence and was predicated on a generational 'revolt' against the conservative small town. The euphemistic phrase 'who meant to have things' clearly denotes urban prosperity, opportunity, and the other constituent aspects of a fulfilled life that is, in these texts specifically, anchored directly to the city.

Whilst considering Austin and Cather's mutual use of motif, symbolism, and euphemism in their writing on mobility, the narratological theory of Mieke Bal offers a useful mode of thought for this particular framing of spatial narrative, and for considering how such ideas contribute to this thesis' idea of a small-town narrative form: 'The contrasts between locations and the borderlines between them will be viewed as predominant means of highlighting the significance of the fabula or even of determining it'. <sup>30</sup> Bal's reference to the 'fabula', which I apply in this thesis specifically to the small-town setting, suggests that a constant anxiety and tension between 'locations' and 'borderlines' remains vital to any

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>29</sup> Cather, *The Song of Lark*, p. 302.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>30</sup> Bal, p. 133.

given narrative. Through Cather and Austin's constant references to the world beyond their single-platform train stations, this tension or 'friction of distance' as it is likewise termed, dominates their treatment of American mobility. Small-town narrative relies explicitly on notions of mobility and migration; through Bal's narratological framework we see that small-town narratives become defined by the frequent, antithetical references to the urban, and to wider migration.

The small town subsequently becomes a narrative form which is used to directly interrogate tensions between the rural and the urban; it transcends its familiar geography and physicality to become a cipher for American identity crises. This argument is anchored to the physical referents of the small town, of course, which Bal's theory can be similarly used to support, as she writes 'spatial indications are always durative (an extreme case of iteration). After all, a permanent object is always involved'.<sup>31</sup> Paradoxically, the 'permanent object(s)' in the small-town narratives of 'revolt' literature come to be denoted by the train, the automobile, and the infrastructure of mobility that signifies the town's borders and restrictions; they themselves are not permanent. Although offering freedom and mobility, these referents rarely yield such things to small-town denizens save for the text's protagonist and, even then, the promise of return is palpable.

In the first act of *The Song of the Lark* Wunsch, an enigmatic music teacher to Thea, inscribes a book of sheet music with a message that laments a lost pastoral idyll, all underscored by the leitmotif of the train whistle: 'the roundhouse whistle woke him from his reveries. Ah, yes, he was in Moonstone, Colorado'.<sup>32</sup> Cather's 'fabula' is scored by the notes of industrial modernity, the rhythms of the railroad an indefinite reminder of the

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>31</sup> Ibid., pp. 139-40.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>32</sup> Cather, *The Song of the Lark*, p. 139.

town's isolation and, paradoxically perhaps, the world beyond. Such sounds become an aural false promise, tantalizing yet never realized. Whilst the aural imagery of Cather's title suggests a certain pastoralism, her works are frequently punctuated with the unnatural sounds of modernity, steadily increasing in volume until her protagonists answer the call.

In My Antonia, the very same ideas of mobility and, specifically, the promise of urban opportunity, are prevalent. Jim Burden, the protagonist and spiritual antecedent of Thea Kronborg, recalls advice he received regarding small-town flight midway through the novel: 'Lena often said she hoped I would be a travelling man when I grew up. They had a gay life of it, nothing to do but ride about on trains all day and go to theatres when they were in big cities'. 33 Here, importance is placed on the idea of 'travelling' as vocational; Cather's protagonists, across her small-town 'prairie texts', are not simply intelligent and socially conscious but also possess an innate desire for mobility, so much so that their entire narrative arcs are dictated by anticipating said movement in an environment that resists precisely that. It is not until Jim Burden leaves the homestead for the city that he truly understands 'the loneliness of the farm-boy at evening'; likewise Thea Kronborg does not come to consider Moonstone 'her own land' until she returns, years later, from urban America with a renewed perspective.<sup>34</sup> As such, this linkage between trains and urban centres where 'theatres' and presumably other such cultural amenities reside is a vital aspect of My Antonia's narrative, just as it is with The Song of the Lark. Cather's works of rural portraiture are indebted to the contrast between micro and macro-America (euphemistically dichotomized here as rural and urban), and questions of American mobility come to the fore of her narratives.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>33</sup> Cather, *My Antonia*, p. 106.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>34</sup> Cather, *The Song of the Lark*, p. 304.

The mutual tension between mobility and stasis in both Austin and Cather's small-town revolt texts is part of a wider conversation concerning the American West's connotations with movement, of both people and land. Gioia Woods' writing on Sarah Winnemucca and the Paiutes, a Numic tribe from America's Great Basin region, addresses the concomitant ideas of frontier and movement: 'migration and rootedness in the American West are related conditions – they coexist and together comprise what it means to have and develop a sense of place'. <sup>35</sup> This claim, useful in unpacking the dual narratives of 'migration' and 'rootedness' keenly felt by both Thea and Olivia, offers further provocation when considering the wider narratorial properties of small-town literature constructed in this mode. This 'sense of place', developed through an attention to movement and mobility is, as Chapter Two of this thesis attests, a vital aspect to small-town narrative more generally.

Austin and Cather use the American West's regional idiosyncrasies – the vastness of the Great Plains, the aridity of the South-West, and the like – to promote a sense of narrative movement born from isolation. Woods continues: 'the West is defined by such migration, and Westerners, particularly those pushed aside by Manifest Destiny, are people whose subjectivity or sense of self is made up by the conditions of migration, people whose sense of self is largely informed by movement through space'. <sup>36</sup> Cather and Austin, even with their work occupying the fringe territories of the 'frontier' and the prairies of the Great Plains, describe protagonists whose 'subjectivity' is clearly delineated by their relationship to the world both immediate and distant, and their subsequent movement to and from the

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>35</sup> Gioia Woods, 'Sarah Winnemucca: Multiple places, multiple selves', in *Moving Stories: Migration* and the American West 1850-2000, ed. by Scott E. Casper and Lucinda M. Long, (Reno: Nevada Humanities Committee, 2001), p. 52.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>36</sup> Ibid., p. 51.

town and the city. 'Movement though space' is a fundamental aspect of small-town narrative, both verbal and visual; whether it is the porch space, the town's Main Street, or the roads that lead to some inevitable urban terminus, spatial movement of both a macro and micro variety occurs.

Writing a few years after Austin and Cather, Sherwood Anderson is a writer to whom movement and migration, the principal factors of this so-called 'revolt' coterie, were likewise narratively significant. *Winesburg, Ohio*, as has already been detailed in this thesis, is a short story cycle predicated on the dual ideas of small-town stagnation and youthful mobility, and the 'too-huge' world beyond the Midwestern backwater ultimately proves, for the cycle's central lynchpin George Willard, too great a lure. This dichotomy between small-town fixity and the restlessness of the young is characteristic of 'revolt from the village' writing. Anderson uses notions of American modernity and mobilization to achieve a tension between stasis and movement in his text, the results of which produce a familiar lamentation of rural isolation and the elusive promises of modernity.

Throughout the cycle of *Winesburg, Ohio,* the spectres of freedom offered by transport, as well as the feared, unknown destinations where Winesburg's spare, dusty roads eventually terminate, make themselves known. Aurally, Winesburg is a town haunted by the promise of escape, and of encroaching modernity. From the audible whistle of a steam train passing through the lonesome stretches of the Midwest - 'somewhere in the distance [...] there was a prolonged blast from the whistle of a passenger engine' – to the 'shrill cries of millions of new voices' brought into rural America enabled by the 'coming of the automobiles,' Winesburg, for all its stunted quietude, is alive with the sounds of

migration, mobility, and change. <sup>37</sup> As its lonely denizens stalk its streets, absent in all but body, they are forever reminded of a world beyond: 'A revolution has in fact taken place. The coming of industrialism, attended by all the roar and rattle of affairs, has worked a tremendous change in the lives and in the habits of thought of our people of Mid-America'. <sup>38</sup> The cacophony associated with mobility and modernity, here discussed in an uncertain, perhaps lamenting tone, by the omniscient, third-person narrator is, perhaps, a loose cipher for Anderson and his own misgivings about such industrial change.

Anderson's later publication of the elegiac, *dominant*, prose-work *Home Town* attests to these misgivings when he writes: 'do you remember when you, now for so long a city man, your hair graying, were a small town boy and what the railroad meant to you?'<sup>39</sup> It's undeniable that Anderson derives a great sense of narrative potency from this plaintive tone when discussing rural America and modernity; it is the imagery of the road, of the automobile, and of the train that colour *Winesburg*, *Ohio*'s lamentations and *Home Town*'s nostalgic reminiscence, both. As William L. Phillips notes, it is the very streets and roads of Anderson's town, as well as the promise of busier streets and longer roads abroad, that construct the narrative of *Winesburg*, *Ohio*: 'as the streets led to each other, and all branched from Main Street, so one scrap of action led to another'.<sup>40</sup> Here, there is a sense that the narrative of Anderson's cycle is tied directly to these routes and roads that dominate its physical and cultural geography — as discussed in Chapter Two. His characters seem to forever contend with the possibility of escape versus the fixed nature of their own banal routine, reminded, at every literal turn, of the world beyond Winesburg. Winesburg,

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>37</sup> Anderson, Winesburg, Ohio, p. 50.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>38</sup> Ibid., p. 20.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>39</sup> Sherwood Anderson, *Home Town*, (New York: Paul P. Appel, 1975), p. 8.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>40</sup> William L. Phillips, 'How Sherwood Anderson Wrote Winesburg, Ohio,' *American Literature*, 23 (March, 1951) 7-30, (p. 8).

then, loses all sense of discrete identity and becomes instead a cipher, a narrative form, in which the anxieties of stasis and movement deconstruct the identities of its inhabitants.

One of the earliest stories in Anderson's cycle, 'Hands', effectively communicates the rural isolation and loneliness at the heart of his text through the character of Wing Biddlebaum. Biddlebaum's isolated, morally ambiguous existence on the outskirts of Winesburg is permeated by feelings of dread, anxiety and unease which, among other imagery, Anderson teases out through the symbolism of the road: 'after the wagon containing the berry pickers had passed, he went across the field through the tall mustard weeds and climbing a rail fence peered anxiously along the road to the town'. 41 Here, affirmations like Diarmuid Hester's that exalt the road as a sacrosanct, vital aspect to the American condition come undone in the context of rural, small-town narrative. Biddlebaum's anxiety of the road, of both travelling away from the town himself and of its potential to bring outsiders into the town's limits, mark a curious intersection of migration anxieties with scepticism of modernity; he fears himself being seen, and yet wishes to look upon the small town of which he is a pariah from the unseen vantage of the fence. Such are the worrisome characters in this cycle that even a small dirt road, trailing from farm to Main Street over a few hundred metres, is cause for alarm; the anxieties of urban centres and the coming of the automobile is a secondary concern only accessible to those, like George, who entertain any thoughts of flight. For the other outsiders, it is a portentous symbol of change, even danger.

The isolation of 'grotesques' such as Wing Biddlebaum, an idiosyncratic recluse and prototypical of the stock figure seen elsewhere in rural literature, perhaps most famously

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>41</sup> Anderson, *Winesburg, Ohio*, p. 3.

through Boo Radley in Harper Lee's similar small-town text *To Kill a Mockingbird* (1960), is interestingly juxtaposed with the related social freedoms of Tom Little, the town's beloved train conductor. Anderson describes Tom as a figure of inherent belonging, one who represents a confluence between rural community and urban modernity: 'he knows the people in the towns along his railroad better than a city man knows the people who live in his apartment building'. <sup>42</sup> Here, the city's anonymity is pitted against the dominant small-town narrative of community and belonging; this rare moment of hope in Anderson's text is of course undermined by the rest of the cycle, which is built on the very hypocrisies that counter-narratives of small-town America routinely take to task.

Whether he is describing the violent recluse Enoch Robinson, who moves to New York and descends into social and mental degradation, or his hopeful small-town youth George Willard who seems bound for urban prosperity however unlikely it seems, Anderson's text fundamentally contradicts itself on whether migration and mobility can be inherently good. This ambiguity forms the greatest tension at the heart of his cycle and marks *Winesburg, Ohio* as a small-town text that narrates and negotiates American mobility in a nuanced, though inconclusive way. Anderson's text becomes a record of rural American identities caught between flight and fixity, and is at once intensely specific in its geography and sense of place – as Chapter Two attests – as well as a loose narrative form where American rurality is explored broadly through several conceits: migration, orality, spatiality, and everyday ritual. It is, then, a perfect example of small-town narrative as this thesis defines such a generic model.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>42</sup> Ibid., p. 89.

Probing these intersecting readings further, we see how Anderson's invocation of mobility, as defined by this chapter, is vital to his often funereal rendering of small-town America. Jennifer J. Smith, whose writing on American short story cycles compares Anderson to more contemporary, small-town texts, notes that 'in Anderson's cycle, the railroad metonymically stands in for how modernity transformed the lives of small-town residents. The railroad signifies the rise of gesellschaft and the collapse of a town's autonomy'. And There is much to unpack here with regards to small-town narrative and its reliance on mobility in the crafting of such narrative; the term 'gesellschaft', defined in opposition to 'gemeinschaft' and denoting 'a social relationship between individuals based on duty to society or to an organization', is particularly telling. Dominant small-town narratives, from the 19<sup>th</sup> century writers mentioned in previous chapters (Mary Wilkins Freeman, Sarah Orne Jewett, et al) to the Depression-era revivalism of Thornton Wilder, all place particular stock in the themes of 'gemeinschaft' and the attending kinship and community felt most fluently in small-town communities.

As such, Smith's argument that the rise of gesellschaft, the urban, modern retort to the rural provincialism of gemeinschaft, is directly proportional to the onset of the railroad and automobile culture makes a fundamental claim about small town narrative, one echoed by Anderson's own characters who remark that a 'revolution has taken place'. In-text, this revolution is destructive and irresistible, save only for the youthful George Willard who embraces the 'revolution' of mobility by embarking on a rural exodus. Conversely, the subtext of *Winesburg, Ohio* co-opts this revolution into a wider revolt against the small

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>43</sup> Smith, *The American Short Story Cycle*, p. 55.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>44</sup> 'Gesellschaft', *Oxford English Dictionary*, <a href="https://www-oed-com.ezproxyd.bham.ac.uk/view/Entry/77413#eid3313671">https://www-oed-com.ezproxyd.bham.ac.uk/view/Entry/77413#eid3313671</a>, [Date accessed: February 2020].

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>45</sup> Anderson, *Winesburg, Ohio*, p. 20.

town and continues the lineage of Austin, Cather, and Anderson's forebear Edgar Lee

Masters by ensuring questions of (anti) mobility remain at the heart of small-town narrative.

Across these verbal texts, paradigmatic of small-town narrative according to this thesis, the notion of mobility – from automobile to the railroad – enjoys a fundamentally complex representation. The apparently simple mantra of American movement in its populist, colloquial form, namely that 'movement is natural and unproblematic and a central and uncontested part of American identity', is shown in Austin, Cather, and Anderson's work specifically to be anything but. 46 Instead, we are presented with narratives that are built on a bedrock of tension toward encroaching modernity and mobilization, invariably embraced by the youth and mourned by the mature. Max Lerner's lengthy writings and dissections of American culture alight, in his text America as a Civilization, upon the claim that the 'small town was undercut by the big changes in American life' – two of these changes he identifies as 'the auto and super-highway'. 47 Whilst Lerner might be writing in a far more established period of American mobility, specifically one year after Eisenhower's National System of Interstate and Defense Highways was implemented, his diagnosis of small-town change in relation to American mobility certainly extends to the 'revolt' period. Austin, Cather, and Anderson each depict two worlds, the micro and macro, and the infrastructure that supports the division between the two.

For these authors, narratives of small-town unrest and division, of psychological disquiet and social poverty, are mapped by American mobility. For some, as with George Willard, it is an attainable mobility which concludes the narrative with some semblance of

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>46</sup> Susan J. Matt, *Homesickness* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), p. 4.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>47</sup> Max Lerner, *America as a Civilization: Life and Thought in the United States* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1957), p. 149.

hope. For others, as with Olivia Lattimore and Thea Kronborg, achieving mobility is a Pyrrhic victory. They escape on the 'fourwent ways of the world' but find themselves returning, physically and emotionally, to the small towns they fled from. Caught in this cyclical loop of mobility, their narratives are undercut with a certain defeat. Lerner writes that 'the currents of American energy moved around and beyond the small towns, leaving them isolated, demoralised, with their young people leaving them behind like abandoned ghost towns,' and in these texts we see these very ghosts bound and restless in equal measure, finding not liberty on the American road but a temporary diversion.<sup>48</sup>

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>48</sup> Ibid., p. 149.

## 'The Other Side of the Tracks': Immigration and rural marginality in small-town America

Small-town texts of both dominant and counter narrative traditions are invariably concerned with ideas of immigration, 'othering' and other forms of marginal existence within localised, small-town America. In Cather's work, largely comprised of European immigrants to whom the American frontier is a *tabula rasa*, nostalgia for one's homeland permeates her narratives of harsh, agricultural life. In dominant nostalgic texts like *Our Town*, the issues of race are frequently elided and undermined in favour of conservative representation of American community. Elsewhere, in texts like Edgar Lee Masters' *Spoon River Anthology* and Anderson's *Winesburg, Ohio*, loners and outsiders mark the small town's virulent exclusivity. Likewise, in visual representations of the small town there is an extended interest in narratives of racial othering, anchored both to local space and geography as well notions of wider American migratory ideals. Ben Shahn's series of photographs, aptly titled 'The Other Side of the Tracks', in which he depicts African-American life in London, Ohio, presents an important focus on the lineage of small-town narratives that privileges identities elsewhere erased.

Whilst Richard O. Davies makes the oxymoronic claim that small towns 'provided an inclusive environment in which each resident – as long as he or she conformed to accepted patterns of thought and behaviour – was considered to be part of an extended family', we soon learn that this is simply not the case for those already marginalised or outcast, frequently comprising the town's non-white inhabitants.<sup>49</sup> The following section of this chapter will now consider how these elements concerning migration and some of its

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>49</sup> Davies, p. 46.

permutations, from spatial segregation to racial othering and marginalisation, are represented and variously narrated across small-town verbal and visual materials.

'In every American town, as in our cities, there is a section beyond the railroad tracks where the poor live,' writes Sherwood Anderson in the previously cited rural paean *Home Town*, written twenty one years after the far more critical *Winesburg*, *Ohio*. <sup>50</sup> Operating within the tradition of Depression-era nostalgia for the small town that enjoyed a reprise during the 30s and 40s, Anderson here presents one of rural America's most overt signifiers of migratory conservatism. The so-called 'other side of the tracks' in small-town America is a powerful, ubiquitous symbol of racial elision and social othering which is often underplayed in dominant narratives of small-town life and very much focalised in counter, subversive narratives. In fact, the notion and terminology recurs across small-town scholarship as a means of metonymically negotiating issues of race and othering in rural spaces, to which Richard O. Davies attests: 'the poor tended to live on the outskirts of town, sometimes segregated 'shantytown' [sic], often situated across a river or on "the other side of the tracks." '51

The spatial determinism of the railroad when considered in this social context, particularly in small-town America, is an evergreen aspect of American cultural geography. Richard Lingeman's narrative study of small-town America concludes with a similar appraisal of railroad-based segregation: 'the comfortable life-style of the upper and middle-class people set the tone; the threats or contradictions to that life were still segregated off some place – across the tracks, in Polish Town (Or Italian Town, or N-Town, or Irish town) where

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>50</sup> Sherwood Anderson, *Home Town*, p. 72.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>51</sup> Davies p. 54.

the new immigrants lived'. <sup>52</sup> For Lingeman, who considers the regional small town as it multiplies and adapts across American history – from the New England idyll to the Western boomtown – the symbolism of 'shacktown' was a provocative symbol of wider anxieties concerning race and cultural assimilation. He writes that 'shacktown was the bottom of the head, the end of the line; its inhabitants were nonpersons, the invisible poor, excluded from the community,' with his choice adjectives shedding particular light on how vital migration and its subversions are to the construction of small-town narrative. Whilst Lingeman offers a narrative *history* of small-town America, this thesis contends that the small town itself can be construed as a narrative form; both agree, however, that the railroad and its attendant connotations of migration and race are vital to both macro and micro small-town narratives.

From a narrative perspective, the 'other side of the tracks' significantly highlights the various non-linear, even circular patterns of small-town life in 'revolt', counter texts. The railroad, as an infrastructural symbol, is a *de jure* marker of progress and narrative linearity, ultimately realized by the narrative minority discussed in this thesis (George Willard, Olivia Lattimore, et al.). As a demarcation of separateness, however, it becomes a *de facto* symbol of small-town narrative stasis for the narrative majority. The stories of small-town America's marginalized, segregated, and othered inhabitants do not occur in parallel with the railroad, experiencing the change and progression it denotes, but instead exist perpendicular to it in communities that are divided and isolated. The railroad's bifurcation of small-town communities remains at the fore of counter small-town narrative, and exists as a disquieting, though actively downplayed, characteristic of rural life in dominant small-town texts.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>52</sup> Lingeman, p. 259, censorship added.

Jane Jacobs similarly discusses the railroad as an index of segregation, conceding that it is especially discernible in small towns rather than her urban subjects: 'railroad tracks are the classic examples of borders, so much so that they came to stand, long ago, for social borders too [...] 'the other side of the tracks' – a connotation, incidentally, associated with small towns rather than with big cities'. <sup>53</sup> The railroad then, as a constituent symbol of small-town narrative, does not exist with a singular meaning of movement and liberty, as discussed in the previous section. It is instead a highly malleable index of the industrial changes wrought by modernity and, to mature and conservative small-town inhabitants, a signifier of antagonistic social change. This antagonism naturally manifests itself in separate communities beyond the railroad itself, which share none of the progress symbolised by the railroad yet remain equally affronting to conservative demographics.

Further examination of the railroad as a socially divisive element, pertaining in particular to racial division, reveals its ubiquity in small-town verbal and visual texts. In one passage of *The Song of the Lark*, Cather's attention to geography and distance is combined with a description of Thea negotiating her setting, finally alighting upon an image of rural segregation and the railroad:

She followed the sidewalk to the depot at the south end of the town; then took the road east to the little group of adobe houses where the Mexicans lived, then dropped into a deep ravine; a dry sand creek, across which the railroad track ran on a trestle.<sup>54</sup>

<sup>53</sup> Jacobs, p. 271,

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>54</sup> Cather, *The Song of the Lark*, p. 38.

'Mexican Town', as it is known throughout the novel, is emblematic of a common, pernicious aspect of small-town American life and becomes, in name, indicative of a familiar social and racial construct to readers. Lee Shai Weissbach, writing on Jewish histories of small-town America, notes a similar ethnic segregation recurrent in the social documents of his own research case-studies: 'small-town Jews tended to cluster in similar professions and to live and work in close proximity to each other'. 55 It is common, in community narratives of this kind, to have racially separate micro-communities that are not integrated into the community proper. The optics of small-town America are defined by these visible divisions, and it is reflected most prominently in counter narratives,

Elsewhere, in the dominant, quasi-utopian small-town narrative of Thornton

Wilder's *Our Town*, a cursory reference to 'Polish Town [...] across the tracks' during the
play's opening scene-setting quickly dismisses the presence of an ostensibly non-conforming
migrant community. <sup>56</sup> As such, Cather's description is both commonplace as well as
essential to the construction of her complex migratory narrative; Moonstone becomes

America writ small, complete with the vices and prejudices that exist beyond its vast acres.

Likewise, the homogeneity of these cited examples, from a range of texts separated by
decades, shows the potential for small towns to assume a common narrative form with a
mutual syntax. That said, there is regional specificity bound up within this commonality; the
'little group of adobe houses' Cather describes, othered from the more typical clapboard
prairie architecture of Moonstone, seem quintessentially *of* the frontier. Pitted against a
'dry, sandy creek' and residing in the shadow of railroad 'trestle', the community becomes

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>55</sup> Lee Shai Weissbach, 'Community and Subcommunity in Small-Town America, 1880-1950, *Jewish History*, 15 (2001), 107-118, (p. 110).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>56</sup> Wilder, p. 22.

an almost romanticised image of small-town separation, of an outpost in the American West. As such, it simultaneously appears to subvert small-town traditions of white hegemony, whilst undoubtedly endorsing, through its overtly familiar descriptions, wider frontier myths in American culture. This duality is a befitting description for Cather's small-town narrative more generally, which finds itself microcosmically represented in 'Mexican Town'.

Thea's frequent visits to 'Mexican Town', and her unique, uninhibited relationship with the non-white community of Moonstone, is a powerful narrative statement of inclusivity which works against dominant small-town myths. With that said, Cather's narrative curiously adopts a language which can likewise *other*; she describes the residents of 'Mexican Town' early on as 'humbler citizens [...] who voted but did not run for office'.<sup>57</sup> The language here is rarely derogatory, in fact the depiction of 'Mexican Town' is vital to Thea's perceived growth, but it unquestionably *others* the residents of 'Mexican Town' in Cather's narratives. The existence of such a community and its role in better defining Cather's white protagonist, also, does provoke questions of sincerity toward Moonstone's *non-white* inhabitants. As such, it is plausible that we are to read Cather's narratives as hybrid texts with regards to American migration and mobility; she is attentive to how both immigrant experience and ostensibly 'native', white hegemony coexist in these communities, though the effect that results from the intersection of the two is not always legible.

Cather's dual treatment of both dominant and subversive small-town migratory narratives is fundamental in the construction of her wider commentaries on American

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>57</sup> Cather, *The Song of the Lark*, p. 51.

culture. Channell Hilfer further notes that 'the real energy of [Cather's] novel is in her rejection of the official culture of the town', as well as marking 'the contrast of immigrant vigour with native sterility and conformity'. <sup>58</sup> Migration in Cather's novels manifests through various modalities, from physical descriptions of the railroad to the instances of social segregation lying in its shadow, but what remains fixed in her work is a narrative attentiveness to how the actions of her characters, as well as the localised worlds they inhabit, are dictated by these competing ideologies. The 'official culture' that Cather rejects is synonymous with this thesis' formulation of dominant small-town narrative; Cather's complex bridging of these two small-town narrative poles results in nuanced texts which ultimately favour the 'revolt' writings of her contemporaries and seek to destabilise conservative tradition.

Eurther to Cather's treatment of othering, division, and small-town migratory exclusions is the pervasive notion of nostalgia, which becomes a compelling narrative device through which Cather explores small-town American experience as well as patterns of migration. To better understand how nostalgia informs these small-town narratives, Susan J. Matt's influential study *Homesickness* (2011) provides a critical foundation: 'Americans move through a culture of memory and connection and try to re-create what they have left behind. Although it has been repressed in speech and overt action, homesickness makes its appearance in daily rituals, in ways that often go unnoticed precisely because they are so commonplace'. <sup>59</sup> Matt's assertions here are specifically attributed to America as a nation, one, we are told by R.W.B Lewis, to whom 'loneliness' is the 'central theme' of their

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>58</sup> Hilfer, p. 95; Ibid., p. 97.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>59</sup> Susan J. Matt, *Homesickness* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), p. 7.

literature. <sup>60</sup> Yet the notions of 'daily ritual' and the 'commonplace' can be interpreted more broadly to ideas of the local and intimate in the context of this study, as is explored in detail in the following chapter. The small town environment, as *the* principal symbol of American local intimacy according to this thesis, is thus a place where homesickness is keenly dictated – there is a homesickness for the small town on the part of those leaving it; there is a homesickness for the 'old country', as with Cather's immigrant characters; so too is there a homesickness for an older, idyllic small town past in dominant narratives that euphemistically betrays a desire to return to conservative, insular traditions.

Pinning this notion of small-town migration down more acutely, and tying such migration to nostalgia, is the work of Svetlana Boym on nostalgia in all its manifestations. Coining the highly useful term 'diasporic intimacy', Boym writes of a nostalgia which is 'rooted in the suspicion of a single home, in shared longing without belonging [...] diasporic intimacy is haunted by the images of home and homeland, yet it also discloses some of the furtive pleasures of exile'. <sup>61</sup> Small-town diaspora, and notions of migration inhere in Cather's works, particularly *My Antonia*, in which the transplanted Shimerdas, the novel's central Bohemian immigrant family, regularly struggle to reconcile their new wilderness home versus the 'old country' they left behind. Concerning the suicide of the titular character's father, Jim Burden notes how he 'knew it was homesickness that had killed Mr. Shimerda, and I wondered whether his released spirit would not eventually find its way back to his own country'. <sup>62</sup> Boym's criticism on nostalgia becomes further useful here in exploring how counter small-town American narratives, in particular, seem to

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>60</sup> R.W.B Lewis, *The American Adam: Innocence, Tragedy, and Tradition in the Nineteenth Century* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1966), p. 49.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>61</sup> Svetlana Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia* (Basic Books, 2001), pp. 252-253.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>62</sup> Willa Cather, *My Antonia*, p. 116.

emphasise this sense of estrangement and, as opposed to dominant narratives, a loss of community: 'when we start speaking of home and homeland, we experience the first failure of homecoming. How does one communicate the pain of loss in a foreign language?' The nature of migration in American history, recorded poignantly in Cather's texts, is one defined by displaced peoples, caught between movement and stasis, often alighting in rural frontier spaces where their othered nature is pronounced. Her characters are in constant search of a 'homecoming' but never find it, and their movement from the rural to the urban is a vital aspect of this failed quest. Cather's work is tinged with nostalgia in its most fundamental form – perceiving the loss of home – and explores this ubiquitous emotion through the highly specific narrative of small-town America.

In keeping with the interdisciplinary approach to small-town narrative presented by this thesis, it is possible to trace these very same concerns with racial othering, elision, and geographic segregation in *visual* narratives of small-town America. Ben Shahn's photographic work, previously considered through the context of oral culture in Chapter One, marks a deliberate artistic attempt to privilege the counter, subversive small-town narratives epitomised by rural African Americans. His series 'The Other Side of the Tracks', conducted in London, Ohio in 1938, provides a moving narrative account of social identity outside of small-town hegemony and as a result shows the plurality of small-town narrative in all its mediums.

In one photograph, part of the 'Saturday afternoon in London, Ohio' series, Shahn depicts a group of Black men and women standing outside a shabby, clapboard café denoted by a peeling wall-mounted sign above them in the image. Visible to the extreme

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>63</sup> Boym. p. 251.

left of the frame, half cropped by Shahn's viewfinder, are ranks of parked automobiles which, for all their connotations of modernity and mobility, stand in noticeable contrast to the men, women and their presumed hangout. In other photographs, like fig. 14 from the same series, Shahn shows two young children walking a lone stretch of railroad, its distance marked via the slowly receding telegraph poles, and seems to foreground here, without direct subject reference to non-white small-town inhabitants, the nature of their existence in the town as dictated by the railroad. To Shahn, photographing a simple stretch of track in this manner is not simply a recording of America's changing mobile infrastructure but also a reminder of the social identities dictated by its presence; to the right of the image the well-built brick buildings of London's Main Street loom over the railroad ties, whilst to the left a suggestion of poorly constructed shacks and a handmade sign imply a racialised poverty. The dominant and counter symbols of small-town American community are once again bifurcated by the railroad.

These scenes appear inflected with Shahn's own itinerant approach to photography, which he adopted for portions of his career. Timothy Egan elaborates: 'he drove rutted country lanes in Louisiana, Mississippi, Arkansas, and Alabama, recording the African-American faces that seldom appeared in the town squares [...] he went into churches, to the steps of country courthouses'. Even when these 'faces' are absent from his works, the overall aesthetic of rural poverty and a certain affectless mode of living becomes known — many are the portraits where people sit in doorways or lean against storefronts. F. Jack Hurley in his important narrative history of Roy Stryker, the FSA, and its select photographers including Shahn, attests to the latter's inclination toward movement through

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>64</sup> Timothy Egan, *The Photographs of Ben Shahn* (Washington D.C: Giles, 2008), p. xii.

America's rural landscape: 'Very shortly after joining the agency he was sent out into the field on an extended tour of the South and Southwest. For three months, Shahn drove about the country absorbing as much as he could'. 65

Shahn's ability, as Hurley terms it, to capture 'the torture in the body of a farm wife' or 'the terror in the eyes of a drought-scarred child' is fundamentally built upon a narrative impetus to document and instruct wider America on the migratory collapse occurring in its small communities. Hurley's continued writing supports this claim, and concretizes my own assertions that Shahn's small-town, rural scenes are inherently narrativized: '[Shan] used the term [propaganda] in a neutral sense, connoting a visual teaching device. He accepted and approved the teaching role that pictures were being asked to play in the Resettlement Administration'.66 This idea of a 'visual teaching device', that Shahn's small-town scenes of migrant workers, automobile culture, and general poverty might be construed to have an instructive purpose, is not just a logical conclusion naturally drawn from a project like the FSA but is also an indication of a contrived, narrative approach by Shahn. Shahn's portraits and street scenes were not taken passively but rather with a direct artistic intention, a contrast, perhaps, to intensely prolific FSA photographers like Carl Mydans whose output was so great that it is not unfair to question how narratively discriminating his scenes and portraits were when compared to Shahn.

In fact, Hurley goes as far to describe these latter kinds of FSA photographs as 'dull, routine progress pictures', marking a clear distinction in narrative style and overall aesthetic amongst the corpus.<sup>67</sup> To say that Shahn viewed the small town as a narrative form it its

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>65</sup> F. Jack Hurley, 'Chapter 3: Groping for Directions', in *Portrait of a Decade: Roy Stryker and the* Development of Documentary Photography in the Thirties (Baton Rouge: Louise State University Press, 1972), pp. 49-50.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>66</sup> Ibid., p. 50.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>67</sup> Ibid., p. 62.

own right is perhaps a conjectural step too far, but when considering his work as a whole, and studying series like 'The Other Side of the Tracks', a narrative form *is* revealed, shaped by Shahn's attention to the same referents and idiosyncrasies that define small-town literature and visual art more broadly. Underscoring all of this is Shahn's fixation on mobility, migration, and small-town movement and stasis. His narratives focus on the marginalized or segregated and on their movement, or lack thereof, within the rural space.

Shahn's subtle narrativization of small-town community, through attention to social stagnancy and encroaching modernity, is limned in a photograph like fig. 15 which details three Black women walking a deserted part of London, Ohio. The rigid and set movement of modernity, what Austin euphemised as the 'fourwent ways of the world', is described in the photograph's many straight lines. The sidewalk, unkept and cracked, stretches into the middle distance of the photograph; to its left, the road carries on unobstructed in parallel. The vertical plane of the image is neatly divided by a wooden telegraph pole, which is partially intersected by a hanging street-sign, and again dictates the orthogonal nature of Shahn's rural scene. Of course, the primary focus of the image is the three women, caught mid-turn, as they move away down a side street. In another image (fig. 16), presumably taken prior to fig. 15, the three women are shown walking in the middle of the scene's deserted road, dominated now by the industrial unit partially shown in fig. 19. Part of an automobile is seen as well as other various farming apparatus which represent a dormant mobility, a temporary stasis punctuating this afternoon scene of apparent small-town languor. Shahn's depiction of the small town here, from the flanking industry to the unkempt sidewalk and peeling signage, is one of marked difference from the bustling Main Streets glimpsed elsewhere in his oeuvre, both within Ohio and elsewhere. The dominant narrative of sociability is replaced with one of stagnancy, marked by the indices of

modernity and mobility which rest insidiously along sidewalks and in front of farming units, uncannily at rest.

What Shahn's images seem to point to most notably in the context of small-town narrative and migration is what Robert L. Dorman calls the 'credo of decentralisation' upon which American 'movement' is founded. 68 Summarising America's independent movement, typified by Westward expansion and finding renewed representation through modernity, Dorman's reference to decentralisation is critically important when used in the context of a space like London, Ohio, as photographed by Shahn. The small town, as has been posited throughout this thesis, holds ideological significance in American culture, and through its dominant narratives is presented as precisely the antithesis to a decentralised space; it is as central an American space as can possibly be. As such, Shahn's visual narrative of London, Ohio via his 'Other Side of the Tracks' framing calls into question how such space - this ostensible centralised hub of American identity - *can* be decentralised concomitantly with American mobility and migration.

In figs. 15 and 16, a simple portrait of three African American women moving through a space disrupted by the machinery of American migration, whilst they themselves are situated in a tradition of wider American movement and racial othering, speaks loudly on the narrative potential for American migration within the small-town environment. These scenes are eerily abject and affectless, narrating small-town othering and division through a specific case-study that instead transforms London, Ohio into a homogenous place, a small-town blueprint that bears remarkable resemblance to other towns, other scenes. They decentralise the notion of small-town community and instead present the

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>68</sup> Robert L. Dorman, *Revolt of the Provinces: The Regionalist Movement in America, 1920-1940* (University of North Carolina Press, 1993), p. 38.

small town *as* narrative form; these are scenes filled with concrete signifiers of American community and yet are informed by a sense of abstract, rural space.

Whilst Shahn's artistic eye is decidedly bound to the 'individual countenance', he likewise presents images which encapsulate the spirit of American migration and movement as a modern, objective force. In the same series, Shahn photographs London's Main Street lined with parked automobiles whilst capturing one in motion directly before him. The stores, with their awnings and bold painted signs, typify the Main Street image discussed at length in Chapter Two, and mark Shahn's works as quintessentially small-town. Given Shahn's preference for portraits, allowing the faces of rural America to tell their unseen stories, it is his street scenes that gesture more overtly to modernization. They seem to capture, perhaps more acutely than his portraits, what Laura Katzman describes as 'the conflict between traditional values and modernity in small-town America'. 69 The automobile, as perfect a metonym for a rapidly urbanising America as was available in the 1930s, denotes in Shahn's small-town scenes an irrevocable change, and an exclusive one at that. In the earlier described photographs, the three African American women walk a deserted road with only two parked automobiles visible across both images. Theirs is a small town defined by a narrative of stasis and inertia; they are denied the promise of the roads and the sidewalks extending beyond them indefinitely and have no means to navigate such spaces. In the built-up commercial districts like Main Street, where white America is represented most keenly, the narrative of American migration, mobility and racial elision becomes clear. Shahn depicts a rural space that will allow the prosperous, and

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>69</sup> Laura Katzman, 'Ben Shahn and the Archive', *Archives of American Art Journal*, 54 (Summer, 2015), 4-33, (p. 4).

predominantly white, to mobilize both literally and socially, whilst the othered and elided are left on front stoops, down side streets, and across the tracks.

Elsewhere in Shahn's London photographs are similar narratives which combine mobility, migration, and, specifically, the centering of African American experience. In another photograph, two mature African American men sit on the stoop of a derelict, boarded-up frontage. Both are dressed in coveralls, a common theme in Shahn's photography given his focus on workers, largely agricultural, and their environments. One of the men sits reading from a large broadsheet whilst the other keeps a watchful eye on Shahn. The distance between the two subjects is noticeable, especially when compared to scenes such as 'Smithland Businessmen' consulted in Chapter One which details two affluent, white men conversing in close proximity. The degradation of the anonymous building behind them stands in stark contrast to the Main Street buildings visible elsewhere and marks the clear social and economic disparity native to small-town America. Shahn appeals perhaps to what John T. Flanagan calls the 'artistic poverty of the small town,' but he does not do so with pretension or artifice. The racial othering so inherent to small-town narratives, and forever linked to wider notions of American movement, seems to demand the artistic representation offered by Shahn; his indiscriminate perspective shows the inequities at play along Main Street.

What is noteworthy here when considering Shahn's privileging of previously elided narratives in the small-town canon – namely non-white identity – is that he uses the very same traditions adopted in his representation of white workers and small-town poverty, and so the distinction between them blurs in a manner both indiscriminatory and authentic. Rosalind Shipley writes of Shahn's trip through Jenkins, Kentucky in 1935, where he depicted a series of coal miners over the course of one October day: 'Shahn's images of

Jenkins depict grubby miners waiting for a bus, smoking during an idle moment, and staring bleakly at the camera [...] Shahn shows us the town's misery'. To Shahn's treatment of workers across his small-town narratives remains true to their conditions and is exploratory, but never voyeuristic. These same notions of 'staring bleakly at the camera', in various states of unrest, define his 'Other Side of The Tracks' images just as accurately; Shahn's exploration of industry, modernity, and the resulting effect on small-town American community is conducted with a lucidity to social and racial divides. Above all of this, however, is the desire to sequence these rural experiences into a narrative form that bears the same hallmarks visible in other small-town texts, relying on visual referents and motifs to mark these works as undeniably of the small town.

Important to this thesis' approach to visual texts alongside verbal texts, and particularly in *reading* visual materials within a narratological framework, is to consider what might be termed a 'reciprocal narrativization' and its occurrence when consulting works like Shahn's. Specifically, does the viewer of Shahn's work narrativize small-town American identity, from African American poverty to Main Street culture, and read in the paralinguistic signs of his portraits a specific experience, motive, or feeling? Or, conversely, is the impetus in reading Shahn's work within a wider small-town narrative canon — as this chapter has done - founded on his own inherent narratorial intentions that are objectively visible? Nicholas Natanson, whose book *The Black Image in the New Deal* (1992) explores representation, and elision, of black identity in the FSA's photography, addresses these questions:

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>70</sup> Rosalind Shipley, 'The Town that Photography Built: Images from the Consolidation Coal Company Photograph Collection, 1911-1946', *IA: The Journal of the Society for Industrial Archaeology*, 34 (2008), 87-100, (p. 96).

We sometimes run the danger of imputing characteristics of the regional or national to the local [...] symbolic cultural processes do not always work with the airtight efficiency that photo-historians have often assumed.<sup>71</sup>

The questions raised by Natanson here are addressed in this thesis through the framing of small-town narrative, which I define beyond its four central themes, as being concerned with the tripartite structure of the 'regional', 'national', and 'local' - the very same terms are used opposite one another in Natanson's text. Shahn's scenes are, of course, 'local' – his residence in wider Ohio for a significant portion of his late photographic career, as well as the series conducted in London denote an artist interested in specific places where the streets have folkloric names, the stores are locally-owned, and the stories are personal. Shahn's background as a mural painter, completing large projects including The Industrial and Agricultural Resources of America for the Bronx Central Post Office, was informed by a deep attention to the local. Describing the mural initiative of the period more generally, Marlene Parks comments how 'the murals in the State emphasize local phenomena, which include distinctive landscapes, agricultural activities specific to the region, local industries, local heroes, representative family groups or people who work together'. 72 Parks' comments demonstrate how Shahn, as a mural painter invested in these same ideals, has inextricable ties to the local and regional, and the stories therein.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>71</sup> Nicholas Natanson, *The Black Image in the New Deal: The Politics of FSA Photography*, (Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 1992), p. 8.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>72</sup>Marlene Park, 'City and Country in the 1930s: A Study of New Deal Murals in New York", *Art Journal*, 39 (Autumn, 1979), 37-47, (p. 38).

The narratives found in both Shahn's photography and his wider artwork, namely his murals, are manifold and frequently cross the boundaries of Natanson's aforementioned 'local, regional, and national'. In fact, the New Deal's push for the completion of murals – Park notes that 1,116 were commissioned by the Section of Fine Arts - coaligned with the Regionalist art movement, an alignment so significant that, as Jared A. Fogle and Robert L. Stevens note, 'some non-regionalist artists were more or less forced by public demand to redesign murals in a regionalist manner in order to please the vanity and mythology of local communities'. 73 Shahn's ties to these various artistic movements – he is not a 'Regionalist' though region undoubtedly informs his art and photography – show a desire to narrativize the local, regional, and national through singular artistic representation. Shahn's work runs in parallel to an era where Regionalist art championed so-called 'American Idealism', a term defined by Fogle and Stevens as 'a paean to the nobility of the average American'. 74 This narrative searching for a 'nobility' in the American small town, which was invariably coded in terms of race and social mobility, finds equal critical interpretation in Natanson's work who recalls the 'Noble Provincial' trope borne directly from the visual representation of rural African-Americans. 75 Shahn's visual record of small-town narrative skirts the fringes of these ideals but fails to endorse either, instead providing a somewhat corrective and democratised vision of rural life. As Natanson tells us, 'Shahn was sensitive, and unusually so by 1930s standards, to a range of historical, cultural and racial meanings embedded in the fabric of the everyday,' and his sequencing of his rural photographs and teasing out of

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>73</sup> Fogel, Jared. A and Robert L. Stevens, 'The Canvas as Mirror: Painting as politics in the New Deal', *OAH Magazine of History*, 16 (Fall, 2001), 17-25, (p. 20).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>74</sup> Ibid., p. 18.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>75</sup> Natanson, p. 23.

narrative engages with the 'inclusion and exclusion [...] achievement and limitation' native to the photographic series as a form.<sup>76</sup>

Crucially, Shahn's representation of Black identity in a corpus of work which largely neglected African American representation – Stryker famously implored Dorothea Lange to 'place emphasis on white tenants, since we know that these will receive much wider use'<sup>77</sup> – provides a vital narrative of small-town racial construction. As Natanson confirms, 'in yearly production, the black proportion [of FSA representation] was never higher in any year than it was in the very first (18.9 percent, with Shahn leading the way.)'<sup>78</sup> In a series of photographs that covers railroad tracks, automobiles, industry, and African American experience as framed by these various symbols of modernity, Shahn's 'The Other Side of the Tracks' is a powerful document of American migration and mobility within the small-town theatre. In a collection of photographs that narrate rural isolation and racial sociability simultaneously, he ultimately provides a compelling counter narrative to the white-dominant mythologies upon which small-town America is ideologically founded.

'The places we set out from': Rural - urban exodus in small-town narrative

<sup>76</sup> Ibid., p. 112; p. 85.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>77</sup> Roy Stryker to Dorothea Lange, in 'Roy E. Stryker Papers', 18 June 1937, microfilm reel NDA 30, Archives of American Art.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>78</sup> Natanson, p. 69.

If we are to continue to read the small town as a narrative form, a concept with a recognisable syntax that is propagated across media, then we must consider perhaps the most defining and recurrent element of this narrative in both verbal and visual material: small-town flight and, less frequently, return. Narrative arcs concerning the exodus of America's rural youth, as well as the negative implications of those who remain static, feature across small-town texts and code the small town as a narrative form predicated on an anxiety between movement and stasis.

To understand these narratives as they appear in rural American communities, it is important to briefly address macro narratives of movement and their role in American cultural history. American migration and mobility are historically linked to the grand national narratives of the frontier, the myth structure of 'Manifest Destiny', and the general westering tendency that is hardwired in *dominant* American social and cultural history.

Peter Freese, writing on such macro American ideologies in a manner akin to the 'journey' narrative, talks of 'the Escape plot [...] in many classic American novels which deal with their protagonist's flight from the fetters of civilization for the still unsettled territory of the west'. The narratives to which Freese's grand claim is indebted include Mark Twain's *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1884), which famously concludes with Huck 'lighting out for the territories,' as well as historical documents such as Frederick Jackson Turner's 'The Significance of the Frontier in American History' (1893) which outlined both America's Westerly inclinations and the derivation of its national identity from this expansive migration.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>79</sup> Peter Freese, 'The "Journey of Life" in American Fiction', Hungarian Journal of English and American Studies (HJEAS), 19 (Fall, 2013), 247-283, (p. 250).

Freese's discussion of America's paradigmatic 'journey' narrative is inflected with references to small-town criticism, including Carl Van Doren and the 'revolt from the village' literature so central to this thesis. Naturally, parallels can be drawn between America's historic migratory patterns westward with the more complicated and cyclical nature of rural-urban exodus, wherein the 'rural' is metonymized by the small town. One movement informs the other, presenting to us a nation, and a literature, in constant flux. At the centre of this, this chapter argues, is the small town acting as both anchor and propeller.

As such, American cultural and historic studies have always posited that movement, migration, and mobility are vital indices of the country's character. These very same ideals find themselves manifest within the literature and visual texts of the small town, where an equivalent, though decidedly separate, movement takes place. Again, Robert L. Dorman offers a useful framework through the term 'postfrontier world' when describing rural spaces during the Depression: 'images of a postfrontier American wasteland did undoubtedly haunt the national mind during the 1930s'. 80 What this chapter section contends, more broadly discussed elsewhere in the thesis, is that the small town as a narrative form and construct gained popularity as a retort to the decline of the American frontier; the grandest narrative of American history found itself writ small within the rural town, by artists who were similarly interested in tensions between movement and stasis. A 'postfrontier' America is not simply a Depression-ravaged dustbowl but, rather, is the many small communities left in the wake of westward expansion and that came to define America's non-urban geography across the century.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>80</sup> Dorman, p. 132.

The remaining portion of this chapter will explore the significant idea of rural-to-urban exodus, as well as a return to the rural, in American small-town texts and will posit that this recurrent theme is a defining aspect of the small town's narrative form. By tracing the mutual narrative escape arcs in Austin and Cather's work, as well as examining Sherwood Anderson's enduring interest in rural-urban flight as demonstrated in both Winesburg, Ohio and Home Town, it will herein be proposed that such narratives of escape and return, of identity loss and gain, are fundamental in the construction of small-town verbal and visual texts.

One of the earliest texts in my study – the previously discussed *A Woman of Genius* – provides in its story of Olivia Lattimore and her small-town flight a compelling summary of rural-urban exodus narratives, as spoken by Olivia's friend Garrett: "The world is round," he declared, as though he had somewhat doubted it. "It brings us back again to the old starting points." Olivia responds to these claims about her newfound urban life by opining on life's cyclicality: "they're always the same, I suppose, the places we set out from; but we ... we are never the same." Here, the core of small-town narrative is articulated; flight from the small town is often, in the narratives of my chosen period, an escape in geography *only*. The nature of small-town life that characterises people like Olivia and Thea, the latter of which speaks 'perfectly good Moonstone' when perceived by New Yorkers, is such that it becomes inextricable from them despite their conscious movement away. Garrett's portent concerning one's return to small-town ways, even upon leaving it behind, presages Olivia's own anxieties concerning her narrative of escape, return, and ultimate unfulfillment.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>81</sup> Austin, p. 237.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid.

One of Austin's most convincing techniques in exploring small-town America through Olivia's narrative comes from the conflation of both escape and return, and the frequent overlap and blurring that occurs when describing the two polarised communities of America: urban and rural. For example, early in the novel Olivia describes the small town of Higglestone, a place identical to Taylorville in all but name, with the transient language one associates with urban anonymity: 'always it bore to my mind the air of a traveller's room in one of those stops where it is necessary to open the trunks but not worthwhile to unpack them'.<sup>83</sup> This rhetoric of transience and impermanence that defines Olivia's experience with small towns underwrites the notion of a counter rural narrative, one which rejects the dominant small-town mythos wherein the local community becomes a symbol of familiarity and inclusivity; here it becomes, instead, estranged and anonymised in the manner of the urban.

This is complicated further when we consider how Austin describes the cities of her story, Chicago and New York, in a manner that evokes notions of rurality and the pastoral: 'I talked it over with Griffin that evening, as we sat humped over my tiny stove before the lamps were lighted. Outside we could see the roofs huddling together with the cold, and far beyond, the thin line of the lake beaten white with the wind in a fury of self-tormenting'. <sup>84</sup> The language here is familiar to readers of small-town narrative, and marks a precedent for writers like Cather and Anderson who make similar references to pastoral-inflected scenes and the festive community of stoves in their rural works. Austin describes these moments of urban life in her novel so as to outline how close the geographies of the rural and urban are

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>83</sup> Ibid., p. 77; The contemporary American folk musician Gregory Alan Isakov, who has spent most of his life travelling across the U.S, founded a record label called 'Suitcase Town Music' in 2013, named for one of his lyrics; this simple phrase connotes the fleeting transience of small-town America felt in texts such as Austin's.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>84</sup> Ibid., p. 199.

in Olivia's life, geographies that transcend the land and exist as a series of idioms, referents and habits. Here the town and the city become curiously intwined, similarly echoed in Anderson's short story 'Loneliness' which, too, is set in New York City though preoccupied with visual memories of Winesburg: 'there is a clump of elders there such as used to grow beside the road before our house back in Winesburg, Ohio, and in among the elders there is something hidden'.<sup>85</sup> This 'hidden' *something*, which Enoch, the subject of the story, cannot discern, later takes on the hallucinatory properties of a corn merchant he imagines to be travelling to Winesburg; the city space is permanently inflected with the small town from which he fled and even in exile he finds himself bound to its Main Street rhythms.

The anxieties here are bound to grand narratives of migration in American culture, and Austin appears to parse the 'the exalted cult of Locality', as Nicholas Witschi refers to it, by taking the small town as a narrative form and unpacking it through contrast to the urban. The small town informs her rendering of urban environments, as with the previous quote, and it further characterises Olivia and how she is perceived and othered by non-natives of America's rural communities. The small town exists far beyond Taylorville and Higgleston in *A Woman of Genius*; it follows Olivia in her futile plight of escape and haunts her as a reminder of a past which she is doomed to repeat.

A provocative aspect of small-town narrative, glimpsed elsewhere across this period's media and brought into focus by Austin, is the notion that one 'can't go home again', to paraphrase Thomas Wolfe's eponymous southern small-town work of 1934.

Midway through Austin's text Olivia returns to Higgleston, which is described with a renewed sense of pastoralism – 'the leaves were all out on the maples'. 86 In spite of this

<sup>86</sup> Ibid., p. 142.

<sup>85</sup> Anderson, Winesburg, Ohio, p. 60.

altered perception of the town she once fled, one informed by a life of urban experiences and possibilities, the reaction from her husband Thomas is one of ambivalence: "'you are away so much", he excused. "You're going to seem almost a stranger." As with her Colorado counterpart, Thea Kronborg, Olivia's return to the small-town enclave following time in the city others her, widening the gaps between heroine and home that have been present since the novel's start. The rural-to-urban exodus that defines Austin's text is fundamentally an exploration not simply of the female experience but of one's ties to one's home communities, and the consequences of severing those ties indefinitely. Olivia's speech is coded entirely in a manner that speaks of her newfound urban experience; here, her rural-urban disconnect becomes audible. "But the life here, yes; there is so little to it. Another year and Mr. Harding says I could hope to stay in Chicago," she says to her husband, who angrily retorts that "Higgleston's good enough for me".88 Here, the primary impetuses of small-town movement are deferred by the conservative Thomas. His denotative stasis is marked by an acceptance of the small town's apparent limitations - this sense of it being 'good enough'.

Olivia's independence and tendency toward movement is not only underscored here by the direct reference to a city like Chicago, but in her concession that what is 'good enough' for Thomas is merely 'little' to her. As such, in the larger rural-urban dynamic explored in this chapter, the former comes to represent a lack, whilst the latter denotes a surfeit of experience and possibility. It is in representing the movement between these two poles where small-town America becomes a narrative form in its own right; it is explored in these early-to-mid century texts as a space to be transgressed and scrutinised, a place one

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>87</sup> Ibid.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>88</sup> Ibid., p. 143.

goes 'out from' and 'come backs to'.<sup>89</sup> It is inescapably tied to larger ideas of selfhood; the Taylorvilles and Higglestons of Olivia's life become characters with which she interacts, visits, and discusses; they exist as far more than simply places on a map. The narrative pressures that mark small-town provincialism are embodied by Thomas, whilst the simultaneous equal and opposite pressure that pushes Olivia from the small town is demonstrable in her speech and actions; the tension between these two is central to the formation of small-town narrative, and the narrative discord it engenders is a frequent facet of 'revolt' narratives.

Willa Cather's narratives of frontier migration and (up)rootedness mark her as the clear successor to Austin's established narrative of female rural-urban exodus though, as with her forebear, Cather's characters often suffer the same inertia and unfulfillment in their attempt to leave the small town. Often, even the secondary characters of her narratives express an innate motive inclination toward the urban or, if not specifically to a city, certainly *away* from the small town. In *The Song of the Lark*, Ray, the local railroad worker with whom Thea becomes romantically involved before his tragic death, states early in the text that he 'had a mind to see something of this world'. <sup>90</sup> The implication that 'something' simply cannot be found in the rural small towns of the American Plains is one echoed across 'revolt' literature, and, even when expressed in such simple terms by a relatively uncomplicated character, marks how fundamental this static ideology is to small-town representation.

Such ideas are echoed further in the novel when Thea's Aunt Tillie asks of the former a similarly provocative, though reductive, question: 'what are you going to do when

<sup>89</sup> Ibid., p. 28.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>90</sup> Cather, My Antonia, p. 75.

you git big and want to git into society?'91 Another Scandinavian migrant whose broken English and overtly simplistic worldviews mark her as othered, Aunt Tillie is privately mocked after asking this question by the other family members present – though the kernel of truth at the heart of her question is one that remains present throughout Thea's life. Her extended narrative of small-town flight, lengthier and more detailed than any of Cather's equivalent works, is defined by this idea of 'society' and its inherent attachment to the urban. If society is synonymous with the city, what of the small town and those left behind? Janis P. Stout, whose writings are vital to this chapter's conceptualisation of journey narratives within the confines of the small-town genre, once more writes to this end: 'the old optimism that launched journeys of discovery has been sunk in a prevailing social mood of futility'. 92 Stout argues that, ultimately, those of both the rural and urban are destined for the same fate. It is this fate that is explored most fervently in 'revolt' narratives, particularly in Cather's and Austin's stories of rural-urban exodus. Some fulfilment is achieved, with Thea's and Olivia's prodigious talents finding recognition and praise, but the internalization of small-town stasis remains a crucial binding from which neither can break.

These ideas of rural-urban exodus, cyclicality, and the prevailing themes of 'revolt' literature can be further traced when assessing the 'return' of Cather's protagonist(s). Stout offers up further revelatory observations concerning American literature and the 'journey narrative' in this vein: 'journeys can often become 'circling', conveying a sense of having lost all centering forces and organizing symbols'. <sup>93</sup> Thea Kronborg and Jim Burden ultimately return to their small towns with renewed life experience but a sense of unfulfillment, a

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>91</sup> Austin, p. 78.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>92</sup> Stout, The Journey Narrative in American Literature: Patterns and Departures, p. 106.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>93</sup> Ibid., p. 230.

sense of never having truly left. The ubiquity of this inescapability in small-town literature, of the place remaining fixed to the person, is perhaps its most defining generic trait.

Nowhere is such a trait better described than in narratives dealing with American migration, be this the wholesale movement of European immigrants or the specific journey narratives of individual small-town natives. The weight of Main Street hangs heavy on the characters in these 'revolt' narratives who, try as they might, find it impossible to rid themselves of their small-town beginnings.

This dual anxiety of never truly leaving home versus the impossibility of a 'homecoming', an anxiety that remains at the fore of small-town narrative both dominant and counter, provides useful narrative fodder to writers such as Cather, Austin, and even the visual artists elsewhere discussed in this study. Norman Rockwell, for example, for all of his images of nostalgic homelife and filial ritual, seems to immortalise a world that exists outside of time. Jennifer A. Greenhill refers to the 'cherished fictions' of Rockwell's 'home' scenes, with which Miles Orvell concurs: 'Rockwell provides us with very few concrete images of the small town itself. For the most part, the town setting is implicit, and we construct it, we fill in the background'. <sup>94</sup> As such, even in the paradigmatic, dominant narratives of small-town American community there is a sense of its elusiveness, of a space that exists beyond the reach of archetypal American migration. Cather's immigrant characters denote this constant search, a search which James Oliver Robertson broadly summarises with the pithy statement: 'Migrants very often come to America with a vision of community'. <sup>95</sup>

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>94</sup>Orvell, *The Death and Life of Main Street*, p. 44.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>95</sup> James Oliver Robertson, *American Myth American Reality*, (New York: Hill & Wang, 1980), p. 215.

What this chapter section contends most ardently is that this 'vision' of community is just that, a figment of wider, dominant American community myths that become unstuck in counter, 'revolt' narratives of small-town America. Cather's Jim Burden, for example, upon returning to Black Hawk, Nebraska after his years away, remarks that 'when I was coming home, the town looked bleak and desolate to me'. 96 Jim's sense of life beyond Black Hawk informs this inverted 'homecoming', where the town he once grew up in has become, to him, a reminder of what Stout calls 'the narrow confines of [their] Midwestern environment'. 97 In both dominant and counter small-town narratives, where migration and movement (or, indeed, the precise opposite) are recurrent themes, there is a continued denial of 'homecoming' in favour of an anxious searching, without conclusion, for a place to call home.

Sherwood Anderson develops these ideas in *Winesburg, Ohio*, in which urban exodus is, to most of his characters, an illusory and intangible promise. For George Willard, the cycle's focaliser, the strangely abrupt nature of his departure is likewise perhaps an indicator of inevitable unfulfillment. George leaves Winesburg, but as to whether he returns one can only speculate; Anderson's cycle is narrated in a manner that firmly suggests he is predestined to return. As Ryan Poll writes: 'although Willard physically departs from the small town, he does not ideologically depart from the small town'. <sup>98</sup> The open question as to whether George returns in his future, the answer to which is of course denied by the nature of the narrative, is raised precisely because of small-town narrative's propensity for inherent cyclicality. In her study of Anderson's text, specifically orientated around this idea

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>96</sup> Cather, *My Antonia*, p. 107.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>97</sup> Stout, The Journey Narrative in American Literature: Patterns and Departures, p. 32.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>98</sup> Poll, p. 47.

of the short story 'cycle' as a form, Jennifer J. Smith refers to 'Anderson's treatment of geographic proximity and emotional isolation', and her writing is suggestive that these two concomitant themes sustain one another in *Winesburg, Ohio*. <sup>99</sup> The 'cycle' of Anderson's text is not merely a formal one; his characters and the themes which define their lives are likewise repeated indefinitely. The small town, then, assumes formal, generic properties once more.

Elizabeth Willard, George's mother and one of the more tragic figures of Anderson's cycle, frequently talks of her failed escape from Winesburg: 'I wanted to run away from everything but I wanted to run towards something too. Don't you see, dear, how it was?'100 The implication here, with 'everything' denoting small-town American life and 'something' representing urban life perfectly mirrors Ray's aforementioned quote in The Song of the Lark, and once more Anderson bridges these two poles of American experience, rural and urban, through the language of migration and movement: 'I wanted to run'. This elegiac tone toward movement and, specifically, urban America, is a frequent refrain in Anderson's text and is likewise visible in Alice Hindman's story of chronic loneliness. 'Ned always liked to travel about, she thought. I'll give him a chance. Some day when we are married and I can save both his money and my own, we will be rich. Then we can travel together all over the world'. 101 Alice's pining for Ned, a former lover so estranged from her he has become a ghost of sorts, is predicated on the tension between (urban) movement and (rural) stasis. Ned left Winesburg, and so achieved some measure of fulfilment; Alice is left to the everyday rituals circumscribed by the small town, and so is denied fulfilment.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>99</sup> Smith, The American Short Story Cycle, p. 41.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>100</sup> Anderson, Winesburg, Ohio, p. 82.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>101</sup> Ibid, p. 38.

To explore these ideas of movement and migration in Anderson's text more intimately, his use of the small town as a narrative form in its own right must be addressed. John T. Flanagan refers to Anderson's 'prose of reality', perhaps a reference to the 'vernacular English' style of writing he adopts in his cycle, which Robert Pinksy corroborates, or, this chapter argues, a contention that sees the reality of small-town America itself become a prose form replete with its own idiosyncrasies and references. Returning to Alice Hindman and her eventual breakdown, resulting in her running naked through Winesburg, we see Anderson use these ideas of small-town movement to potent effect. Alice's act is a performative response to the movement she craves and which is denied her by the town's cyclical, stagnant presence. Anderson depicts the small town as a space where transgressive acts may be performed in futile, though briefly cathartic, episodes to relieve its inhabitants of their torpor. Alice's thoughts of travelling 'all over the world' are undercut by the small-town setting of the story cycle; as a narrative form, the small town becomes a metonym for the unmoving, forgotten rural populace.

Winesburg, Ohio is a cycle that takes the small-town setting and creates from it something which Robert Fulford terms a 'master narrative', one in which dominant American ideas are explored through many individual stories. As Fulford explains: 'a master narrative always speaks with the confidence of unalterable and unassailable truth – and yet paradoxically it is always in the process of being altered'. <sup>102</sup> Anderson's town, and thus his narrative form, is predicated on the unalterable nature of its fixity, though his characters' various performances of mobility – from George Willard's departure to Alice Hindman's breakdown – attest to the alterations in Fulford's narrative construct. Anderson himself was

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>102</sup> Robert Fulford, *The Triumph of Narrative: Storytelling in the Age of Mass Culture* (Canada: House of Anansi Press Limited, 1999), p. 32.

vocal about his desire for a new formal 'looseness' (as discussed in Chapter One), and his own artistic ambitions suggest that interpreting his work through the lens of the small town *as* narrative form is not without precedent. Jennifer J. Smith, in her already-cited study remarks upon this at length: 'he had invented a new genre, named it for his volume, and claimed ownership'. <sup>103</sup> She goes on to state that 'Anderson made innovations to the form, maximising its expressionist possibilities and engaging an appreciation for local places and quotidian events'. <sup>104</sup> Smith's findings here support the central argument proposed in this chapter, namely that *Winesburg, Ohio* evinces, as do its contemporaneous texts, a desire to formally experiment in a manner that renders the small town itself *as* the form.

The small town as narrative form arises when generic experimentation (lack of fixed protagonist; vignette; vernacular prose) meets the referents and idiosyncrasies of the small-town region itself; with *Winesburg, Ohio* specifically we see the 'master narrative' of migration and mobility in American culture repurposed as small-town narrative. Smith's term of 'limited locality' is especially useful here when she talks of 'the cycle's ambivalence to the promises of community [...] they are limited because they take as their focus a bounded geography and because the texts emphasize descriptions of particular, selected features of that geography'. <sup>105</sup> The 'limited locality' of Anderson's text – written in what he openly calls the 'Winesburg form' – is suggestive of the small town *as* narrative form; it is a recognizable space where quotidian interactions and experience are privileged in conjunction with a distinct, metaphysical evocation of place. What is contested here,

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>103</sup> Jennifer J. Smith, 'Locating the Short Story Cycle', *The American Short Story Cycle* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2018), p. 12.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>104</sup> Ibid., p. 13.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>105</sup> Ibid.

specifically, is that the tensions between movement and stasis, between native and migrant experience, come to the fore when this evocation of place occurs.

This idea of the 'Winesburg form' can be further unpacked by returning to Fulford's narratology, specifically his qualification of 'master narrative': 'a master narrative is a dwelling place – we are intended to live in it'. <sup>106</sup> The application of this theory to small-town American texts, where the process of 'dwelling' and the representation of lives lived within specific places is central, becomes perfectly viable. The 'master narrative' of small-town American texts is that they are directly proposing the small town to be a narrative form, one immediately recognisable whether for its spatial and geographic descriptions or, as this chapter contends, its constant anxieties over movement, stasis, immigration, and other transitory aspects of American identity. Paraphrasing Henry Canby, Richard Lingeman notes in his narrative study of small-town America that 'it is the small town, the small city, that is our heredity; we have made twentieth-century America from it'. <sup>107</sup> As such, it is befitting that Anderson's text, as well as wider visual and verbal works consulted here, provides a compelling deconstruction of American identity through the nation in miniature.

The small town as generic form contains both master and minor narratives within it; its master narratives are evident in its exploration of identity, migration, and quotidian experience in American culture but its minor narratives come to the fore when individual stories and experiences are considered. What might be considered America's grand national narratives are not simply defined by the frontier and its antecedents, or of the modern city, but of the individual stories that form its small-town archipelago. Indeed, Anderson, as one example, provides us with the small town as form and uses it to focalise issues of exile and

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>106</sup> Fulford, p. 32

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>107</sup> Lingeman, p. 262.

return. The form itself is transgressed, rebuked, and revisited by both characters and readers alike. As William H. Gass, a writer of rural Midwestern repression and isolation, aptly puts it: 'a dissonance of parts and people, we are a consonance of towns'. 108

## **Conclusion**

From Klondike gold rushes to Ellis Island immigrants, narratives of migration are a cornerstone of American culture and are repeatedly reproduced across media. America's legibility in this study is defined by its intersecting stories of exodus and flight versus confinement and stasis; movement on a grand scale may appear to be America's *raison d'etre* but it is the small towns, rural communities, and non-urban social spaces that dominate when closer analysis is undertaken. When America is 'read' and the nation is parsed into its constituent narratives, in the vein of Barthes and his belief in reading nations, the small town remains one of its most dominant and compelling.<sup>109</sup>

This chapter contends that in such small-town spaces, the narrative potential of migration, mobility, and other forms of social movement are fundamental to the shaping of the small town *as* a narrative form. As Scott Casper and Lucinda Long note in their collection *Moving Stories: Migration and the American West* (2001), 'migration occupies a storied place in American history and mythology'. <sup>110</sup> Its prevalence in the primary material discussed in this chapter, which privilege the small and intimate geographies of American life over their grand, metropolitan alternatives, shows not simply how intrinsic migration is

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>108</sup> William H. Gass, 'In the Heart of the Heart of the Country', *In the Heart of the Heart of the Country* (New York: New York Review of Books, 2015), p. 190.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>109</sup> Roland Barthes, *Incidents* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992), p. 8.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>110</sup> Moving Stories: Migration and the American West 1850-2000, p. xi.

to American cultural production but likewise how multivalent such narratives are and how rural-centric they can be.

The tripartite structure to this chapter has sought to unpack and explore the central tenets of small-town narrative when contextualized via migration and mobility. The first of these is an attention to the transitory nature of American migration, from the coming of the railroad to automobile culture and other forms of conveyance. Tracing the promise of quasisalvation denoted by the railroad in texts like *Winesburg*, *Ohio*, whilst examining their deadly portentousness in *The Song of the Lark*, this chapter has revealed the railroad to be not simply a grand instrument of American modernity but also a fundamental aspect to small-town narrative which standardizes rural communities and the stories in which they feature. Elsewhere, one sees the automobile as a harbinger of modernity in small-town spaces, a symbol which finds telling representation from the writing of Theodore Dreiser to the photography of Ben Shahn. As the ultimate symbol of personal liberation, a means to escape the aforementioned 'ossifying bonds' of rural community, automobile culture compressed spatial temporalities in American culture whilst reminding those denied ownership of their own immediate fixity and stasis.

Shahn's photography in London, Ohio, moving between main streets and backroads, captures the almost ominous presence of automobiles within the context of the impoverished, racially segregated communities of small-town America and shows the nation's relationship with newfound four-wheeled freedom to be a complicated, exclusionary affair. Ultimately, transport and vehicular modernity are vital signifiers in small-town narrative of the rural community's innate spatial connectedness to an outside world, whilst deepening the emotional disconnect felt by its inhabitants to whom movement is not an option. The small town, as narrative form, becomes one defined by these constant

references to the indices of movement and by their frequent denial and estrangement in the context of intimate, small-town lives.

The second aspect to this chapter's study on small-town narrative and its migratory properties, which focuses on immigration and social and racial othering, addresses the ideological ramifications of movement and mobility. As Charles Stephenson writes: 'the concepts of social and occupational mobility obviously are important in dealing with studies of social structures, modernization, and other questions'. 111 Put simply, even when taking case-studies of American identity and experience, achieved in this study via the small-town community unit, it is vital that broad concepts such as migration and mobility are not reductively theorised but considered as nuanced, complex frameworks. The physical migration denoted by the railroad, for example, is a crucial aspect of narratives such as Winesburg, Ohio, yet the same iconography also serves a racially exclusive symbolism in the photography of Ben Shahn, and the appraisal of both is necessary when undertaking a study of this kind. This chapter section explores and reconciles certain absences and elisions in small-town narrative, from the migrant othering of 'Mexican Town' in The Song of the Lark; the African American demographics of Shahn's 'The Other Side of the Tracks', to notions of homeland and diaspora in Cather's My Antonia. All these themes are amplified by the smalltown setting, where both divisions and community, nostalgia and sorrow, are felt keenly. What is suggested in this chapter section is that if we are to figure the small town as a narrative form, we must naturally consider the forces that shape it as a community construct proper; the nostalgia of Cather's Shimerda family and the relegated presence of

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>111</sup> Charles Stephenson, 'Determinants of American Migration: Methods and Models in Mobility Research', *Journal of American Studies*, 9 (1975), 189–97, (p. 190).

London, Ohio's African American denizens each contribute to a wider narrative of the American local whilst describing their own unique experiences and identities.

Finally, this chapter considers the notions of rural-urban exodus across my primary material and how this concept is instrumental in shaping the generic model of small-town narrative. When Gioia Woods writes of the American West that 'migration and rootedness [...] are related conditions – they coexist and together comprise what it means to have and develop a sense of place,' she strikes at the heart of this chapter's chief exploration of movement and stasis anxiety in wider American regionalism. 112 In the novels of Mary Austin and Willa Cather, as has been detailed in this chapter, a 'sense of place' is denied the respective intellectual protagonists who each light out for the cultural hubs of urbanity but find their rural roots run strong and deep. Woods goes further in her critical summarising of American migration by writing that 'identity is always in transit, always constituting and reconstituting itself in terms of its relationship with different contexts, situations, and environments,' ideas which all coexist within Austin and Cather's small-town novels. 113 Olivia Lattimore and Thea Kronborg, each characterized by their intelligence, empathy, and propensity for change and new experiences, adapt to and are molded by constantly shifting social conditions and expectations which forever link back to their small-town origins.

These seemingly character-driven novels are in fact small-town narratives par excellence; both Olivia and Thea come to realize that the small towns so formative in their early exodus are vital to their own psychologies, and so place and person become provocatively aligned. Elsewhere, characters like George Willard problematize the notion of

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>112</sup> Gioia Woods, 'Sarah Winnemucca: Multiple places, multiple selves', in *Moving Stories: Migration and the American West 1850-2000*, (Reno: Nevada Humanities Committee, 2001), p. 52. <sup>113</sup> Ibid.. p. 55.

rural escape through narrative elision; we are never confronted with George's projected destiny, yet Anderson's melancholic portrayal of his Midwestern town, and indeed his frame narrative, indicates a likely return. Movement and mobility shape small-town narratives and their relation to wider American social and cultural constructs, as Stout argues in her study of journey narratives: 'the escape [...] is the most fully characteristic form adopted by the American imagination and comprises a part of the mythology of the American experience from its origins'. 114 'Escape' is the dominant theme of small-town texts, and the futility of such escape often accompanies it. The small town is the very epitome of a 'manageable sense of origin' in American culture. 115

Escape and return, then. These are the core themes in American small-town representation, and the attendant stories of migration, mobility, and movement within this representation help to limn the restlessness of America's various communities where ostensibly all roads lead home, for better or worse.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>114</sup> Stout, The Journey Narrative in American Literature: Patterns and Departures, p. 32.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>115</sup> John A. Jakle, 'Childhood on the Middle Border: Remembered Small Town America', *Journal of Geography*, 85 (September, 2007), 159-163, (p. 163).

## Four: 'This is the way we were [...] in our living and in our dying': Small-town narrative and everyday routine<sup>1</sup>

Routine and ritual, as specific though related terms in everyday existence, are not simply defining traits of the narratives common to all of us in our daily lives but are, as this chapter attests, fundamental to the construction of small-town narrative. They recur across dominant and counter small-town texts and work to not simply contribute to an essential realism to the stories told but also to shape their progression or, indeed, stasis. The roles people fulfil, and the spaces in which they do so, from domestic chores and agricultural labour through to the white-collar occupations of modernity, provide us with the most familiar sense of small-town community experience.

This chapter argues that a core component of the small-town narrative generic form is the tension and anxiety that cluster around the terms ritual and routine and their subsequent narratological performance. Whilst ritual implies a specific performance and deliberateness, routine can imply an unconscious acting out of certain habits – in spite of these formal differences, both have significant narratorial potency. Reading routine through the theoretical framework of Roland Barthes' *effet du réel*, for example, renders these unconscious labours, chores, and actions as little more than superfluous to the narrative. But when their ubiquity in small-town narrative is considered, a genre which is indebted to local colour and nineteenth-century realism, a circular and unprogressive narrative defined by internal repetitions and banal action is revealed. Such descriptions are not superfluous to the narrative; rather, they become the narrative.

<sup>1</sup> Wilder, *Our Town*, p. 41.

Positing a theoretical contrast, one can choose to read ritual as a far more deliberate, purposeful narrative construct, one in which linearity and progress are innate. Rita Felski suggests that 'everyday rituals may help to safeguard a sense of personal autonomy', a claim this chapter explores through counter and dominant small-town narrative, but so too can we identify less frequent or 'daily' rituals achieving the same effect. In 'revolt from the village' literature, for example, the adolescent ritual of departure – exemplified by *Winesburg, Ohio*'s George Willard and *The Song of the Lark*'s Thea Kronborg – creates a sense of narrative progress and linearity.<sup>2</sup>

The narrative instances of ritual and routine, something Lyn C. MacGregor calls, not unproblematically, the 'habits of the heartland', is the final constituent of small-town narrative that this thesis will define and explore, offering a distinct reading of each term as they become manifest in dominant and counter small-town texts as narrative constructs and devices. Ju Yon writes on the distinction between routine and ritual that sits at the heart of this chapter:

In other words, how do we distinguish between rituals and routines? The emphasis on explicitly formalized acts [...] suggests that the difference between ritual and the mundane might rest in their pitch rather than their rhythm: while the repetitions of the quotidian unfold, signify, and have social effects in a subliminal hum, rituals are more insistently patterned and symbolic.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>2</sup> Rita Felski, 'The Invention of Everyday Life', Cool Moves, *New Formations*, 39 (March, 2000), 15-31, (p. 21).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>3</sup> Ju Yon, 'Everyday Rituals and the Performance of Community', *The Racial Mundane: Asian American Performance and the Embodied Everyday*, (New York University Press, 2015), p. 78.

In this chapter, I explore the unconscious 'subliminal hum' of routine as it becomes manifest specifically in small-town texts as a narrative device, a means of keeping counter texts like Sherwood Anderson's short story cycle, Winesburg, Ohio, precisely that: a circular text comprising futile and banal actions that only ever gesture toward a sense of meaningful, lived existence. The 'patterned and symbolic' nature of everyday ritual is likewise explored in small-town narrative, from the dramaturgy of Wilder's Our Town, where an absent domestic space is willed into being through the performance of simple acts, to the brief and epiphanic instances of walking and navigation that punctuate Ethan Frome's ultimate narrative of inescapability. Both are vital to small-town narrative's generic make-up, and each provide a familiar sense of pace and place to this narratological concept; the semantics of small-town narrative rely upon audience familiarity with the routines and rituals that are frequently described. This chapter argues it is both deliberately performed ritual and the unconscious motions of routine that small-town narrative relies upon, and that the tensions between both routine and ritual, as well as the overlap across dominant and subversive texts, are vital constituents of the genre. Both ritual and routine have distinct narrative properties and are vital in any narrative of the small town, verbal or visual, and the (un)conscious performance of both frequently comprises the greater part of these texts – to imagine a small-town story minus the accrued quotidian details associated with these two charged terms, without chores and labour and 'Main Street' socio-economic transaction, is almost impossible.

As I consider the various manifestations of these elements in small-town narrative, I will pay particular attention to notions of the domestic as a key focaliser of ritual and, particularly, routine. Specifically, how gendered notions of domesticity are performed (or rebuked) across my given texts will be evaluated, coupling this with an emphasis on how the

physical construction of such spaces (furniture, architecture, etc.) works in tandem to establish dominant and counter narratives of small-town domestic routine. From considering examples like Alice Hindman in Winesburg, Ohio, the lonely, spurned lover who creates for herself a twisted vision of heteronormative domesticity in her single-room accommodation, to the mythologised utopia of Our Town in which domesticity is performed in near caricature - the entire small town as home - I will trace how domestic space becomes a key site of small-town routine and ritual. In particular, I am interested in feminist reconsiderations of domestic space in conjunction with 'revolt' literature, examining how, within the context of small-town narrative, there is an extended engagement with 'materialist questions of labour and value; global questions of home and belonging; psychoanalytical questions of unconscious compliance and resistance; and structural and ideological questions of public and private'. These observations, taken from Jo Applin and Francesca Berry's introduction to their 'feminist domesticity' special issue in Oxford Art Journal, are critical to this chapter's positioning of small-town domesticity and gendered labour. Destabilizing the notions of 'home and belonging' and what constitutes conscious and 'unconscious compliance' in small-town ritual and routine, is an essential aspect of counter small-town narrative just as 'compliance' of these hegemonic ideals contributes to the myth structures upon which dominant small-town narrative is founded.

I posit that quotidian experience and banal daily life constitute a chief characteristic of small-town narrative, amplified in such texts through a pronounced articulation of minor actions, routines, and rituals in a narratologically significant manner. As Rita Felski writes, 'we are all ultimately anchored in the mundane,' and it is this sense of mundanity that this

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>4</sup> Jo Applin and Francesca Berry, 'Introduction: Feminist Domesticities', *Oxford Art Journal*, 40 March 2017, 1-5, (p. 4).

chapter contends is immediately identifiable and familiar when reading a text set in rural America. This chapter will explore how such representations of routine and ritual present in *dominant* small-town narrative work to homogenise and preserve conservative American tradition, using repetitive rhythms and performances to suggest an unimpeachable American community space and construct. Alternatively, in *counter* texts, the focus on social and material poverty and economic crises offers a disruption of recreational space and routine. Again, this chapter is interested not just in positing the terms of ritual and routine against one another within these shifting narrative contexts but in exploring their intersections, looking closer at how the former's pronounced performativity and the latter's circular, indefinite habituation evokes small-town narrative's paradigmatic realism.

## 'We'll always go on living here together': Dominant small-town narrative and the circularity of routine

The continued ubiquity of domesticity in American cultural mythmaking is striking – the enduring ideal of an American home place remains both a utopian cultural construction and a symbol denied many of the nation's poorest and most marginalised. What constitutes home space, and the routines that make it so, remains a constant anxiety in American community both rural and urban; the paradigmatic, and largely fallacious, cultural ideal of the 'American Dream' is predicated on finding or settling such space. The centrality of the term 'home place', or indeed 'home land', remains a chief tenet of American life, a term that stretches from this study's own period through to the twenty-first century, as visible in post-9/11 media rhetoric and American domestic policy. As Sally Bayley writes on her study

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>5</sup> Rita Felski, 'The Invention of Everyday Life', *New Formations*, 39 (March, 2000), 15-31, (p. 16).

of home spaces in American culture, the platitudinal notion of the 'homeland' marks a 'deep-rooted connection to an historic and perhaps mythical past: an American version of Volk. In other words, America's twenty-first century recuperation of an ideology of "homeland" is a return to something folkish and fixedly domestic'.

Bayley's findings have a two-fold valency to my own thesis; not only does she demonstrate how the small-town traditions of home place, community, and domesticity enjoy perennial appeal, but so too does she alight on the notions of 'folk' and the 'fixedly domestic', both of which this thesis finds innate to small-town narrative. The fixity of small-town domestic space has been well-documented in the previous two chapters, and the notion of 'folk' (or 'folkways' as it figures in scholarship on American rural communities) remains a thread which stitches together many small-town narratives. This reference to a 'mythic past', a term that is likewise consistently used in scholarship of the small town regarding both its celebrants and detractors, is of course aligned most prominently with what I term the dominant small-town narrative form.

Marking one of the archetypal examples of nostalgic, utopian small-town representation, *Our Town* is both a regularly produced American drama text as well as a canonical purveyor of conservative tradition. At the centre of its ideological figuring of the small town as haven and sanctuary is the performance and familiarity of everyday ritual, and particularly the domestic space in which such ritual often occurs. Indeed, the concept is freighted with gendered stereotypes and patriarchal governance and frequently becomes a space to which female narrative is consigned and restricted. Mrs. Gibbs, for example, embodies the gendered maternalism of domesticity, explored through her interaction with

<sup>6</sup> Bayley, p. 10.

the domestic space and her family within it. A sequence in which she opens a non-existent sash window and stokes an imaginary stove (the play, as has been noted elsewhere in this thesis, is sparsely staged) is particularly revealing to this end: '[Mrs Gibbs, a plump, pleasant woman [...] pulls up an imaginary window shade in her kitchen and starts to make a fire in her stove]'.<sup>7</sup>

The actions described are, of course, mimed, though they are recognizable in their description and performance as the domestic rituals of rural life and concur with, among others, Tim Cresswell's theory of space performativity as it is detailed in Chapter Two of this thesis. Whilst these actions could be equally visible in an urban environment, the proximity of the Stage Manager walking along the adjacent Main Street as they occur, as well as the proximal relationship between the play's imaginary houses and institutions, suggests a local, contained community scene that befits the small-town ideal. The actions become those of the country rustic to whom keeping house and home is a daily imperative in the wider white, middle-class mythos to which *Our Town* directly contributes. The Stage Manager's narration, too, fills in for the absent props and staging through spatial language; 'and here's his wife comin' downstairs' and 'There's Mrs. Webb, coming downstairs' are two examples of how vertical movement is described on a stage operating with only one level / plane. Bert Cardullo speaks to the dramatic minutiae of Wilder's play when he writes how his characters 'are able to appreciate the dailiness of human existence, undeterred by the masses of people, mass transportation, and massive buildings common to big cities'.8 Here there is an understanding that the dramatic substance of the play, argued here as its rituals and routines, are amplified directly due to the small-town setting. This takes on even

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>7</sup> Wilder, p. 24.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>8</sup> Cardullo, p. 73.

greater significance when the sparse staging of the play is addressed; not simply does the inter-textual absence of large buildings and urbanity ensure the characters focus on 'smaller' experiences, but the audience are likewise made to confront ritual and routine in this mundane way – what Cardullo calls 'anti-drama' - care of the complete lack of props and or set design.<sup>9</sup>

What is curious here is the distinct ritualization of household chores, performed in so deliberate a manner (which Wilder's minimalist production necessitates) as to suggest something quintessential and indeed valuable about ostensibly ordinary acts; actions that might be considered routine and unconscious in another text, like Winesburg, Ohio, are repurposed here and given narrative significance. Indeed, in Sam Wood's 1940 cinematic adaptation, Mrs. Gibbs and Mrs. Webb are both featured prominently in the film's opening scene-setting, both framed by their kitchen windows. The former approaches several windows in the house upon waking, fussing over the correct height of a blind in one particular window, before resuming the morning chores which include putting the kettle on to boil and rousing the children upstairs. Of course, the filmic qualities of Wood's adaptation require less deliberate performance than Wilder's stage play, where the invisible window must be animatedly interacted with so as to suggest its presence. That said, the focus on the windows as framing devices and Mrs. Gibbs' interaction with them show that even with the relatively maximal set design afforded the film adaptation, there is still intent focus on the same rituals that Wilder introduces at the beginning of his play. Winfield Townley Scott talks of Wilder setting in motion 'the little wheel of daily doings' at the play's outset, and the

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>235</sup> 

momentum of this so-called minutiae wheel keeps the narrative of *Our Town* returning time and again, in a perfect cycle, to rural life that is unimpeachable and static.<sup>10</sup>

useful in unpacking my theorizing of domestic routine performance in dominant small-town narrative. Goffman writes of performance as 'idealization' and conjoins notions of performativity with the enforcement of 'the accredited values of the society', both of which speak to a truth innate in *Our Town*. <sup>11</sup> Wilder's dominant, utopian figuring of small-town life through simple, 'down-home' routine and its continued performance is coded through moral and social mores which are as familiar to the performers as they are the intended audience; the audience takes great pride in seeing Mrs. Gibbs perform these routine domestic chores because they enforce the play's overtures of conformity and familiarity.

Perhaps the most telling of Goffman's findings in terms of theorizing routine and ritual in a grander scheme – taken here to be small-town narrative more generally – is his dramatic binary of 'back' and 'front region'. The former refers to backstage, unseen apparatus in theatre that formulate said performances whilst the latter refers to the staging area and the subsequent presentation of the performance. In a play like *Our Town*, given its minimal staging, this distinction becomes curiously blurred but what I am more intrigued by is the possibility of theorizing small-town routine more generally through this mode. We might say that in dominant small-town narratives, for example, where a clear circumscription of social mores are present, known, and regularly enforced, that this ideology in of itself becomes the unconscious 'back region' to the town's inhabitants. The

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>10</sup> Winfeild Townley Scott, "Our Town" and the Golden Veil', *The Virginia Quarterly Review*, 29 (Winter, 1953), 103-117, (p. 107).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>11</sup> Erving Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (Edinburgh: University of Edinburgh Press, 1956), p. 23.

narrative proper, with Main Street as stage, becomes the 'front region'; the relation of the story to us becomes the performance itself and so it is through this that even the smallest and most inconsequential performance of daily routine become narratively significant.

Wilder's Stage Manager narrator perfectly bridges these two regions – he guides the narrative, connects the interstitial space between back and front stage, and is himself a performance of a small-town stock character, so familiar and quotidian in his dress, manner, and speech that he himself becomes a routine personified.

The nature of Wilder's play is such that these habitual motions of everyday life become, in the context of his small-town narrative concerning both the town and its townsfolk, ritualistic by way of their deliberate performance and animated reproduction intended for his audience. We are led to believe, through Wilder's direction, that the mere act of opening a kitchen window, or stoking a fire, is quintessentially *of* the small town. They seem, in spite of all their simplicity, to be acts that could only occur in Grover's Corners, and narrate a specific, exclusive cultural memory of rural, nineteenth-century life. Routine becomes ritual and, in turn, assumes dramatic importance and essential narratorial qualities; the opening of the window, as an invitation to the audience into the Gibbs' home, is a reception into Grover's Corners itself and marks the play's dioramic, doll-house qualities. Behind each door and window, a story of conservative, domestic service to the community, or wistful dreams of escape, are each revealed scene by scene to an increasingly complicit audience.

This notion of ritual and routine as being *of* the small town is highlighted in productions of the play, wherein the mimed domestic chores become the very backdrop that the play famously denies its audience. In a 2019 production by the Arts Council of the Twin Counties, based in Virginia, and available to watch online, the characters of Mrs. Gibbs

and Mrs. Webb continue their silent mimicry of domesticity behind the Stage Manager as he continues to talk about other aspects of Grover's Corners and introduces side characters such as Joe Crowell, the newspaper boy. 12 With the Stage Manager facing outward and Main Street being denoted by the floorspace between the stage and the audience, the domestic performance happening behind him, where the making of breakfast is deliberately ritualized through exaggerated physical mimicry, becomes the 'backdrop' to the production. In lieu of set design or decorative staging to denote the town's physical presence on the stage, these domestic rituals (or rather, routine *as* ritual) remind us of the town's presence.

Routine, when performed in this familiar, paradigmatic manner, helps to enforce dominant small-town mythologies by preserving and archiving the recognizable visual syntax of 'daily life', which is incidentally the name given to the play's first act. Again, we see that routine can often be figured as circular, inhibiting narrative progress through its fixity; Wilder's play, built on the innocuous labours of household chores and social gossip, certainly blurs the distinction between routine and ritual. The linearity offered by the existential final act, in which the ghosts of Grover's Corners roam freely and lament their lost past, is undercut by Emily Webb's lamentations to return to her childhood and to the ostensible innocence of the town; Wilder's dominant small-town narrative is anchored firmly to the idea that the rural idyll is unimpeachable and cannot be surpassed. As such, a play as widely produced as *Our Town* ensures that seemingly benign acts of maternal domesticity are consistently reproduced in American cultural discourse – the dominant hegemony of the small town's Depression-era revival thus holds fast and reaches back to the idyllic nineteenth-century model of rural life by showing its routines unchanged.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>12</sup> 'Our Town', dir. Valerie Rives, online video recording, YouTube, 2019, <a href="https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Zscb7Dbn5TU">https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Zscb7Dbn5TU</a>>, [date accessed: 30<sup>th</sup> August 2021].

Richard O. Davies writes on domesticity and gender within the context of latenineteenth-century small towns to this end: 'the widely accepted rules of domesticity restricted women to the home [...] they were expected to be discreet in their dress and behavior [...] obedient and, at least publicly, subservient'. 13 In the dramatic world of Our Town, policed to a significant extent by the metanarratorial figure of the Stage Manager, such subservience and obedience is upheld in the play's wider utopian mythology. Like the towns that Davies explores in his text, centrally anchored to his own hometown of Camden, Ohio, Our Town represents a dominant narrative in which routine seeks to elevate the 'unchallenged moral code' of small-town life. In Act 2 of the play, Mrs. Gibbs remarks to George, prior to his marriage to Emily, that "people are meant to go through life two by two. 'Taint natural to be lonesome", intimating that a nuclear, and heteronormative, life is the only one to which an American adolescent should aspire. <sup>14</sup> These values and core beliefs at the heart of Our Town are linked directly to the routines and actions performed by its characters, from the simple opening of a kitchen window to the ceremony of marriage. Inscribed in all such acts is the narrative implication that this visible dramatic life is the only life for an American citizen.

Wilder's set-up of Grover's Corners as an infallible sanctuary is as much visible in the performance of these banal rituals as it is in how they are observed and quietly enforced by the narrative. We might say that, in dominant small-town narratives akin to *Our Town*, routine is morally freighted to some extent; the continued motions and habitual adherence to what is expected and what is 'normal' is necessary if one is to maintain status and character within their wider community. When these routines are transgressed or broken,

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>13</sup> Davies, p. 45.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>14</sup> Wilder, p. 55.

dominant texts find the necessary discord and tension that is central to narrative formation.

For example, a conversation between Mr. Webb and the town inebriate, Simon Stimson,
seems to suggest the limitations on freedom of routine in dominant, utopian small-town
narratives:

Mr. Webb: Good evening, Simon ... Town seems to have settled down for the night [...] Good evening...Yes, most of the town's settled down for the night, Simon, I guess we better do the same. Can I walk along a ways with you?<sup>15</sup>

This interaction is noteworthy for multiple reasons; firstly, the conversation is conducted with the presence of the town's police officer, Constable Warren, and so the entire interaction assumes an air of authoritarianism in which the routines of small-town life — here depicted as walking the streets at night — are intimated to be transgressive. The polite request for Simon to cease his loitering, with his own drunkenness clearly marked as an affront to the town's otherwise pristine community image, is imbued with a sense of policing the small-town hegemony. Furthermore, the curiously stunted and repetitive speech of Mr. Webb seems to allude to the fixed social routines and norms of Grover's Corners, which govern not simply how its denizens perceive and perform the world around them but in how they communicate it, too. Even with such a specific example as this, one can trace very clearly the crafting of routine and ritualistic ideology in line with small-town utopian thought.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>15</sup> Wilder, p. 47.

Ben Highmore writes on this deification of certain routines and habits, a theoretical concept which is central to this chapter's formulation of routine and ritual as intersecting, though distinct, narrative concepts specifically in small-town American texts:

The ordinary speaks of commonality without necessarily intoning the ideological set pieces of 'the silent majority', or of universality. But the ordinary also carries with it the policing exertions of the normative and the governmentality of institutions who would set out to regulate and regularise your eating habits, your cleanliness, your work routines, your sleeping habits, your political affiliations, your sexual practices and your consumption. To be marked as 'extraordinary' in your ordinariness is to be marked out collectively, to become one of a collective of people similarly marked-out as 'deviants', 'perverts', as 'idlers', 'unhealthy' and so on.<sup>16</sup>

These ideas are firmly visible in a text such as *Our Town*, in which the image of rural life is cultivated and policed to a significant extent. Routine is maintained and never deviates from the established norm; the circularity of habit is maintained both by the Stage Manager and the audience that wills Grover's Corners into being. To break from the hegemony of Wilder's play is to be cast as deviant and, given the play relies on collective projection by its audience for its metaphysical staging, this is a credible threat. Investing into Wilder's narrative structure of seemingly everyday routine, speech, and tasks requires a nostalgic, dominant ideology to take hold in the audience's perception of small-town America. Likewise, there are few better analogies to Highmore's 'silent majority' than in the thousands of Americans who annually sit in the audience of an *Our Town* production.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>16</sup> Ben Highmore, *Ordinary Lives: Studies in the Everyday* (New York: Routledge, 2011), p. 5.

It is the character of Simon Stimson, ironically, who offers one of the text's few breaks from this hermetic world of idyllic community during the play's existential final act, in which he utters the following forlorn warning:

That's what it was to be alive. To move about in a cloud of ignorance; to go up and down trampling on the feelings of those...of those about you. To spend and waste time as though you had a million years. To be always at the mercy of one self-centered passion, or another.

Now you know — that's the happy existence you wanted to go back to. Ignorance and blindness. 17

The references to ignorance and blindness, and indeed to moving through life as 'in a cloud', can all be easily read as metaphors for small-town routine and the perils of habit, and the phrase 'to spend and waste time as though you had a million years' underscores the futility of everyday life that permeates many small-town texts, notably *counter* narratives. In Grover's Corners, 'to spend and waste time' is to carry out the labours and recreations of daily life within a domestic environment beyond which wider society is regarded as suspicious. Simon's comments are a rare warning in Wilder's play concerning the imprisonment one can find in daily routine, and his own marking as a 'deviant' in the play gives him agency to avail himself of such rote, futile habits. The act of drinking becomes a transgressive retort to the utopian, domesticated world of Grover's Corners. In spite of these rare moments of self-reflexivity, positioned in the play's third act which is removed both thematically and physically from the 'Main Street' mise-en-scene, the dominant theme and register of Wilder's play is undoubtedly one of idealization. Projected and populated by

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>17</sup> Wilder, p. 89.

an exclusive, collective audience memory, Grover's Corners' daily rhythms become the rituals of an audience who seek to preserve and archive the conservative traditions of rural American life – its narrative is their narrative.

Working in an adjacent narrative framework to Wilder is Granville Hicks' Small Town (1943), a work of non-fiction rural portraiture which reconciles the ostensibly simple daily life of America's small communities with wider modernity, using the framework of dominant narrative to dissect Hicks' own adopted Grover's Corners: Grafton, New York. Post offices, general stores, and, perhaps most importantly, the American home, are encompassed in Hicks' text, a sociological study by way of memoir, but they are spoken of as merely the surface matter of small-town American life. The substance of American community, according to Hicks, is found in the patterns of ritual and routine which define one's place in small-town American community. In his own largely white, conservative town of Grafton, New York (pseudonymously referred to as Roxborough in Small Town), Hicks notes his relative 'outsider' status given his reputation as a Marxist (or 'red', in his own words) and intellectual, yet he speaks of small-town routine and ritual from an undoubtedly privileged position. His revelations about community life in Grafton, referring often to his 'constant participation' in various local roles, from fire marshal to trustee of the town's one-room schoolhouse, ultimately reveal a telling, though exclusive, portrait of small-town American routine and ritual, performed care of Hicks' innate privilege.

Indebted to this regional hegemony with regards to the small town as it is constructed and perceived, Hicks cannot help but borrow the same ideologies, and frame his writing using the same language, as dominant New England narratives like Wilder's and Rockwell's. Even in this non-fiction small-town narrative text, there is a linkage between domestic space, the small town, and the comfort of routine. For example, Hicks makes

repeated metaphorical comparisons between his own small town of Grafton and the kitchen space:

In the soft, unseasonable warmth the village seemed comfortable and homelike – not dignified, not impressive, certainly not beautiful, but not unattractive. One saw few signs either of private wealth or of public spirit. Not only was there nothing ostentatious; the whole look of the place was informal and a little unkempt – like the kitchen of an easy-going [...] housekeeper.<sup>18</sup>

This simile, one that draws together the small town, the kitchen space, and the 'housekeeper' with its contemporaneous associations of gendered maternalism, equates small-town space and the performance of routine with the domestic environment itself.

Home and town become one; 'Main Street' is internalised within the four walls of a nuclear family home, a key signature of dominant small-town narrative.

To this end, Hicks' book begins in many ways like Wilder's play, with himself as Stage Manager itemizing his daily chores, errands, and other quotidian jobs:

We got up moderately early for a Sunday, and after breakfast I did the chores; that is, I brought in a couple of baskets of wood for the kitchen stove, chopped a little kindling, and filled the water-storage tank. I listened to the news on the radio, and set out for the village.<sup>19</sup>

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>18</sup> Granville Hicks, *Small Town* (New York: Fordham University Press 2004), p. 2.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>19</sup> Hicks, p. 1.

These simple acts are coded, in the larger framing of *Small Town*, as the ostensibly virtuous routines of a dominant persona or stereotype that Hicks seems to wish to fulfil. The reality of small-town community myths is that this universal image of a community stalwart, equally happy toiling in their well-tended garden as they are socialising upon Main Street, is far from the encompassing ideal it professes to be but is instead prohibitive and exclusionary. Again, the narrative qualities of routine, as they become manifest in dominant small-town narratives, take on metaphoric purpose. The presence of routine, and the potentiality of its performance, maintains dominant small-town narrative's even keel; that each actant in the narrative is unconsciously aware of their routines, their place in the larger scheme of things, is enough to ensure the harmony of dominant narratives is never broken and is why they seem so often circular in their construction. The constant anchor of the domestic environment to both Hicks and Wilder, and the attendant chores that take place there (cooking, chopping wood, readying children for school), constitutes the repetition of actions happening elsewhere, indefinitely, by identical people. This ritualistic sameness is vital in dominant small-town narratives where the myth of idyllic community reproduces itself through the same mechanical processes of everyday life.

Completing what might be termed a dominant small-town triptych in this period, alongside *Our Town* and *Small Town*, is Sherwood Anderson's *Home Town*, a markedly different publication to *Winesburg*, *Ohio* and which 'suggests that the [small] town and its values are permanent and immutable'. <sup>20</sup> Anderson's homage to rural life claims that 'the New America was being made there [in small-town America]. It is still being made,' and it is this atemporal nostalgia for the small town of America's past that sits at the heart of

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>20</sup> David D. Anderson, 'Introduction', in Sherwood Anderson, *Home Town* (New York: Paul P. Appel, 1975), p. ix.

dominant narrative.<sup>21</sup> The importance of routines, ritual, and one's place in the community because of the fulfilment of these roles, is likewise important to Anderson just as it is to Hicks. 'The well-known small town individualist is an established figure in American life. He is in the cities as in the small town but in the small town you know him,' Anderson writes, and in doing so affirms Hicks' own assertions in the importance of community roles and their performance. Anderson's claim that one 'knows intimately their idiosyncrasies' in a small town alludes to these very routines and rituals as being the public-facing fundamentals of a small-town existence. This is again euphemised as the 'old hunger for intimacy' to the world-weary small-town expatriate, craving a return to rural life where their daily habits are accounted for, understood, and expected. The narrative implications are simply that dominant small-town life is predicated on exploration of these routines and rituals, and in upholding their apparent value as more than the sum of their parts. When Anderson notes 'the women of the little frame houses of the towns doing their fall canning', he is speaking to far more than simple harvest activities but instead to the 'women who keep our cultural tone' and thus uphold dominant small-town hegemony.<sup>22</sup> This later phrasing is problematic and unsurprising in the context of dominant small-town narrative, where WASP sensibilities and so-called 'lost innocence' are revered, and Anderson again marks how vital these seemingly banal instances of life in small towns are to narratives therein. Taken as a three, Wilder, Hicks, and Anderson exalt the everyday rituals and routines of small-town America and narrativize the seemingly mundane nothingness of daily life. The emphasis is placed, across these three texts, in such a way that it makes such chores and labours seem to be borne of the small town, and native to its construction.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>21</sup> Ibid., p. 9.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>22</sup> Ibid., p. 58; p. 74.

## 'Exemplary moments in the ordinary': Ritual and Routine in Norman Rockwell's visual work

Domestic idealisation and small-town routine find equal weight in Norman Rockwell's visual works, too, and in many ways seem the illustrated analogues of Our Town's various domestic scenes. Many of Rockwell's iconic Saturday Evening Post covers and standalone illustrations depict, among other small-town miscellaneous activity, the sacred nature of the domestic space which is, as with Wilder, coded as a nuclear, white, protestant space of harmony and conformity. Mending the Flag (1922) (fig. 17) is a perfect example of Rockwell's vignette style, wherein a slice of American small-town life is centred and elevated, and demonstrates his endorsement of prevailing domestic ideologies wherein the maternal figure is central. Here, an elderly woman sits in a large wooden chair, needle in hand, repairing the eponymous American flag draped across her lap. To her right, a tengallon hat rests atop a wooden cabinet next to her spools of thread, a curious indication of an absent assumed patriarch and a subtle nod to the frontier myths dominating American popular culture. The clear gesture toward the cultural narrative of Betsy Ross and the sewing of the first American flag is likewise clearly legible here, in a work replete with subtle nods to wider American myth structures. Rockwell's central subject is the maternal figure of the woman, the body language and delicate gestures of whom speaks to the stock-type, motherly figure seen elsewhere in his work (Mother Tucking Children into bed, 1921; Spring Tonic, 1936).

As with much of Rockwell's work, the simplicity of his quotidian domestic scenes upholds the idyllic dominant myths of small-town utopia – there is safety and comfort visible here, but for whom? Rockwell's greatest admirers, and the core readership of *The Saturday Evening Post*, were largely white and middle-class. It is to them that Rockwell's

work appeals in its nostalgia, knowing that the dominant domestic mythologies it upholds are practised and revered by the very same audience. In this way, dominant small-town narrative sustains itself in American popular culture.

Important to Rockwell's purveyance of dominant domestic mythologies is recognising that it is exactly this, an endorsement of a specific figuring of pre-war and interwar domestic space where the maternal figure is centralised. In their special issue of feminist domesticities for Oxford Art Journal, Jo Applin and Francesca Berry recognise this dominant discourse and its problems, referring to the 'mass visual representations of femininity as narrowly defined in the reductive terms of immaterial domestic labour expressed as nurture'. 23 It's difficult to consider a piece of artwork like Mending the Flag without addressing how it consummately champions these dominant ideas of domesticity and womanhood through the act of everyday routine. The act itself, conflating the mundanity of clothing repair with a grander act of national pride, seems to likewise borrow from the maternal nurturing seen elsewhere in Rockwell's work (cooking; cleaning; caring for the family) and so, through this, routine is once again depicted as virtuous in small-town narrative. Moreover, the implications of the painting are many; there is the intimation that the domestic symbol of haberdashery is the nation's progenitor – the flag, and thus the nation, derive from the care of a maternal figure in a small-town domestic environment. Likewise, the idea that the nation's fractures and divisions – dealt with in the latter years of Rockwell's career through far more politically aware paintings concerning civil rights and segregation – can be healed or 'mended' through simple domestic care again privileges the

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>23</sup> Applin and Berry, p. 5.

utopian small-town environment as the nation's origin site and the last, best hope for its future.

Routine and ritual here become a rallying cry for a divided nation, but its enforcing of dominant utopian myths and hegemony creates problematic, exclusionary narratives in its own right. Alan Wallach writes: 'one might contend that Rockwell's art remains perennially attractive as a nostalgic celebration of traditional American values – patriotism, hard work, thrift, honesty, cheerfulness – through its depiction of a mythic American world of unchanging racial, class, and gender hierarchies'. <sup>24</sup> This latter point is particularly revealing when we consider how often Rockwell's most iconic and quintessential small-town scenes are populated with only a few subjects, as well as lone figures. The 'consanguinity' of these characters, as noted by Richard Halpern, ensures that the routines and rituals presented are kept exclusive to the *Post*'s 'predominantly white readership' for whom Rockwell's art was largely intended. <sup>25</sup> This consanguinity extends to Rockwell's dominant legacy across five decades at the *Post*, where themes, vignettes, and symbolism were repeated in a similar cycle of routine that was always familiar – one of many examples of this can be seen through the character of Willie Gillis, a recurrent character of Rockwell's that appeared on 11 covers between 1941-46.

A private in the U.S army, Gillis is depicted variously as in bed, surrounded by home comforts (*Willie Gillis Home On Leave*,1941); engaging in mess-hall chores whilst reading the newspaper in a marked imitation of domestic routine (*Willie Gillis on K.P*, 1942); reading in the window seat of his new college dormitory (*Willie Gillies in College*, 1946). Gillis'

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>24</sup> Wallach, p. 283.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>25</sup> John Fagg, "The Bewhiskered Rustic, Turned Orator": Robert Robinson's Old Men, Politics, and the Saturday Evening Post', *American Art*, 27 (Summer, 2013), 68-93, (p. 78).

recurrence marks, in microcosm, Rockwell's tendency toward internal thematic repetition—whether at home, in the military, or at college there is still a fixation on both mundane chores and simple leisure; the performance of both is captured with equal attentiveness.

Rockwell's, and by extension the *Post's*, commitment to these same routines, ones which are indelibly associated with the small town even when removed from their specific context given Rockwell's career-dedication to such communities, shows a clear interest in how such simple performances of everyday life constitute narrative. The *Post's* national readership undoubtedly responded to such familiarity and recognition; they were, after all, a 'Main Street readership' as Miles Orvell terms them.<sup>26</sup> The iconography of the dominant small town ensured the survival of conservative, middle-class hegemony and there is perhaps no publication, or artist, that so prolifically supplied it as *The Saturday Evening Post* and Norman Rockwell.

Responses to such recognisable and animated performance of seemingly virtuous routine – repeated in a cycle of familiar scenes across Rockwell's career – are emblematic of dominant small-town mythologies that prevailed, as this thesis contends, in the 1930s and 40s. The pre and interwar 'revolt from the village' made way, post-Depression, for a recuperation of nineteenth-century small-town idealism as emblemized by the New England 'village'. Rockwell's scenes of small-town routine in this mode ensured a familiar territory was always visible, and knowable, to the *Post*'s readership. Affirmation to these ideas is found in Frances C. Butler's work on American graphic art where she writes of the 'ethnically and culturally stereotyped and sentimentalised social symbolism of Norman

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>26</sup> Orvell, The Death and Life of Main Street: Small Towns in American Memory, Space, and Community, p. 101.

Rockwell...'<sup>27</sup> Such symbolism is coded through the depicted domestic acts and performances – sewing, cooking, cleaning – which become the remit of the *Post's* demographic and the product of a rural utopia that is sustained by the repetition of such performances. Like a production of *Our Town* that runs indefinitely, a simulacra mapped across real American small-town experience, Rockwell's vision of dominant small-town mythology is as enduring as it is exclusive.

So often are the rituals and habits of everyday life, particularly in the domestic sphere, associated with the preservation of home life for posterity or indeed for a returning member of said household after a period of absence - Rockwell's art attests to this impulse frequently in dominant small-town ideologies. A keyword search on the Norman Rockwell Museum's digital collection reveals that six of Rockwell's pieces – from graphite sketches to full-colour oil paintings – feature the word 'homecoming' in their title; countless others bear titles with slight variations on this theme including *Home for Christmas* (1955) or *Home on* Leave (1945). Important to each of these 'homecoming' scenes are the similarities concerning domestic space shared across them all; we see that Halpern's 'consanguinity' is not limited to person in Rockwell's work but extends to place, too. In The Homecoming (1945) (fig. 18), a scene of deep pathos given the contemporaneous conclusion of the Second World War, Rockwell crafts this narrative of homecoming and domestic return through the same symbolism of routine customary to his other, less politically aware scenes. The apparatus of domestic symbolism that abounds in dominant narratives are likewise visible in *The Homecoming* – clothes hang on the line, a family dog animatedly greets the titular returning figure, and minor maintenance to the house is carried out. Elsewhere,

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>27</sup> Frances C. Butler, 'Eating the Image: The Graphic Designer and the Starving Audience', *Design Issues*, 1 (Spring, 1984), 27-40, (p. 40).

children (presumed relatives of the returning G.I.) climb down trees and hang from windows in typically carefree, Rockwellian fashion. The overall theme of this painting, like so many equivalent Rockwell scenes, is of a return to community – a community that we imagine as being of the small town even when the scene's setting is not ultimately clear.

Of course, not all readings of this image subscribe to its narratives of routine, small-town community, and positive homecoming, as with Alexander Nemerov's interpretation of the painting's 'dark' and 'unsettled' anxiety concerning the unseen horrors of war, now shouldered by the anonymous G.I.<sup>28</sup> To Nemerov, this depiction of small-town routine and homecoming evokes the 'sadness and uncertainty at war's end', though achieves this through the very same iconography and domestic leitmotifs that this chapter is concerned with: 'the apron-clad mother welcomes her son home with outflung arms, and to a meal no less'.<sup>29</sup> Nemerov likewise reads in the previously mentioned jubilation, particularly of the children climbing down to embrace their friend or relative, a contrasting demeanour in the isolated, distant figure of the G.I. who seems at once cut off from the 'buoyant' companionship before him as he does childhood itself.<sup>30</sup> Nemerov's subversive reading of Rockwell's painting – which he readily admits, upon first viewing, is a seemingly benign reiteration of domestic routine performance customary to Rockwell's style – is compelling, not least in the ways it brings out the apparent distance of the title figure through his 'downward' positioning and low elevation.

I contend that the customary stock-types visible in the windows, doorways, and yard of the scene speak to Rockwell's singular belief in the power of community and of coming

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>28</sup> Nemerov, p. 59.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>29</sup> Ibid., p. 62.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>30</sup> Ibid., p. 62.

together, made all the more poignant and necessary in the wake of war. Nemerov's claim that the soldier appears burdened and slumped down can be likewise rebuked; his posture is as straight as the countless boy scouts Rockwell depicted across his career (*Homecoming*, 1961) and the duffel bag does not, as Nemerov argues, appear to prove too unwieldy a possession. Rather, he seems ready to give himself back, possessions and all, into the comforting and familiar world of domestic routine. The anonymity of the figure, and his marked immobility compared to the scene's 'antic' atmosphere, can be read just as confidently, I argue, as a cipher for the return to American peacetime. Rockwell's faceless figure allows for such projection, and the community spirit of dominant American small-town narrative undoubtedly speaks to the *Post*'s 'Main Street readership'. They are led to feel, perhaps, that the pictured returning young G.I. is a harbinger of America's return to community life where childhood innocence can resume, a return to the dominant, exclusive narratives of small-town America that were interrupted by war. Despite my alternative interpretation to Nemerov, we both concede readily that narrative and symbolism are vital to unpacking Rockwell's work and small-town narrative lore.

Important to understanding how Rockwell's work contributes to the notion of a dominant small-town mythos and narrative structure, particularly through the use of routine, is by showing how these themes endured across his career. From earlier works like *Mother Tucking Children into Bed* and *Spring Tonic*, where maternalism and domestic life is given reverential treatment, to later works like *Homecoming* and *Father's Homecoming* (1973) with their striking similarities regarding domestic routine and ritual, it's evident that routine and ritual remained at the fore of Rockwell's process.

In *Homecoming* (fig. 19), the eldest son of the pictured family is shown returning, in full boy scout regalia, to the family home where he is greeted by his parents and younger

brother. The father stands proudly before his son, both hands on his shoulders, whilst the mother and younger brother wave from the staircase. Rockwell's use of the staircase (a repeated motif, as will be shown in Father's Homecoming) and the various family members arranged both on and below it seems a neat symbolising of the generational quality to the illustration – whether the subjects are old or young, Rockwell's domestic scenes always promote a close-knit harmony. The exaggerated expressions and body language of the family members embodies the overarching sense of performance that I find to be intrinsic in dominant small-town narratives. As with *Our Town*'s deliberate enacting of small-town domesticity – the opening of a sash window in the kitchen, for example – Rockwell takes great pains to show his characters as embodying their present moment as fully and animatedly as possible. Rockwell's frequent use of models and reference photographs in creating these scenes is crucial to this recreation of authentic, lived experience – the animated characters that flavour his quintessentially dominant, utopian narratives uncannily blur the distinction between the real and the unreal; they are at once caricatured stock types and also imitations of actors and models. It is vital to Rockwell that we believe these simple scenes of domestic routine are somehow sacred, or at the very least elevated beyond the mundane – a young man returning from scout camp is to be as equally celebrated as one returning from the military, and each return to the domestic is treated with reverence.

This generational sense of domestic community is likewise continued later in Rockwell's career through *Father's Homecoming*, which shows the featured household's patriarch returning from a day of work, with the small town in which he and his family reside visible over his shoulder through the open door. The nuclear family tableau of mother, son, and daughter rushing down the staircase to greet him with open arms and

ecstatic faces, whilst the family dog vies for attention between them, elevates the simple act of daily homecoming to something borderline spiritual. So much of Rockwell's popularity derives from his appeal to pre-war American notions of community, as Halpern notes: 'Rockwell's middlebrow admirers have always loved his work in part because it looks wistfully toward the past. It both partakes of and contributes to the myth that the world was a simpler, happier place then than now'. 31

Despite its provenance of 1973, Father's Homecoming resembles the same scenes visible fifty years earlier in his career, and the small-town environment visible beyond the door keeps this simple domestic daily ritual anchored to the dominant small-town American narratives with which Rockwell is closely associated. A painting from 1919 titled Welcome Home engages with the same themes as the previously cited illustrations. A young man, returning home from the war, is greeted by his smartly dressed father and younger brother, the only other detail in the scene is a simple wooden chair, metonymizing the unseen smalltown domestic space into which the subject is received. What can be gauged from looking across Rockwell's career in this way is not only the clear endurance of small-town domestic routine but also how he seems to marry together both notions of timelessness and period specificity; the clothing and furnishings of his interiors speak to a specific moment in time and yet the thematic continuity across the decades of his work (indeed, beyond his career at the Post) marks a certain timeless, ubiquitous quality; this is of course aided by the Post's early stylistic cover designs where vignetted scenes against white backgrounds gave the impression of atemporal, suspended scenes.

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>31</sup> Halpern, p. 9.

Like the small town's perennial use as a setting across American literature and visual media over the twentieth-century and beyond, so too does Rockwell's career show, in microcosm, the same lasting endurance of the small-town symbol and the ritualistic themes associated with it. The 'exemplary moments in the ordinary' that Halpern notes of Rockwell's catalogue rests on this belief by his audience, by readers of the *Post*, in the sanctity of domestic routine, elevated in his small-town scenes by its sheer ubiquity and through the implication of many similarly quaint lives happening simultaneously, in houses all along the imagined streets and towns of his works.

Rockwell does not always rely on such overt themes, as with the previous images describing large families gathering together in or around their homes, but does, too, allow certain illustrations to metatextually allude to the same notions of small-town routine, domestic ritual, and dominant community myths. His early illustration Save the Surface and You Save All (Painting the Little House) (1921) (fig. 20) was originally commissioned by a varnish company to promote their product's protection against 'rust and rot' and to encourage purchase of paint and varnishes sold by the business. The image, despite its commercial provenance, is actually one of Rockwell's most striking, symbolic scenes of quasi-domesticity. The young boy in the image appears to be painting, or indeed varnishing, a quaint, hand-built model house, the design of which ambiguously alludes to a bird house, a dog kennel, and a traditional clapboard home simultaneously. The overt symbolism of a young craftsman at his work, architecting a seemingly perfect miniature of rural America, seems in many ways to predicate what Rockwell's career would eventually encompass – the construction of small-town scenes through delicate suggestion and traditional, familiar domestic symbolism (New England homes; chores; pets).

It is this overt symbolism that allows us to draw from Rockwell's vignettes and intimate scenes wider commentaries on domestic life and, importantly, how his works contribute and endorse prevailing dominant mythologies concerning the domestic space.

Emma R. Power's work on the dog as a symbol of domestication is vital here, illuminating how the very same ubiquity of canine companionship in many of Rockwell's domestic scenes – not least all three included in this section – develops the dominant, small-town family unit which his art both immortalised and commercially pandered to. Power notes that, on a simple, behavioural level, 'a disciplined dog is part of the performance of respectable middle-class identities,' and the inclusion of dogs in Rockwell's family tableaus seems inherently part of this middle-class performativity. In fact, further applicability to my own theorizing of small-town narrative performance through routine and ritual arises when Power makes the following statement, concerned with sustaining middle-class identity through ritualistic performance:

The performance of respectability is central to middle class practices of home and is part of the construction of middle-class identities. The appearance of order through the maintenance of a tidy house and garden is key to this construction, as is the sense that children are disciplined and under control [...] The everyday relations through which this is achieved, including cultural decisions about the nature of mess and dirt, and acts of cleaning, are key components of home and family making. 33

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>32</sup> Emma R Power, 'Domestication and the dog: embodying home', *Area*, 44 (September, 2012), 371-378, (p. 371).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>33</sup> Ibid., p. 373.

These ideas are concomitant in Rockwell's scenes of domestic routine, which inform his wider mythos of small-town America and its dominant narratives; the 'appearance of order' punctuated with occasional moments of play and frivolity – a puppy animatedly greeting a returning member of the home – is vital to Rockwell's homogenous scenes of rural American homelife. The minor chaos present in his scenes, like the dog threatening to topple a hallway table or track muddy paws across the floor, are playfully hinted at with the promise they can be, and will be, easily fixed and restored to their pristine original calm.

In conceptualising small-town narrative, it is equally important to address not simply examples of such routine and ritual when they are presented overtly – *Man Fishing* (*contentment*) (1926) for example - but to also examine, in the rarer moments of metatextuality, the verbal and visual texts that seem to actively gesture toward this creation taking place. The previously mentioned painting, *Painting the Little House*, created near the beginning of Rockwell's career, is of course unlikely to be a conscious commentary on his formation of small-town visual narratives but, reading this image through a new framework of small-town narrative genre, and indeed within a broader career context, the symbolism of routine and preservation here can be clearly surmised. Considering how frequently in scholarship of the small town rural America is envisioned as 'passing away' (Waller, 2005; Davies, 1998; Halpern, 2006) or vanishing in some capacity, fading in the wake of industrial modernity to little more than a bygone memory, it is curious to mark an image which seems to allude to the crafting, building, and indeed *preservation* of small-town narrative (certainly not a coincidence given the commercial intent of the image).

Just as Rockwell's four-decade catalogue of illustrations comprises a vast sequence of small-town scenes where simple routine becomes the remit of magazine covers and advertisements, there is a sense in all of his works of preserving the apparent traditional

values of small-town life upon which dominant narratives frequently rely. Whether seen in the homecoming of a family member or in the quiet hobbies of a studious, budding artist, Rockwell captures his distinctly domesticated, small-town flavour by having his subjects perform their ostensibly quotidian tasks with animation, care, and earnestness. For dominant small-town narratives, both visual and verbal, the earnest performance of mundanity is the framework upon which their stories are told and how we come to confidently recognise them.

## 'The devices common to lonely people': Melancholy and isolation in *Ethan Frome* and *Winesburg, Ohio*

Given the divergent approaches to small-town narratives posited by this thesis – dominant and counter – there is, as with representations of oral culture, spatiality, and migration, both a significant disparity and occasional intersection between their representation of routine and ritual. The domestic, in particular, assumes significantly different forms in texts such as *Winesburg*, *Ohio* and *Ethan Frome*, and even visual material such as the photographs of the FSA, where dominant overtures of belonging, familial community, and safety are replaced with isolation and loneliness. Again drawing on Applin and Berry's theorizing of feminist domesticities, it's important to recognise how often these alternative domestic narratives can still become equally problematic, prone to what Applin and Berry call the 'fetishization of the domestic uncanny that constitutes, in reality, a mystification of a removal of feminist politics from the public sphere'. <sup>34</sup> They follow this by asking 'how might we resist?' this approach in scholarship, which can likewise become complicit in this

<sup>34</sup> Applin and Berry, p. 4.

fetishizing of nonnormative traditions.<sup>35</sup> Equally important to my study into how small-town counter narratives use routine and ritual to subversive effect is lucidity to common discourse surrounding the domestic as a theorized space – my aim is to demonstrate the domestic as a space both celebrated and disturbed in small-town fiction whilst remaining attentive to gendered notions of labour and ownership, marking how it becomes a contested site of routine and ritual in small-town narratives.

The notions of routine and ritual in my chosen dominant and counter texts risk this kind of exaggeration and 'fetishization'; in counter narratives like *Winesburg, Ohio* one notes how bedrooms and kitchens are haunted with their failed potential to be welcoming places to live, or taunt both occupant and reader alike with their gradual decline into sites of absent routine; they become empty staging areas without performance. Likewise in *Ethan Frome* (1911), the farmhouse becomes a stagnant, oppressive environment which is not attended to with the chores and labour rituals of small-town housekeeping; its metaphorical collapse at the novel's close seems predicated on its occupants' inability to correctly perform the domestic. Robert E. Innis, in his work on American 'placeways' notes that 'people feel a deep and persistent need for privacy and independence in our domestic lives', and yet in counter small-town narratives this desire can manifest itself in cruel moments of violence, transgression, and perversion.<sup>36</sup>

These ideas are particularly visible in *Ethan Frome*, whose central concerns lie in the rural isolation of its setting, where the domestic space is used to focalise the futility of rural routine and the unrequited love that sits at the novel's heart. Likewise, the novel's rare representations of ritual, such as the unsuccessful attempt at flight from the village late in

35 Ibid.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>36</sup> Innis, p. 54.

the novel, are narratively significant in that they, too, ultimately become futile and mark counter small-town narrative's ritualistic shortcomings. The novel's brief promises of narrative progression, denoted by my theorising of 'ritual' and marked by instances of walking in the novel, or travel, are subsumed by the overtures of banal circularity, conversely theorised as 'routine' and represented by the labours of the farm which dominate the text.

Early in the novel, Wharton's unnamed male protagonist remarks, upon the habits of the New England region and town in which he finds himself, that 'under the hypnotising effect of routine, I gradually began to find a grim satisfaction in the life. During the early part of my stay I had been struck by the contrast between the vitality of the climate and the deadness of the community'. The perception of small-town ennui is often heightened in counter small-town narratives and Wharton's protagonist here highlights how quickly the routines and social mores of small-town America can take on an almost insidious air, such is their repetitive futility. The novel's frame narrative is important here; Wharton's prologue and epilogue take place in the present and the novel's central themes - the destruction of a potentially liberating romance; the upholding of a loveless marriage and, more importantly, the inescapable nature of the rural small town – are retrospectively explored, occurring twenty-four years prior to the novel's opening.

As such, these early indications that something is indeed stagnant and oppressed in Frome's demeanour, his habits, as well as the town's wider routines, pre-empt the novel's embedded narrative of small-town futility in the face of routine and ritual. So often is the language used to describe Starkfield and its inhabitants of a particularly bleak and

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>37</sup> Edith Wharton, *Ethan Frome*, p. 39.

depressive quality, with the suggestion that in the quiet habits visible in the farmhouses that comprise the 'mute, melancholy landscape', as well as upon the sidewalks of its Main Street, there is a virulent social malaise. The 'sluggish pulse' of the town is, as we see likewise described in *Winesburg, Ohio,* a common idea in counter small-town narrative, as is the 'hard life [...] the cold and loneliness' which Ethan Frome recalls fearing Mattie, the subject of his taboo affection, will experience during her stay in Starkfield. As Herron notes, Wharton shows 'a character, moulded by a narrow environment, [who] could not escape his cheerless situation'; it is precisely in Starkfield's mundane routines that such an inescapability is coded. <sup>38</sup> Wharton's text is built on a series of unfulfilling routines that define the isolated agricultural town, from the 'hauling' of wood necessary to maintain heat during the winter to 'domesticity in the abstract' which, in Frome's anxious view, is precisely what his farmhouse and marriage represent — a space of circadian non-performance which ensures there is always a fire, always a meal, a life, but at a cost far greater than the

Tellingly, these few acts of ritualistic performance, as this study has it defined, occur in a manner highly reminiscent of other small-town narratives considered elsewhere, both dominant and counter. For example, Ethan's various walks through the surrounding hills, woods, and outskirts – often accompanied by Mattie and in deliberate rebellion again his marital status – mark the novel's sparing use of conscious performance which hints at some kind of narratorial progression or liberation, for both protagonist and reader alike. Indeed, the specific tropes that Raymond Wilson identifies as rare yet narratively significant in *Winesburg, Ohio* – 'the writing of notes, walks in the woods, the rituals of courtship and of

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>38</sup> Honaker Herron, *The Small Town in American Literature*, p. 140.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>39</sup> Ibid., p. 66.

other town-life events' 40 – are the very same small-town tropes that colour Ethan Frome's moments of infrequent pastoralism, all of which is predicated on the ultimately unrealised dream of small-town flight. These elements conspire to give a progressive sense of narrative through their ritualistic performance but Wharton ensures that they are never fully realised, and so are performed in vain.

The graveyard, likewise visible in dominant small-town narrative such as *Our Town* and perhaps most overtly Spoon River Anthology, is a charged symbol that is central to Ethan's existential crises in the novel and frequently bookends his excursions to and from the farmhouse. The Frome family headstones on the property of his farm constantly remind Ethan of the same terminus awaiting the cyclical routines he enacts each day, morbidly underscored by the fact that an ancestor bearing his own name is buried with a prominent headstone. The ritualistic nature of Ethan's walks, often appearing as a moment of lucidity, even epiphany, when compared to the claustrophobia and stasis of the farmhouse, is one that sees him taking agency in a novel that describes the otherwise complete destruction of his individual volition. Wharton is not interested, as Anderson is, in allowing the ritual of departure to reconcile an unfulfilled rural life – for her, ritual and routine become, in smalltown narrative, equally fruitless and quintessential of rural malaise. Like Masters' poetic epitaphs, in which the reader roves aimlessly, Ethan's world is forever circumscribed by this grim reminder of his own cyclical routines which lead, unerringly, to the same static fate as his ancestry.

One sequence where Wharton's commentaries on rural routine, ritual, and domesticity converge most dramatically is early in Mattie's stay, when Frome finds her

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>40</sup> Raymond Wilson, 'Rhythm in "Winesburg, Ohio", The Great Lakes Review, 8 (Spring, 1982), 31-43, (p. 31).

completing domestic chores in a manner that transcends banal routine and becomes dramatic ritual, metonymically denoting the alternative married life he seeks:

It was warm and bright in the kitchen. The sun slanted through the south window on the girl's moving figure, on the cat dozing in a chair, and on the geraniums brought in from the door-way [...] he would have liked to linger on, watching her tidy up and then settle down to her sewing; but he wanted still more to get the hauling done and be back at the farm before night. 41

What is striking about this passage is not simply the rare evocation of what we might term domestic conformity, where heteronormative, dominant traditions of domestic life are enacted in a manner that is reverential and celebratory, but also how immediately this imagery is undercut through descriptions of rural routine, comparatively banal and characterless in their descriptions. Julia Bryan-Wilson, writing in the previously cited special issue of *Oxford Art Journal* on the artist Louise Nevelson, talks of the 'house as female corpus, interior as gendered unconscious [...] these longstanding associations'.<sup>42</sup> Indeed, these 'longstanding associations' are rife in dominant small-town narrative such as *Our Town*, which begins with a very literal performance of this exact 'gendered' unconsciousness. For Wharton, however, this is only alluded to briefly before the circularity of small-town routine punctures the image. Frome is locked into the cycle of small-town routine – the narrative itself, from its title to its frame narrative, is predicated entirely on

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>41</sup> Wharton, p. 71.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>42</sup> Julia Bryan-Wilson, 'Keeping House with Louise Nevelson', *Oxford Art Journal*, 40 (March 2017), 109-131, (p. 110).

this cyclicality – and he cannot entertain these epiphanies of dominant domestic comfort for long without this cycle rendering it a fanciful daydream.

Of further interest regarding this extended passage of domestic utopia is how quickly it draws one's attention to the lack of any such space existing not simply in Frome's farmhouse but in Starkfield more generally. Indeed, the rituals of sociability upon which dominant rural life is founded – the visiting of neighbours and sharing of labours and recreation – are so conspicuously absent that Frome and Mattie need conjure an illusion of this life for themselves. R.B. Hovey, writing on Ethan Frome, ties this stunted sociability and mundane routine structure directly to gender, something which is inextricable from any discussions of domesticity more generally: 'Ethan, like most men then, was imprisoned, by a killing load of work and responsibility. The same system made women dependent, cut off in the deadening routines of domesticity, their lives deprived of variety'. 43 This is backed up by Elizabeth Ammons writing on Wharton to whom Hovey calls back, as she notes that 'it is sad but not surprising that isolated, housebound women make men feel the burden of their misery'. 44 In this reading, small-town routine becomes a twisted enemy of rural married couples, its very rhythms and sameness reminding them of their own stasis and predictability. Such ideas are firmly rooted in Wharton's text which emphasises the highly specific rural chores and labours of Starkfield as instrumental in the novel's central social collapse.

The fantasies enjoyed by Frome and Mattie at various points are made so because they lack the ability to exercise any social rituals outside of their farmhouse existence;

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>43</sup> R. B. Hovey, "Ethan Frome": A Controversy about Modernizing It, *American Literary Realism*, 1870-1910, 19 (Fall, 1986), 4-20, (p. 10).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>44</sup> Elizabeth Ammons, "Edith Wharton's Ethan Frome and the Question of Meaning," *Studies in American Fiction*, 6 (1979), 127-39, (p. 134).

Wharton shows that with the collapse of small-town ritual comes an inescapable cyclical routine that portends a kind of death. Small-town fixity, in *Ethan Frome*'s case, marks the novel's entire narrative drive – Wharton finds that her narrative progress and plot development derives from the brief moments where Frome and Mattie temporarily assail their stasis, only to have it renewed in increasingly dire circumstances.

There is, also, a metatextual interpretation of Wharton's treatment of small-town banality, domesticity, and routine. Jenny Glennon, in her comparative study of Wharton and Sinclair Lewis' regional satires and criticisms, framed through the conceit of 'Main Street', quotes Wharton's own anxieties of the 'tendency among critics to "stake out each novelist's territory and to confine him to it for life.""45 It is not necessarily an interpretative stretch, then, to suggest that in Ethan Frome, the central narrative's preoccupations with stifling routine, inescapable banality, and an overall lack of ambition is a cipher of sorts for Wharton's own fiction; the author herself fears what Ethan must ultimately confront, which is a life measured by the same daily rhythms indefinitely. All of this is linked to Glennon's 'custom of Main Street' conceit; Wharton uses the small-town setting in her narratives to better highlight stifling, unfulfilled lives being eked out in the nation. Glennon's observations pertaining to 'the tendency of so-called great American novels to rehearse hoary regional stereotypes [...] lavender-scented New England, a chivalrous South, and a bronco-busting West' find interesting representation in Wharton's specific fixation on the small town.

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>45</sup> Jenny Glennon, 'The Custom of Main Street: Wharton, Sinclair Lewis, and Middle-Class Taste', *Edith Wharton Review*, 30 (Spring, 2014), 45-59, (p. 49), quoting Edith Wharton, *The Writing of Fiction*, no further citation given.

Given her departure from these canonical regional caricatures - her New England is one where mundanity takes hold — Wharton seems to rebuke this monolithic ideology in American regionalism through nuanced, albeit deeply melancholy, small-town narrative. More than a text that simply details small-town routine as lifeless, or its brief rituals merely oneiric gestures to be buried with the next snowfall, *Ethan Frome* is a text that uses the unique parameters and generic properties of small-town narrative to deconstruct dominant domestic ideologies as well as alluding to Wharton's own fears of generic monotony. Whilst it is an early, prototypical example of what I define as small-town narrative, there can be no doubt that Wharton's novel is a modern retort to the local colour of Jewett and other late nineteenth-century writers. The pastoral idyll is replaced, in *Ethan Frome*, with an industrialising rural town that appears to confront its own obsolescence.

The destabilising of the domestic space is a recurrent aspect of small-town counter narrative, particularly prominent during the 'revolt from the village' literary period in which it was used, as in Wharton's text, to focalise the collapse of various rural routines and rituals. Sherwood Anderson's *Winesburg, Ohio* is replete with such instances of collapsed domestic routine, with both characters and their environments left unrealised, unfulfilled, by his short story cycle's close. We might say of *Winesburg, Ohio* that it is a cycle informed by failed notions of performance, of performing ostensibly normal social roles and adhering to typical social mores. Families are presented as dysfunctional, relationships struggle against Anderson's intense, complex character psychologies, and the simple acts of the everyday become repressed exercises in futility and longing.

Perhaps Anderson's most significant character in terms of exploring notions of domesticity as it is traditionally conceived is Alice Hindman, one of the short story cycle's most compelling, tragic figures. A young woman spurned by a former lover whom she was

certain to marry, Alice lives alone in a quiet room overlooking the town's Main Street whilst maintaining a quiet occupation in Winesburg's general store. This role, a performance of small-town commerce and conviviality, is a warped take on one of dominant small-town narratives' most iconic and familiar symbols: the store clerk and shopkeeper. The symbol of the shopkeeper, and the community connotations of which it is paradigmatic, appears across a variety of small-town texts both dominant and counter, fiction and non-fiction, and is vital in evoking notions of routine and everyday life. For example, bell hooks in *Belonging:* A Sense of Place (2009), which looks at Black American identity particularly in the rural South and her own experiences of 'home', or lack thereof, writes:

Like many of my contemporaries I have yearned to find my place in this world, to have a sense of homecoming, a sense of being wedded to a place. Searching for a place to belong I make a list of what I will need to create firm ground. At the top of the list I write: "I need to live where I can walk. I need to be able to walk to work, to the store, to a place where I can sit and drink tea and fellowship [sic]. 46

hooks' study, focused on rural communities, notes how intrinsic to one's sense of identity and belonging the notion of the 'store' is as well as the performed notions of community which it comprises. The 'geography of place' is fundamental to hooks' writing and she privileges, in this extended metaphor of finding one's place in the world, the small-town store as a key coordinate. The rituals of maintaining the store and serving customers, as well as partaking in the customer ritual of purchasing goods, work in tandem in small-town narrative to offer a sense of community realism; when either of these rituals are made

<sup>46</sup> hooks, p. 6.

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strange, or unmoored from typical conformity, then we begin to mark the collapse of ritual more generally.

The store as a place of 'fellowship' is an idea more commonly found in dominant small-town narratives, as explored in the introduction to David Plowden's photographic text Small-Town America (1994) where he notes the 'distinctive character and clientele' of 'Mellen's', a store in his hometown of Putney, Vermont.<sup>47</sup> Plowden's memories of early twentieth-century routine, as anchored by that most archetypal small-town referent, the general store, is typically gendered toward male community when he writes 'it was not just a store, it was the town's "club", where men would begin to arrive, singly or in groups of two or three, around four or five in the afternoon. From then until closing time at nine there was always a cluster of habitués gathered around the stove in the centre of the room[...] in the coziness and warmth the store exuded'. 48 Plowden's male-orientated vision of smalltown community is a common one among dominant small-town narratives. Although Small-Town America blurs the boundaries, as do many of the texts consulted in this thesis, between dominant and counter narrative, Plowden's introduction and wistful memories are undoubtedly inflected with hegemonic images of the storefront as ritualistic mainstay and everyday symbol. The performance of the small-town shop keeper is vital in the upkeep of everyday ritual; to tend the town's central community hub is a vital role in any small-town narrative.

As such, in *Winesburg, Ohio* Alice's inability to fulfil this aspect of small-town ritual – the role of commercial figurehead, gossip, and general symbol of small-town community – is just one of the many social norms that find themselves warped and broken in Anderson's

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>47</sup> David Plowden, *David, Small Town America*, (Harry N. Abrams, 1994), p. 17.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>48</sup> Ibid.

text. Similarly, as will shortly be discussed, Elizabeth Willard finds her maternal role made strange in the wake of George's burgeoning ambition and maturation into a young man – she roams their family home with a wraith-like presence and projects her own existential fears of small-town inertia onto her city-bound son. Anderson's cycle becomes a collection of similar unfulfillments and failures at performing these dominant social roles, habits, and routines.

The domestic environment that Alice Hindman exists in is uniquely presented, taking place largely in a single room – her bedroom – in a house she shares with her mother. It is from this vantage, looking out upon the desolate thoroughfare of Winesburg, that she recalls her affair with Ned Currie and his subsequent abandonment of her following promises of marriage. In a subversion of conservative moral codes and expected social behaviour, Alice and Ned's affair curiously sees the former perform the routines and rituals of a youthful small-town figure far more naturally than in her banal, though morally correct, present life in Winesburg. The narrative of her story 'Adventure' notes how 'together the two walked under the trees through the streets of the town and talked of what they would do with their lives' and, perhaps more importantly, how 'the outer crust of her life, all of her natural diffidence and reserve, was torn away and she gave herself over to the emotions of love'. 49 Here, through heteronormative social adherence, Alice's performance and enacting of small-town courtship and the rituals of youthful love defines her character; she is established early on in her story as surprisingly free-spirited and more hopeful than her fellow Winesburg compatriots, and it becomes clear that Anderson is pre-empting the

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>49</sup> Anderson, *Winesburg, Ohio* p. 35.

dissolution of these routines and rituals as part of Alice's wider narrative of small town repression.

The breakdown of typical small-town routine, as established in the beginning of 'Adventure', creeps insidiously into Alice's life in Winesburg. 'I am his wife', she whispers to herself when other young men display romantic interest toward her, despite the fact that this remains plainly untrue and emblematic of her unrequited love. Nowhere is this more amplified than in the privacy of her bedroom and shared domestic space with her mother, where Alice 'begins to practice the devices common to lonely people'. <sup>50</sup> The performance of her unfulfilled relationship manifests through her arranging a pillow beneath her duvet so as to give the appearance of another person lying beside her, an act of deep melancholy that speaks to the wider collapses of dominant social routine structures in *Winesburg, Ohio*.

Alice's performance of affection during this scene - 'kneeling beside the bed, she caressed it, whispering words over and over, like a refrain. "Why doesn't something happen? Why am I left here alone?" <sup>51</sup> – alerts us to Winesburg's endemic loneliness; its characters frequently question their own motives and existence in their silent homes.

This particularly potent commentary on the habitual necessity of domestic routine, the collapse of which is presented in a haunting tableau in Alice's bedroom, reaches its climax when she is described as 'trying to force herself to face bravely the fact that many people must live and die alone'. <sup>52</sup> For Alice, as with so many of the text's forlorn individuals, the ultimate small-town ritual becomes death, a morbid coda to a life lived within the confines of a provincial town. Alice's inability to assume the role of a married woman,

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>50</sup> Ibid., p. 38.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>51</sup> Ibid., p. 38.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>52</sup> Ibid., p. 40.

thwarted by the city's anonymity that ultimately seduces Ned Currie and ensures her forgotten status, marks the overall theme of Winesburg, Ohio. It is a text which takes the dominant leitmotifs of small-town ritual and routine – commercial roles, strong social groups, fulfilment of familial status – and shows them as untenable in the contemporary interwar period.

When theorising notions of performance and its place among the rituals of the everyday, Victor Turner's 'proto-aesthetic' notion of performance resonates loudly with Anderson's text and the ways in which Alice Hindman, to name but one, works to deconstruct ideas of conformity through routine. Turner writes:

In the first stage, Breach, a person or subgroup breaks a rule deliberately or by inward compulsion, in a public setting. In the stage of Crisis, conflicts between individuals, sections, and factions follow the original breach, revealing hidden clashes of character, interest, and ambition. These mount towards a crisis of the group's unity and its very continuity unless rapidly sealed off by redressive public action, consensually undertaken by the group's leaders, elders, or guardians.53

This duality of 'Breach' and 'Crisis', as stages of ritualistic collapse, seems to recur across the small-town narratives discussed in this thesis and is usefully presented in microcosm through Alice and the other vignettes described in Winesburg, Ohio. Alice's transgressive nude walk through the deserted streets of Winesburg marks her 'breach'; a young adult life defined by unfulfillment and unrequited love finally gives way to an 'inward compulsion'

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>53</sup> Victor Turner, 'Are there universals of performance in myth, ritual, and drama?', in By Means of Performance: Intercultural Studies of Theatre and Ritual (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 8-18, (p. 8).

which manifests as a defiant act of nonconformity. The 'crisis' to follow is observed by Alice, and we, the reader, in the domestic space she occupies. Again, another binary takes hold: the breach happens upon a public stage, performed on Main Street, whilst the crisis occurs privately in the repressed space of the small-town domestic environment. Alice performs the collapse of her daily life, with each act seeming to mirror an alternative temporality wherein she achieves love and fulfils her ambitions; the presence of a lover in her bed is replaced with a fictitious reproduction, just as the walks she enjoyed with Ned Currie are replaced with transgressive, lonely acts of quasi-liberation.

A common theme of counter small-town narratives is precisely this collapse of normal routine and everyday ritual, replacing the normal and the expected with a twisted reflection. Turner's model of 'social drama' performance and routine has, following the 'crisis', two further branches. The first, termed the 'redressive process', can be identified in small-town narrative when 'breaches' of social codes find their corrective in a larger institutional power – Simon Stimson's conversation with Mr. Webb and the policeman in *Our Town* marks the dominant form of this process, where the small-town routine is restored to its normal state. <sup>54</sup> For Alice, who sinks further into her loneliness – 'Alice dropped to the ground and lay trembling' <sup>55</sup> - there is no small-town institutional power to correct her nonnormative experience; the notion of this community panopticon has dissolved in Winesburg; its ritualistic institutions have collapsed and cannot be 'redressed'. As such, the final branch to Turner's hypothesis – 'reintegration' – is denied Alice, as it is most of Anderson's similarly abject and lonely characters. <sup>56</sup> Instead, the 'recognition of an

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>54</sup> Ibid.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>55</sup> Anderson, p. 40.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>56</sup> Ibid.

irreparable schism' is all that remains, the result of which, in counter small-town narrative, is the further breakdown of recognisable everyday routine and ritual both within and without the domestic environment.

The details of Alice's ultimate fading into Winesburg's dreary history, little more than a name to be forgotten among the town's headstones, mark what Henri Lefebvre's refers to as the 'deprivation of everyday life' specifically in 'rural areas', part of a complex historical tradition of changing class and religious social structures.<sup>57</sup> Of this particular decline, in which Lefebvre suggests the performing and perception of everyday life and its attendant rituals has devolved into passivity, he makes the following claim relevant to my reading of Winesburg, Ohio and other counter small-town narratives: 'And yet it is still there, this innocent life, so very near, but impoverished and humiliated, both strong and pathetic, creative but threatened, producing the future but beset with foreboding about all the imponderables that future has in store'. 58 Winesburg, as a collection of vignettes and stories of small-town life, is chiefly concerned with showing this 'innocent life' and its 'impoverished and humiliated' reality through melancholy portraits. George's uncertain departure, ostensibly 'producing the future' with his exodus but likewise 'beset' with the knowledge he will likely one day return, proves true Lefebvre's assertions. Similarly, Alice's 'creative' attempts to craft for herself some semblance of a routine life – arranging the pillows beneath her duvet or tending the general store – are all constellated around the central notion of loneliness and unfulfillment.

'So very near', as Lefebvre describes this order of everyday life, befits the general atmosphere of small-town narratives as this thesis describes them. As mentioned previously

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>57</sup> Henri Lefebvre, *Critique of Everyday Life: Volume 1* (London: Verso, 1991), p. 210.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>58</sup> Ibid.

with regards to the small town's perennial status of 'passing away', the town is figured in many narratives across verbal and visual texts as 'so very near' to total collapse; it is not just its rituals and everyday routines which are threatened with collapse, but the town's existence itself. Anderson taps into this same proximity to disaster and collapse through his characters, with Alice Hindman's domestic unfulfillment perhaps the cycle's most compelling commentary on how routine and ritual provide a bedrock for small-town existence and how, when these erode, one can become unmoored completely.

The performance of routine and ritual is central to this chapter's theorisation of small-town narrative, and these ideas all find a curious intersection in a theatrical production of *Winesburg*, Ohio put on by the Franklin and Marshall college in 2017, in which the text is updated to a present-day setting and makes use of 'non-verbal' scenes and vignettes as well as deliberate recreations of biblical and mythic tableaus, all centred around the 'daily, quotidian lives' and the 'pervasive sense of isolation' that punctuates Anderson's text. <sup>59</sup> This appeal to the text's stasis directly draws attention to how fundamental routine and ritual are in upholding this immobility; dramatic tableaus of mundane routine lend themselves to small-town narrative, as is visible not simply in the works of Rockwell and FSA photographers but, too, in literary adaptation too. *Winesburg, Ohio* is predisposed to its own cycle form via the circular habits of its denizens; it's extremely telling that these routines were made, in their own dramatic way, into a kind of ritualised performance through a stage adaptation. The text becomes a subversive undercard to *Our Town* and

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>59</sup> Peter Durantine, 'What Lies Underneath Small-Town Life in "Winesburg, Ohio"?, 6<sup>th</sup> February 2017, < <a href="https://www.fandm.edu/news/latest-news/2017/02/06/what-lies-underneath-small-town-life-in-winesburg-ohio">https://www.fandm.edu/news/latest-news/2017/02/06/what-lies-underneath-small-town-life-in-winesburg-ohio</a> [Date Accessed: 26<sup>th</sup> October 2020].

inverts the generic expectations of routine and ritual established here – the conclusion being that both are vital to small-town narrative, and can become easily blurred.

Performance and the collapse of everyday ritual are vital in the characterisation of Elizabeth Willard, the worrisome mother of Anderson's quasi-hero George Willard. Described as 'tall and gaunt' and stricken with some 'obscure disease', the descriptions of her domestic routine are likewise tinged with melancholy and suffering: 'listlessly she went about the disorderly old hotel looking at the faded wall-paper and the ragged carpets and, when she was able to be about, doing the work of a chambermaid among beds soiled by the slumbers of fat travelling men'. 60 The grief with which these routines are carried out, lacking the necessary deliberation, consciousness, and general feeling of performance we associate with 'ritual', speaks to Anderson's general atmosphere of social decline in his cycle. Even one of small-town literature's most typical, often caricatured roles – the mother - is reduced to a ghostly presence locked in a cycle of mundanity. The reference to 'travelling men' is likewise no accident; the stasis of Winesburg's denizens is something they are reminded of when carrying out the most thankless of routines. In fact, the close thirdperson narration gestures toward Elizabeth's own internalisation of these facts when Anderson writes 'it seemed like a rehearsal of her own life, terrible in its vividness'. 61 The reference to a 'rehearsal' marks the performative qualities of ritual and routine in Winesburg, Ohio, though their collapse and destruction in the wake of stagnancy results in a twisted subversion of typical performance.

Anderson's characters quickly become victims of small-town America's prevailing atmosphere of ennui and banality; even the performance of that which should feel familiar

<sup>60</sup> Winesburg, Ohio, p. 8.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>61</sup> Ibid., p. 9.

and natural – from social interaction to domestic chores – becomes estranged and defined by a kind of grief, or loss. The narrative thread that stitches together Anderson's small-town cycle is precisely this melancholic grief which, although achieved through a combination of spatial and linguistic narrative techniques, is fundamentally built on the principles of routine, ritual, and the collapse of both within the small-town environment.

## Conclusion

Small-town America's ostensible fixity marks it, at first, as narratively untenable – the assumed linearity and progression of narrative seems irreconcilable with the established rhythms, routines, and rituals of small-town life. For dominant small-town narrative, as in the dramatic work of Thornton Wilder and genre illustrations of Norman Rockwell, the immobility of these routines and the circumscription of these rituals provides the narrative foundations for an enduring idyll myth structure. As Andres Duany and Elizabeth Plater-Zyberk note in their appraisal of the small town's 'second coming', 'Americans long for community'. <sup>62</sup> The utopian representation of small-town narrative seen in dominant texts, where the inconsequential routines and rituals of daily life amount to a hermetic world that resists all change, ensures the survival of this community myth for the white, middle-class audience with whom it has long been associated.

Elsewhere, in counter small-town narratives these same conditions of rural life — fixity, immobility, the presumed circularity of routine — conspire in creating an environment that is insular, provincial, and the precise antithesis to true community. What this chapter

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>62</sup> Andres Duany and Elizabeth Plater-Zyberk, 'The Second Coming of the American Small Town', *The Wilson Quarterly*, 16 (Winter, 1992), 19-48, (p. 19).

has sought to do, through a narratological interrogation of routine and ritual as discrete though interrelated terms, is further the extant scholarship dedicated to explaining how narrative takes form, how it is represented and related, and what the resulting consequences are. This chapter has explored the dominant narratives of Thornton Wilder's *Our Town* and genre illustrations of Norman Rockwell, both of which offer a typical representation of small-town routine and ritual as inconsequential and instantly familiar to their intended, exclusive audience. By looking at how the performance of certain domestic rituals is attended to in the works of both, I have shown how dominant small-town narrative derives a safety, even a comfort, in the circular, non-linear performances of everyday life which threaten no change nor repercussion. As Emanuel Levy notes, 'Wilder was interested in exploring the most universal elements in everyday life'; nothing is more universal, dominant small-town narrative suggests, than the everyday acts of homemaking, social exchange, labour, and recreation. <sup>63</sup>

Of course, these everyday acts are codified through a predominantly white, middle-class presentation and do not represent a 'universal' vision of small-town America; the obverse is presented through counter small-town narrative where the very same routines and rituals are presented as stifling, oppressive, and emblematic of a deep-rooted traditionalism. Edith Wharton's *Ethan Frome* and Sherwood Anderson's *Winesburg, Ohio* present rural, small-town life to be riven with melancholy, repressed psychosexual feelings, and a more undefinable condition borne from repeating the same rhythmic routines on a daily basis, one we might term the 'malaise of the small town'.<sup>64</sup> We are confronted with

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>63</sup> Emanuel Levy, *Small-Town America in Film: The Decline and Fall of Community* (New York: Continuum, 1991), p. 72.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>64</sup> Davies, p. 186.

'terrible' 'rehearsals' of these routines and rituals which lack any kind of narrative linearity, much like in dominant narratives, only the performance of them alone is no longer sufficient to those whose stories are being told. 65 Characters like Ethan Frome, George Willard, and indeed Willa Cather and Mary Austin's protagonists, quickly find the futility in their quotidian actions outweighs any meaningful experience or interaction with the world.

Dreams of escape – typified by the adolescent ritual of leaving home fulfilled by George Willard, Olivia Lattimore, Thea Kronborg, for example – offer brief respite for precious few of the small-town denizens depicted in these counter texts, the majority of whom are left to continue 'practicing the devices common to lonely people'. The banal everyday becomes unassailable, and the narrative pressures of stasis and transience intersect and clash within both dominant and counter texts.

aspects to a wider narratological framework in small-town narrative, across verbal and visual texts, it becomes clear that the 'fascination with the quotidian and local that ground regionalist sketches' are more than simply decorative exemplars of Barthes' *l'effet du reél* but serve a strict narrative attraction and purpose. <sup>66</sup> By unpacking small-town narratives across my given period through the lens of daily minutiae, and by examining the ways in which authors and artists represent the varied notions of ritual and routine, we begin to see the shape that small-town narrative takes across its various media forms. It is a genre, a style of verbal and visual representation, which is fixated on the banality of everyday life and of what happens when the characters themselves become aware of this banality. For some, it is a reassuring, rhythmic comfort, its 'subliminal hum' lost among the aurality of

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>65</sup> Anderson, Winesburg, Ohio, p. 8.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>66</sup> Smith, *The American Short Story Cycle*, p. 19.

domestic appliances and social chatter. For others it is a repetitive reminder of their own futile position in the world, as they remain caught in a mundane choreography.

## **Thesis Conclusion**

There can be no doubt that the small town remains a complex, vital key to understanding historic and contemporary cultural production in America. As Ima Honaker Herron wrote in 1939, and which remains true today, 'throughout [our] national history the small community has occupied a place of large influence'.¹ It remains deeply intriguing that in a nation so young, and which industrialised and modernised with such speed, the bedrock community structure of small-town America should continue to provoke such critical discussions, even as post-war urbanity became the nation's more familiar and iconic spatial symbol. The so-called Main Street-era that this thesis focuses upon marks the codification of a clear narrative genre which has enjoyed significant growth and expansion in the decades beyond. Small-town America is more than a catch-all term for a homogeneous, vaguely utopian nineteenth-century idyll, but rather it is a symbol of American community that is variegated, elusive, and a crucial lens through which to study the nation's cultural imaginary.

Perhaps the most important critical intervention posited by 'Talk of the Town' is the notion of *dominant* and *counter* small-town narrative, an overlapping, unstable binary that loosely encompasses the majority of 'small-town texts'. What is perhaps most important to state from the findings posited in this thesis is the slippage and intersectionality of these two terms; such binaries and taxonomies are frequently how the small town has come to be culturally perceived and so I have used a similar construct here to showcase formal differences and, importantly, overlaps. The *dominant* small-town narratives which originated with nineteenth-century Romanticism, local colour writing, and adjacent

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup> Honaker Herron, *The Small Town in American Literature*, p. 3.

regionalist work, are the more historically prevalent of the two modes in general American media. From New England village texts like Sarah Orne Jewett's The Country of the Pointed Firs through to Thornton Wilder's Our Town and Sherwood Anderson's nostalgic paean Home Town, across my period of study and into the contemporary moment there is an enduring myth of small-town community coded through this dominant tradition. The chief attributes of this mode, which have been identified across form and media in the previous chapters, include a homogenous population (often WASP Americans), a strict and authoritarian adherence to social mores and codes, and the notable absence or repression of anything deviant to the established status quo. It is, as Brookes Wortham-Galvin and many other scholars agree, a 'pastoral idyll' ideology that champions the 'utopia of the small town'. <sup>2</sup> Conversely, the *counter* narrative form, helpfully represented in this study through the 'revolt from the village' writers of the 1910s and '20s, as well as being visible in the more nuanced photography of the FSA, is defined by a rebuttal of these dominant claims. Counter small-town narrative instead marks the exclusivity and racial segregation inherent in rural community; it satirises the social authoritarianism of insular towns via protagonists that rally against such strictures, and it presents indices of sociability such as gossip to be irrevocably damaging.

This duality at the heart of small-town narrative provides the first step in defining it as a clear generic form that can be applied to a range of primary materials, both historic and contemporary. It accounts for the often diametrically opposed approaches to representing small-town America, in which one of these two forms is normally assumed, by suggesting both are part of a wider *small-town narrative* form, and frequently intersect in important

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>2</sup> Wortham-Galvin, p. 23; Halpern, p. 11.

ways. Unifying these seemingly distinct approaches, and showing them to be far more proximal in theme and construction than is first evident, is the common syntax that exists between them. That is to say that the four themes identified in this thesis, each attended to in a discrete chapter, are mutually visible in both *dominant* and *counter* small-town narrative, with their application modified depending on the register of the text and the context of publication. The prevalence of these four distinct themes in an array of texts classifiable as 'small-town', from the exalted utopia of Thornton Wilder to the lonesome Midwest depicted by Sherwood Anderson, marks a common language and framework by which small-town texts are constructed and reproduced across media. The resulting conclusions about form and genre are such that many texts, we readily find, often fit *each* category and exclusivity is rare. This narratological study posits that these four themes, across *dominant* and *counter* small-town narratives, represent the chief referents and signifiers of small-town narrative as a genre. When considered together, and by examining both verbal and visual texts in my period of study (and, indeed, beyond), the emergence and codification of small-town narrative can be in no doubt.

Orality, as the first posited theme in my theorisation of small-town narrative, quickly reveals itself as a pervasive influence in texts which articulate rural community stories. The hum of gossip and rumour, the subtle sociability of small talk on the sidewalks of Main Street, and the variously gendered forums of the barber shop, the tavern, and the home space, all feature prominently in small-town narratives both dominant and counter alike. This chapter's consideration of such aspects of oral tradition through the framework of critics like Patricia Meyer Spacks and her unique conceptualising of gossip as a 'new territory', and indeed as something which narrativizes the seemingly banal and unnarratable, is founded on the principle that small-town narrative is part of wider oral

traditions in American culture.<sup>3</sup> Greg Camfield's assertion that 'gossip [...] can be both funny and poignant, both abusive and conducive to building community' marks just how duplicitous a symbol it is in small-town texts, which themselves are likewise highly changeable.<sup>4</sup> Small-town narratives frequently deal with proximity and anxieties of distance - Main Street to city, hometown to downtown – so it is natural that the proximal nature of oral culture and its most prolific social manifestations (gossip, rumourmongering, storytelling) should so greatly inform the narrative register of these texts, both verbal and visual.

examining how the physical and figurative landscapes of small-town America is equally vital to understanding small-town narrative construction. The reproduction and invocation of small-town spaces, both familiar and subversive, recurs across small-town narrative media and a mutual syntax of referents and symbols are used in both dominant and counter small-town texts to render the space tangible. With Robert E. Innis arguing that America can no longer be seen as an 'assemblage' of individual places but as a collection of 'zones of influence', one quickly finds that there are few greater examples of such 'zones' than the small town itself. This influence is exerted in a number of ways, notably through familiar and recognisable referents that metonymize small-town community. Exploring this further, this study uses the spatial theories of Yi-Fu Tuan, Robert Tally, Tim Cresswell, and others, to show how small-town *topoi* are fundamental to its narrative construction. Placemindedness, we learn, is innate to both narrator and audience.

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>3</sup> Spacks, *Gossip*, p. 15.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>4</sup> Greg Camfield, 'Jewett's "Country of the Pointed Firs" as Gossip Manual', *Studies in American Humour*, 9 (2002), 39-53, (p. 43).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>5</sup> Innis, p. 41.

Small-town narrative as a genre and theoretical framework further relies on the representation and semantics of mobility and migration. From the spatial compression ushered in by the rise of the automobile, where small towns found themselves no longer adrift from the nation at large but rather vital contributors to renewed urban migration, to the anxieties of race and social segregation in rural communities, issues of movement both social and physical are stitched into the fabric of small-town America. Janis P. Stout's theorising of the journey narrative in American literary traditions is a useful starting point for this study, where she asserts that 'it has been a literature of movement, of motion, its great icons the track through the forest and the superhighway'. Importantly, in the context of this transmedial study, it is not just the literature of America that is concerned with movement and motion but specifically small-town American narrative, both verbal and visual.

Understanding racial elision, segregation, and, in rarer instances, positive minority representation, in these small-town texts is crucial. The frequent metonym of 'the other side of the tracks' is visible across the primary material consulted in this thesis, from Thornton Wilder's *Our Town* and its segregated Polish population, 'Mexican Town' and its distinct racial separateness in Cather's Moonstone, to Ben Shahn's London, Ohio photography which turns this title and symbol into a social investigation. This attention to marginal demographics is paramount in counter small-town narrative, as Nicholas Natanson reminds us in his text *The Black Image in the New Deal*: 'on street corners and in courthouse squares, in stores and barbershops, in churches and lodges, in taverns and juke joints, blacks maintained worlds of social interaction whose conventions were as central to their lives as

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>6</sup> Stout, *The Journey Narrative in American Literature*, p. 3.

the price of cotton or the size of a paycheck'. In dominant small-town narratives, such details are easily lost in the mythologies of WASPish American community; it is only when narratives like Shahn's photography, or Cather's prairie novels, engage with such themes that their prevalence (and subsequent suppression) in small-town narrative becomes clear.

'Talk of the Town' suggests that all such ideas, from orality to spatiality to migration, are bound to the seemingly polarized, though fundamentally intersecting, notions of ritual and routine. This thesis argues that 'ritual' speaks to a prescribed and deliberate action or ideal that requires a certain performance; this latter term is likewise vital to understanding how small-town narrative utilizes moments of ordinariness for narratological effect. Of course, the 'rituals' and 'routines' of everyday life are ubiquitous across media and genre and are not exclusive to small-town narrative, but what this thesis contends is that they do offer a mutual language through which small-town narrative is often articulated. As Ben Highmore writes, 'if everyday life is inventive, it also requires an invention by the writer of a language that will make possible the registering of the everyday'. 8 Small-town narrative as a genre form emblemizes this very language, or system of mutual themes and referents, through which 'everyday' identity is explored and critiqued. Narratologically, small-town texts rely fundamentally on an attention to the slow and deliberate activities of daily life; if Main Street is indeed 'the nation writ small', then it privileges such ostensibly mundane experience because it represents a drive toward the real and familiar.

What can be most clearly understood when undertaking a study of this kind, which takes a seemingly niche, or at least unassuming, American setting and privileges it as a distinct narrative form, is just how fundamental this kind of theorization is in wider

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>7</sup> Natanson, The Black Image in the New Deal: The Politics of the FSA, p. 3.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>8</sup> Highmore, p. 153.

American Studies. Many of the canonical studies and secondary materials I have considered in the course of my narratological study take a facet of American cultural or national identity and use it as a lens through which to comment on issues far beyond its remit.

Classic urban studies such as the Lynds' influential *Middletown* takes as its charge an apparently unextraordinary Midwestern town and from it taxonomizes American social practice, economic growth, and community norms. Likewise, Jane Jacobs and her study of urban America speaks to wider issues of nation building and image making in the so-called American century. This thesis, continuing in this same vein, and occupying the intersection between cultural and literary study, posits that the same wider ramifications and potential for extrapolation exists fundamentally in the symbol of small-town America. 'Main Street' recurs throughout this study in a manner akin to the cultural studies of Miles Orvell, Ryan Poll and Nathanael T. Booth – it is a metonym for the nation, and a cultural shorthand for complex community ideologies.

'Talk of the Town' furthers these extant cultural studies by suggesting that Main

Street itself is a genre, a form, and not simply a setting or backdrop. By parsing this enduring symbol in American culture, through the four key themes identified in this study, this thesis proves that small-town narrative has recognizable properties, traits, themes, and referents that exist beyond single forms or disciplines, and that are instead part of a much larger constellation that reaches all manner of American demographics and experiences.

Small-town America's continued popularity in American culture, from contemporary genre television (*Stranger Things; Schitt's Creek*) to popular investigative journalism (*S-Town*), necessitates the need for this very study to resolve how and why this symbol of American identity holds such narrative significance and potential to artists, authors, and creatives. Its manifold appeal, whether it is invoked in a dominant and nostalgic tradition or

instead used to reckon with America's provincial shortcomings and wider issues with race and prejudice, cannot be summarized neatly. Rather, *how* such an appeal or preoccupation is broached and reconstituted formally, as *small-town narrative*, has been answered by this thesis.

The power of Main Street, the push and pull it inflicts upon American citizens both fictive and otherwise, is evident. Its centrality to both American image construction and deconstruction is likewise fundamental when the nation is scrutinized; as a narrative form, few genres more readily take to task the building blocks of American community as smalltown narrative. If we are to reduce America's central anxieties over space, place and politics to the rural and urban binary – Main Street versus Wall Street – then it seems there is much to gain in terms of narrative significance from the former when its popularity is considered, especially through the dominant narratives that exist in cinema, historic photojournalism, and other popular forms. A closer look at the texts that comprise small-town, or Main Street, narrative's beginnings as a genre show both critical and reflexive approaches to rural community as well as nostalgic and reverential representation. The evolution of this narrative has ebbed and flowed across the twentieth-century, and this study gestures toward the flashpoint of the interwar years and Depression as periods in which small-town fixations reached fever pitch. The foundations laid by the cultural output of these decades established what I can confidently call one of the most enduring cultural fascinations in American history.

What are we to make, then, of America's small-town archipelago, so distinct from its urban centres, which reappears with perennial certainty in American film, literature, television, and visual art? What is it about this ubiquitous American space that is so alluring, or that proves so rich? The dreams and ambitions that historically founded such American

spaces are undeniably exclusive ones, and the cost of those precluded from living that particular 'American Dream' is exorbitant. Small-town narrative, as a genre and form, redresses this historic tendency toward 'dreams' and dominant, utopian mythologizing of American community by suggesting that there is more to Main Street than picket fences and white, protestant homemaking. Through exploration of dominant and counter narrative forms, acknowledging that this is a useful taxonomy regarding how small-town America is culturally perceived, this thesis articulates why this community space and symbol came to be so pervasive, so compelling, in the cultural imaginary of twentieth-century America. So too has this thesis reveled in the rich critical material born of the genre slippages, binary intersections, and narrative homogeneity that exists between this ostensible *dominant* and *counter* binary, concluding that small-town texts are frequently both - and complicatedly so.

Like the thoroughfares that branch off from the many thousand Main Streets bisecting American towns the nation over, this manifold study of verbal and visual material returns time and again to a central axis: America *is* its small towns, and the stories and denizens found there, along with the artists who repeatedly choose to represent and narrate them, are, likewise, America.

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## Appendix

Fig. 1 - Ben Shahn, *Scene in Smithland Kentucky*, photograph from Farm Security Administration, (Library of Congress, 1935)



Fig. 2 – Ben Shahn, *After Church, Sunday in Little Rock, Arkansas*, photograph from Farm Security Adminstration, (Library of Congress, 1935)



Fig. 3 - Ben Shahn, *Scenes at Buckeye Lake Amusement Park, near Columbus, Ohio*, photograph from Farm Security Adminstration, (Library of Congress, 1938)



Fig. 4 – Bernard Hoffman, 'Political Forum', from *A Small Town's Saturday Night, Life*,

December 1<sup>st</sup>, 1940



Fig. 5 - Bernard Hoffman, 'Ila Dean enjoys a 10c soda', from *A Small Town's Saturday Night*, *Life*, December 1<sup>st</sup>, 1940



Fig. 6 - Bernard Hoffman, 'The College Hangout', from *A Small Town's Saturday Night, Life*,

December 1<sup>st</sup>, 1940



Fig. 7 – Norman Rockwell, *Three Ladies Gossiping*, New Rochelle, New York, 1928



Fig. 8 – Norman Rockwell, *The Gossips*, Arlington, Vermont, oil on canvas, 1948



Fig. 9 – Norman Rockwell, *Post Toasties*, New Rochelle, New York, 1920



Fig. 10 – Norman Rockwell, *Welcome to Elmville*, oil on canvas, New Rochelle, New York, 1929



Fig. 11 – Norman Rockwell, Walking to Church, oil on canvas, Arlington, Vermont, 1952

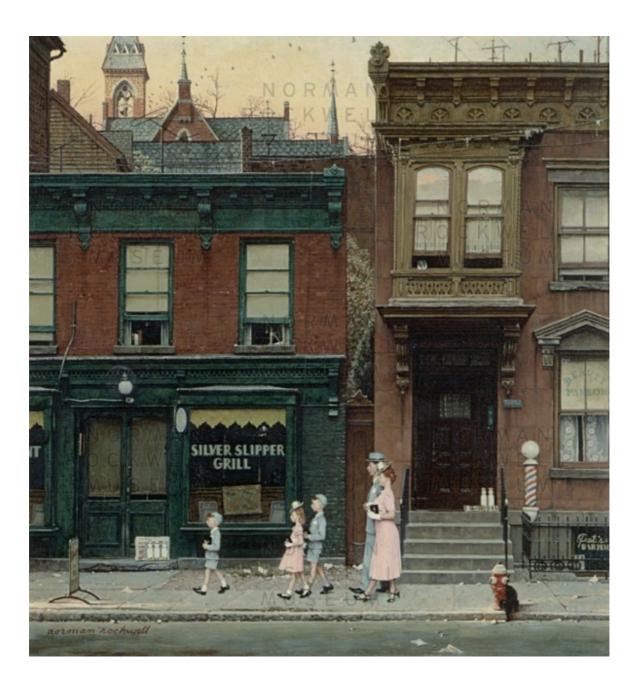


Fig. 12 – Norman Rockwell, 'He's passing his home town', from *Night on the Troop Train*,
Arlington, Vermont, 1943

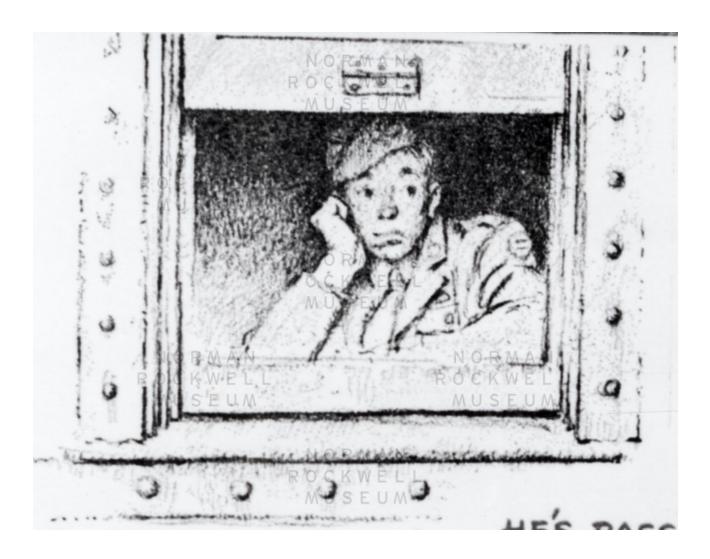


Fig. 13 – Norman Rockwell, *Home For Christmas*, Stockbridge, Massachusetts, 1967



Fig. 14 – Ben Shahn, 'Saturday afternoon in London, Ohio, 1938', from *The Other Side of the Tracks* series, 1938



Fig. 15 - Ben Shahn, 'Saturday afternoon in London, Ohio, 1938', from *The Other Side of the Tracks* series, 1938



Fig. 16 - Ben Shahn, 'Saturday afternoon in London, Ohio, 1938', from *The Other Side of the Tracks* series, 1938



Fig. 17 – Norman Rockwell, Mending the Flag, oil on canvas, New Rochelle, New York, 1922



Fig. 18 – Norman Rockwell, *The Homecoming*, oil on canvas, Arlington, Vermont, 1945

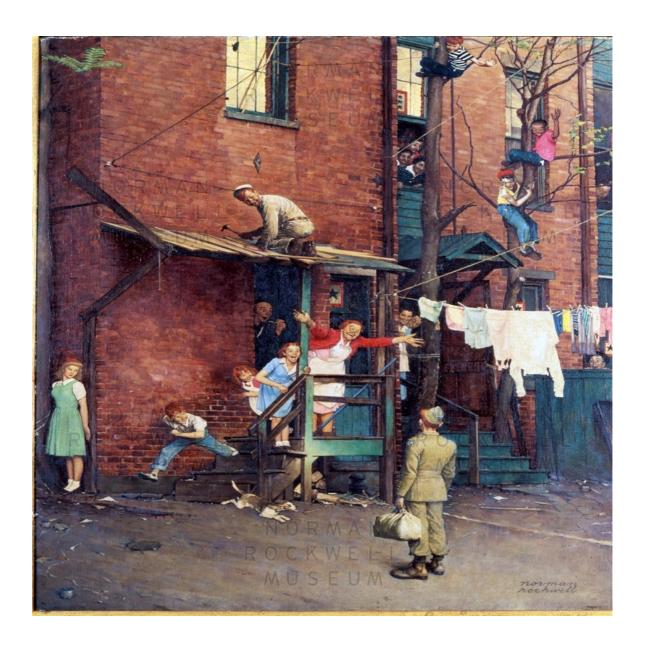


Fig. 19 – Norman Rockwell, *Homecoming*, oil on canvas, Stockbridge, Massachusetts, 1961



Fig. 20 – Norman Rockwell, Save the Surface and You Save All (Painting the Little House), oil on canvas, New Rochelle, New York, 1921

