Death and Dying in Minnesota Small Town Literature

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Contents

German Abstract

Die Identitätsproblematik ist ein wichtiges Thema in der Literatur und Literaturkritik, weil Identität dem Individuum oder gesellschaftlichen Gruppen die Möglichkeit bietet sich gegen Andere abzugrenzen. Folglich wird diese Thematik häufig in der Regionalliteratur des amerikanischen Mittleren Westens aufgegriffen. Der Mittlere Westen ist eine Region, die kulturell besonders schwierig zu definieren ist, da der amerikanische Siedlungsprozess die Bildung einer definitiven kulturellen Identität behindert hat. Aus diesem Grund wechselten die mit dem Mittleren Westen assoziierten Werte und Bilder häufig. Im Laufe des 20. Jahrhunderts wurde der Mittlere Westen immer mehr als eine Region angesehen, in der amerikanische Werte wie Moralität, Nachbarschaftlichkeit oder Gleichheit aufrechterhalten werden können, während sie in fortschrittsorientierteren amerikanischen Regionen keinen Platz mehr haben. Daher konnte sich im Mittleren Westen nur eine unsichere und unklare regionale Identität bilden, die sich häufig auf die Kleinstädte stützt. Da die Region sehr ländlich geprägt ist, verkörpern die Kleinstädte die Mythologie des Mittleren Westens als eine stabile, unveränderliche Heimat, die eine Rettung von den Problemen der modernen und globalisierten Welt bietet.

Diese Problematik wird häufig in der regionalen Literatur aufgegriffen, z.B. in der Regionalliteratur von und über Minnesota. Schon seit Sinclair Lewis' bedeutendem Roman *Main Street*, der 1920 veröffentlicht wurde und die amerikanische Kleinstadtmythologie hart kritisierte, nimmt die Literatur aus Minnesota einen wichtigen Platz in der Perzeption der amerikanischen Kleinstadt ein. In den Romanen *Lake Wobegon Days* von Garrison Keillor, *The Cape Ann* von Faith Sullivan, und *Staggerford* von Jon Hassler steht die Kleinstadt in Minnesota im Mittelpunkt, wobei das Thema des Todes eine tragende Rolle in diesen Romanen und in der Darstellung der Identitätsproblematik des Mittleren Westens spielt. Obwohl der Tod in der amerikanischen Gesellschaft gern verschwiegen, versteckt oder beschönigt wird, spielt Mortalität, aufgrund der extremen Wetterbedingungen, gerade für das Leben der Menschen im Mittleren Westen eine nicht zu unterschätzende Rolle. Folglich, wird die Todesthematik in den Romanen von Keillor, Hassler und Sullivan verwendet, um die Mythologie der amerikanischen Kleinstadt in Frage zu stellen und ihre Schwachstellen aufzuzeigen. Dennoch wird die Todesthematik von den Autoren auch für die Konstruktion einer relevanten Identität für Minnesota und den Mittleren Westen benutzt. Eine Identität, die die Mehrdeutigkeit und Unsicherheit der Region akzeptiert und als vitalisierende Faktoren versteht.

1. Introduction

> [The] central ambivalence within Midwestern life – a lingering feeling for an Edenic past as represented by the garden myth while in full pursuit of progress and the distant towers of refinement and culture – has enriched its literature in the sense of providing it with … an underlying complexity of conflicting and unresolved attitudes. The Midwest perceived as either the warm center of the world or the ragged edge of the universe has usually been a formula for imaginative work singing the folk charm of the region or dismissing it out of hand as beyond redemption. Held together in some degree of tension, on the other hand, the crosscurrents of Midwestern attitudes have now and then resulted in work of satisfying depth and implication.[1]

In this paragraph from his book *The Midwestern Ascendancy in American Writing*, Ronald Weber addresses the problematic issue of Midwestern regional identity and writing. "Identity" remains an important topic in literature as it provides the individual and larger social groups with a unique self-image in relation to other individuals or groups.[2] However, designating a regional identity, which is a major concern of regional studies and regional literature, is a challenging task since the definition of a region is often unclear and dependent on who and what defines it. As Michael Kowalewski argues, "[t]he critical assumption seems to be that region or a sense of place is not an imaginative factor that can be internalized and struggled with in the same literarily rewarding ways that writers struggle with issues of race, class, and gender."[3]

More than other US regions, the Midwest defies the delineation of a distinct and coherent cultural identity that sets it apart from the rest of the United States. Although often believed to be rather homogenous, the Midwest is a geographically, economically, and socially diverse region with "varieties of Midwestern experience." This variety complicates the issue of a unifying identity additionally and "suggests to some that the Midwest is not a region at all in any meaningful sense but merely … a Great Valley of flattened space between the Alleghenies and the Rockies."[4] A central issue herein is the settlement process of the Midwest, which hindered the development of unifying local traditions. Instead, the region has come to embody the United States itself instead of a distinctive section. The Midwest is often portrayed as but also

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[1] Ronald Weber, *The Midwestern Ascendancy in American Writing* (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1992) 23-24.

[2] Kay Deaux, "Identity," *The Oxford Encyclopedia of Psychology*, ed. Alan E. Kazdin, vol. 4 (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2000) 222-24.

[3] Michael Kowalewski, "Writing in Place: The New American Regionalism," *American Literary History* 6.1 (1994): 174.

[4] Weber 7.

represents itself as a repository for cherished American values (e.g., morality, friendliness, community, or equality), which seem to have lost their importance in an increasingly urban and technologically defined America.[5]

The uncertain and ambiguous Midwestern identity has always been a central theme in the Midwestern regional literature, especially when concerning the small town setting. According to Diane Quantic, author of several widely referenced critical books about Great Plains literature, the Midwest largely draws its self-perception from its small towns since they provide a sense of being and rootedness in an often featureless landscape and in a nation defined by turnover and movement. Furthermore, they have become the embodiment of pastoral values and morality in the American conscience.[6] Thus, the Midwestern small town has turned into "one of the most important icons of American self-mythification."[7] Minnesota literature in particular has played an important part in the formation of the Midwestern small town image. Sinclair Lewis's novel *Main Street* (1920), for example, portrays the Minnesota small town as a repressive and judgmental place. Thereby, Lewis questioned the truthfulness and actuality of the Midwestern small town myth and changed the pastoral image of the small town effectively. Another novel about a Minnesota small town that has affected the national perception of Midwestern towns is Garrison Keillor's *Lake Wobegon Days* (1985), published in the wake of his successful radio show *A Prairie Home Companion*. In contrast to Lewis, Keillor emphasizes the "folksy charm" of the small town, instead of "dismissing it … as beyond redemption," which spurred nostalgia for Midwestern small towns.[8]

However, Keillor's *Lake Wobegon Days* as well as two other Minnesota small town novels, namely, Faith Sullivan's *The Cape Ann* (1989) and Jon Hassler's *Staggerford* (1977), were published during a time when regionalism began to rise to new critical interest in an increasingly globalized world. Although regionalism is often understood as a "code … for spatial and temporal rootedness, and, accordingly, for the rejection of modernity," the attention paid to local communities as a means of creating a sense of identity should not be discredited.[9] Although, a variety of literature concerning the topic of the Midwestern small town is available, novels seem to have had the most influence on the perception of the Midwest. The structure of novels

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[5] Weber 7.

[6] Diane D. Quantic, "The Unifying Thread: Connecting Place and Language in Great Plains Literature," *American Studies* 32.1 (1991): 69.

[7] Heinz Ickstadt, "The Creation of Normalcy," *Revue Française d'Études Américaines* 85 (2000): 9.

[8] Weber 24.

[9] Philip Joseph, *American Literary Regionalism in a Global Age* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State UP, 2007) 9-10.

allows the authors to explore "the nature of the human heart in the small town setting" and the "meaning of the small town" more extensively than other literary venues. Thus, the writers are able to create plots and characters that raise "questions or doubts" in order to enable the reader to "see the unseen, recognize the unspoken, understand the unfathomable," and decide "where the truth lies."[10]

Lake Wobegon Days, *Staggerford*, and *The Cape Ann* use various methods to explore Midwestern and Minnesotan identity; yet a recurring theme in all these novels is death. Death itself holds a difficult place in US culture because it is generally tabooed, beautified or rejected within American society. This 20th century development is, for example, visible in the embalming of the deceased or in the relocation of dying and elderly society members to hospitals or nursing homes. Still, as mortality and decay are an ever-present factor in the unreliable and extreme nature of the Midwest, death occupies an integral place in Minnesota small town fiction. On the one hand, death conflicts with the idea of the Midwestern pastoral paradise since it reveals the flaws and ambiguities of the mythic Midwestern small town community, which is portrayed in *Lake Wobegon Days*, *Staggerford,* and *The Cape Ann* via the decay of the small town setting and the societal marginalization of social misfits. On the other hand, the deconstruction of the Midwestern small town myth through the theme of death opens the door for a new identity, one that accepts the tension within the region as insolvable yet vitalizing.

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[10] John Miller, "The Search for Meaning in the History of the Small Town," *The Prairie Frontier*, eds. Sandra Looney, Arthur R. Huseboe and Geoffrey Hunt (Sioux Falls: Nordland Heritage Foundation, 1984) 161-62.

2. The Context of Midwestern and Minnesota Small Town Literature

2.1 Regionalism and Sense of Place

The actual meaning of regionalism and the region remains highly disputed in academic discussions. Most critics now agree that the concept of regionalism and the region is not only based on geography but also on societal images and constructions.[11] Generally, there seems to be an agreement that a region can be at least defined as "middle space [i.e.,] less extended than a nation … but wider than the social space of a group."[12] Robert Jackson, professor of cultural and historical studies at the University of Virginia, even claims that the indistinctness of regions is actually a positive force within the American context since it makes the "cultural space" uncertain and ambiguous and allows the American culture to be fluid, open and, adaptable.[13] Owing to the general blurriness and vagueness of geographical definitions of regions, "the place of regionalism [must remain] a rhetorical one."[14]

Indeed, the term regionalism is used for a variety of rhetorical concepts, for instance, "the unifying principle of a corpus of literary texts … the attachment of a writer to a particular place, the diversity of writing within the larger body of a national literature, or a kind of ideological consciousness or discourse."[15] In order to create some boundaries for regionalism in critical writing, the concept is often set in opposition to nationalism, i.e., the focus on the nation state and creation of a national identity. Regionalism is believed to be "a more appropriate frame within which to read literature than nationalism" because it seems easier to grasp.[16] Hence, many regionalist writers argue that regional writing is not influenced by national burdens and that its centering on the specific can offer insight into the universal human nature.[17] Nevertheless, many contemporary critics argue that regional literature should avoid "focusing on either the unique particularity or the underlying universality of [the]

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[11] Herb Wyile, Christian Riegel, Karen Overbye, and Don Perkins, "Regionalism Revisited," introduction, *Re-Evaluating Regionalism in Canadian and American Writing: A Sense of Place*, eds. Christian Riegel and Herb Wyile (Edmonton: Alberta UP, 1998) x.

[12] Arnand Frémont qtd. in Roberto M. Dainotto, "'All the Regions do Smilingly Revolt': The Literature of Place and Region," *Critical Inquiry* 22.3 (1996): 490.

[13] Robert Jackson, *Seeking the Region in American Literature and Culture* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State UP, 2005) 9.

[14] Dainotto, "All the Regions" 497.

[15] Wyile x.

[16] W.H. New, "Beyond Nationalism: On Regionalism," *World Literature Written in English* 23.1 (1984): 13.

[17] David M. Holman, *A Certain Slant of Light: Regionalism and the Form of Southern and Midwestern Fiction* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State UP, 1995) 14.

regional world at the expense of the other" but rather maintain a healthy balance between these extremes.[18]

The opposition against using nationalism as basis for literary analysis stems especially from the 19th century notion of nation and identity, which suggests enclosure and cultural homogeneity. After the decrease of nationalistic concepts in the 20th century and the deconstruction of place through modern and postmodern theory, people were left scrambling for new conceptions of identity.[19] This problem furthered the rise of regionalism and regional literature, which tried to fill the existential void by creating supposedly authentic, pure, and unchanging places and communities. Hence, regionalism became a "new place from which to study literature"[20] and a concept that provides freedom for marginal groups and minorities.[21] Nonetheless, many critics argue that the concept of regionalism is no more natural than nationalism if it emphasizes homogeneous, isolated, and undivided communities as a response to the modern identity crisis induced by globalization.[22] The problem with regionalism is that the region is often believed to be rooted in specific geographic areas, which in turn are supposedly connected to unique cultural characteristics, i.e., environmental determinism. This perspective is only one step away from a blood and soil ideology, which equates landscape with personality and state of mind.[23]

Hence, regionalism occupies an uncertain place in American literary studies as its value is debatable and ambiguous. Roberto Dainotto, professor at Duke University, argues that regionalism is "*not* a literary genre … but a way of reading … [so as to] find an answer to the so-called 'crisis of modernity.'"[24] In general, "regional writing is a genre that is … dedicated to elaborating the meaning of places and the people who [inhabit] them. It is therefore the genre most efficient at discussing and mediating the place of social and cultural difference itself."[25] These features of regional writing might then account for the renewed interest in regionalism at the end of the 20th century since the concept of nationalism is no longer applicable in the time of globalization and modern technology. Leonard Lutwack even suggests in his widely

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[18] Holman 13.

[19] R. Jackson 4-5.

[20] Roberto M. Dainotto, *Place in Literature* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 2000) 4.

[21] Dainotto, *Place in Literature* 5.

[22] Dainotto, "All the Regions" 489.

[23] Frank Davey, "Toward the Ends of Regionalism," *Re-Evaluating Regionalism in Canadian and American Writing: A Sense of Place*, eds. Christian Riegel and Herb Wyile (Edmonton: Alberta UP, 1998) 4-5.

[24] Dainotto, *Place in Literature* 30.

[25] Stephanie Foote, "The Cultural Work of American Regionalism," *A Companion to the Regional Literatures of America*, ed. Charles L. Crow (Oxford: Blackwell, 2003) 27.

referenced book *The Role of Place in Literature* that this uncertainty led to the development of a "sense of place-loss and a sense of placelessness" in modern society.[26] Thus, the need to root oneself in an actual place in order to maintain a stable identity is growing.[27]

Historically, regional literature in the United States had its peak between the Civil War and the early years of the 20th century. As a result of the violent war, urban growth, industrial progress, and an increasingly diverse population, people developed a strong yearning for an idealized rural life. The uncertainty and anonymity of urbanization led to the creation of a nostalgic image for rural areas as places of stability and morality.[28] Regional writings were first published in local newspapers and became more popular through the rise of national magazines in the late 19th century. Since these magazines were largely issued and read in the urban East, the published stories reinforced the nostalgic and stereotyped image of rural areas, which were supposedly vanishing, especially in the Midwest.[29] Thus, regional literature became a genre that provided escape from the problems of modern life and preserved the supposedly innocent, virtuous life of rural areas.

However, as regional writing sought "to preserve what [was] in danger of being lost … regionalism has been understood as a genre in decline itself."[30] The "Revolt from the Village" movement of the 1920s, a term coined by Carl Van Doren in 1920 and established by Anthony Hilfer in his famous book *Revolt from the Village*, severely criticized the popular nostalgic image of Midwestern rural areas and the idealization of Midwestern small towns as the embodiment of cultural wholeness.[31] This criticism, made famous by authors like Sinclair Lewis or Edgar Lee Masters, eventually led to the demise of regional literature until its rediscovery in the late 20th century. The renewed interest in regionalism emerged during the 1980s due to the growing forces of globalization and a subsequent shift of competitiveness from nations to regions. Additionally, boundaries came to be accepted as being blurry or adaptable instead of restricting or demarcating, which makes the definition of regions

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[26] Leonard Lutwack, *The Role of Place in Literature* (Syracuse: Syracuse UP, 1984) 11.

[27] Susan J. Rosowski, "Imagining Literary Landscapes," *Great Plains Quarterly* 19.2 (1999): 85.

[28] Foote 29.

[29] Foote 30-31.

[30] Foote 28.

[31] Anthony C. Hilfer, *The Revolt from the Village 1915-1930* (Chapel Hill: North Carolina UP, 1969) 3-4.

in literary studies or social sciences almost impossible.[32] Still, in contemporary popular opinion regionalism and regional writing are often unjustly equaled with narrow-mindedness, resistance against progress, and simplicity.

However, Stephanie Foote, English professor at the University of Illinois, suggests that since regional writing deals in various ways with persons or groups that are deemed marginal, e.g., "women, minority writers, provincials, sexual dissidents, and village dwellers,"[33] it serves, not only as a nostalgic genre, but also addresses differences and variety. Furthermore, Foote argues that regional literature laid the groundwork for dealing with identity and nation-building because it understands that identity can be "meaningful only locally."[34] Modern America is defined by movement and progress, which triggers the search for identity and roots. For this reason, regional literature is still relevant in current American society and literary criticism. Furthermore, American landscapes are marked by less and less distinctiveness and uniqueness as many cities and towns come to look the same. Thus, the connection to place as well as its importance has been diminished in American society during the 20th century.[35]

In criticism, it is important to differentiate between, on the one hand, local color literature, which embodies regressive nostalgia and geographical determinism and, on the other hand, regional literature, which focuses on the human struggle with identity, marginalization, globalization, or nationalism.[36] As these two terms are often conflated, the majority of writers are wary of being called "regional." Being "regional" is often associated with local color, geographical determinism, and limited perspectives, or as David Holman puts it, "*Regional* is often the faint praise that damns."[37] Furthermore, an author who is "steadfast … risks being dismissed as regional or quaint. [Because] [w]hat could be more backward than staying put in a culture that rushes about? How can you see the big picture from a small place?"[38] Thus, regionalism needs to acknowledge the dynamic relationship between the local and the globalized world in order to counteract the stereotype of enclosure and rejection of mobility.[39] Furthermore, contemporary regionalists often have to fight an

[32] Björn Hettne, "Globalization and the New Regionalism: The Second Great Transformation," *Globalism and the New Regionalism*, eds. Björn Hettne, András Inotai and Osvaldo Sunkel (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1999) 7-8.

[33] Foote 27.

[34] Foote 34.

[35] Foote 12.

[36] Holman 14.

[37] Holman 15.

[38] Scott R. Sanders, *Writing from the Center* (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1995) 160.

[39] Joseph 7.

uphill battle against common, preconceived images of places because the construction of regional distinctiveness often results in "deliberate deflation of scenic or mythic preconceptions of a landscape and its people."[40] For example, a common perception of the prairie is that it is flat and empty and its people backwards. Hence, regional writers face the difficult task of establishing a meaningful literary sense of place without skirting the abyss of geographical determinism. As a result, regional literature often struggles to find a balance between the desire to gain outside recognition and the search for a distinctive regional self-image.[41]

However, the ambiguity of place in American regional studies cannot be solved by simply omitting place in literature. Eudora Welty, a Pulitzer Prize winning author and photographer, argues that fiction without an established place creates "uncertainty about what the characters really think or mean … [and omits] the set of standards to struggle within or against."[42] Thus, the struggle with place provides identity and orientation for the characters. Place and region in American literature and society are never inherently positive or negative; these attributed values are societal constructions. For instance, the spaciousness of a region can be either "elating or terrifying."[43] This assessment of a place, a region, or a landscape depends largely on the perspective of the writers and whether they write from the "outside" or the "inside" of a region. Holman argues the importance of writing from the inside in order to develop an "awareness … of what the region really means."[44] Moreover, he believes that regional writers differ from other authors

> who are simply from a geographical region of the country, by the extent to which they participate in the communal psychology of the region – the extent to which their works manifest the values of the region and the extent to which those values inform the world of literature.[45]

This view is based on the notion that regional writing is generally marginalized in the American literary landscape through the canonization of writers who supposedly create a national literature in opposition to those who create an alternative and critical idea.[46] Majorie Pryse, English professor at the University of Albany, suggests that a

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[40] Foote 11.

[41] R. Jackson 155.

[42] Eudora Welty, "Place in Fiction," *South Atlantic Quarterly* 76.4 (1977): 449.

[43] Lutwack 35.

[44] Holman 14.

[45] Holman 13.

[46] Marjorie Pryse, "Writing Out of the Gap: Regionalism, Resistance, and Relational Reading," *Re-Evaluating Regionalism in Canadian and American Writing: A Sense of Place*, eds. Christian Riegel and Herb Wyile (Edmonton: Alberta UP, 1998) 22.

sense of place in regional writing "reflects a gap between dominant ideological … interests and the interests and stories of persons who reside in the locale. [Thus] regionalism becomes … writing out of that gap."[47] Hence, regional writing that addresses societal contradictions between dominant and marginalized viewpoints can be understood as an act of resistance against the culturally dominant reading of texts and the subsequent "othering" of peripheral groups, for example, the dismissal of regional texts as local color writing.[48] Moreover, writing out of the "gap" produces a sense of place "in the process of interaction that characterizes the relationship between reader and text."[49] Since regional texts are usually non-canonical, they have not been mediated and, therefore, require the readers to engage with the texts and read them as a "critique of a national culture that has rendered invisible so much of American experience."[50]

2.2 The Midwest in American Society and Literature

2.2.1 The Mythic Midwest

Since the borders of a region are always constructed and ambiguous, there is no clear-cut definition of the Midwest. The delineation of the Midwest has changed constantly throughout the American settlement process. Today, most scholars agree that the Midwest or Middle West consists of 12 states, i.e., Kansas, Nebraska, Illinois, Michigan, Indiana, Ohio, Wisconsin, Minnesota, North Dakota, South Dakota, Iowa, and Missouri[51], and that the western border is usually marked by the front range of the Rocky Mountains, i.e., land that does not sustain farming.[52] However, states defined by large and productive urban areas, e.g., Illinois or Michigan, are less and less considered being part of the Midwest since they do not convey the prominent Midwestern stereotypes of rurality and pastoralism. For this reason, the imagined Midwest has been relocated more and more to the agricultural Great Plains area.[53] Hence, the term "Great Plains" is often used synonymously with "Midwest."

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[47] Pryse 24.

[48] Pryse 25.

[49] Pryse 33.

[50] Pryse 33.

[51] United States, Dept. of Commerce, Economics and Statistics Administration, *Census Regions and Divisions of the United States*, US Census Bureau, 2007, 09 Mar. 2009 <http://www.census.gov/geo/www/us_regdiv.pdf>.

[52] James R. Shortridge, *The Middle West: Its Meaning in American Culture* (Lawrence: Kansas UP, 1989) 5.

[53] Shortridge, *Middle West* 92-94.

The historical construction of the Midwest has evolved with the social and geographical changes in the United States. The term "Middle West" as we understand it today was established around 1912 due to the increased use of the term in magazines. At the end of the 19th century, the term was usually reserved for Kansas and Nebraska, which were situated in-between the Northwest, i.e., Minnesota and the Dakotas, and the Southwest. At this time, the Midwest also began to be identified with a prosperous rural economy and cultural values, like humility, industriousness, pragmatism, and idealisms, which supposedly had developed through the pioneers' struggle with the land and climate.[54] These associations mostly came into being after the droughts of the 1890s and were embraced by most of the settlers as an explanation for the failure of the Eden-like images created by land speculators. The treasures of the land, promised by the garden myth, were now believed to be only attainable for strong-willed and hard-working settlers. Thus, the Midwest was alternately perceived as desert or garden during the 19th century and early 20th century depending on natural circumstances and economic benefits for East Coast entrepreneurs.[55]

The economic depression and droughts of the 1880s and 1890s fed even more into the self-identification of the Midwest. The economic hardships, not only brought the people in the rural Midwest closer together, but also severed the ties to the East as each blamed the other for the crisis.[56] However, a long-awaited rain period at the beginning of the 20th century fostered optimism, progress, and self-confidence in the Middle West. In the minds of many Midwesterners and US Americans the Midwest became an idealized pastoral "kingdom suspended between uncivilized wilderness and urban-industrial evils."[57] The Middle West seemed to combine the best parts of the old, decaying East, and the youthful, energetic West without succumbing to their extremes.[58] Hence, the Midwest became the epitome of American culture and the Heartland of the nation by appearing to embody the virtues of an agrarian democracy, i.e., "an egalitarian society … a natural aristocracy … and social progress on a wide variety of fronts."[59] Subsequently, the Midwest became synonymous with the myth of pastoralism.

However, the values attached to pastoralism changed in the course of the 20th century, resulting in an unstable and often times ambiguous Midwestern identity. The

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[54] Shortridge, *Middle West* 16-17.

[55] James Shortridge, "The Expectations of Others: Struggle toward a Sense of Place in the Northern Plains," *Many Wests: Place, Culture, and Regional Identity*, eds. David M. Wrobel and Michael C. Steiner (Lawrence: UP of Kansas, 1997) 120.

[56] Shortridge, *Middle West* 21.

[57] Shortridge, *Middle West* 6.

[58] Shortridge, *Middle West* 8.

[59] Shortridge, *Middle West* 29.

advance of industrial progress and urban growth challenged and contradicted the wholeness and harmony of rural life. This change was mostly ignored in literature and society until the 1920s because the pastoral Midwest was at the heart of the American identity. This contradiction was eased in the American conscience by compartmentalizing; that is, pastoralism was increasingly attributed to the Middle West, whereas technological progress was ascribed to the East. However, the image of the Midwest as an ideal agrarian democracy lost more and more momentum within society since it diametrically opposed the idea of progress and advancement prevalent after World War I.[60] The self-confidence of the Midwest, rooted in pastoralism and idealism, gave way to self-doubt eventually.

The year 1920 marked a definite turning point in the perception of the Midwest, expressed particularly in the novel *Main Street* by Sinclair Lewis. Furthermore, an agricultural recession had arisen, signaling the first dark clouds of the looming Great Depression.[61] *Main Street*, although voicing no unknown facts, bared the crucial flaws of the Midwest to the general public and hit the nerve of time, exemplified by its unusual popularity and sales numbers.[62] Lewis especially criticized that the Midwest had had the potential for "greatness," but sacrificed it by attempting to combine pastoral and material success. Thereby, the Midwest turned itself into a tragedy.[63] The novel, not only undermined the self-image of the Midwest, but also boosted the East Coast superiority. These two events, the book release and the agricultural crisis, acted as "vehicles" for doubt in the pastoral myth and the alteration of the popular image of the Midwest.[64] From this moment on, the Midwest came to be associated with regression and, consequently, declined in national importance, especially in the eyes of the East Cost. Unfortunately, the image of the Midwest and the Midwestern psyche could never quite recover from this loss of importance. Prosperous agriculture in the 1940s and 50s gave rise to new contentment within the Midwest; however, this development was overshadowed by the migration of numerous young and educated Midwesterners toward the cities. Midwesterners had also largely "accepted the … Eastern view of their region not only as rural but also as a place that was … functioning largely as a 'colony' of the East."[65]

It took the tumultuous years of the 1960s and 1970s to revive the pastoral image of the Midwest. During this time, a longing for Midwestern pastoralism and for

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[60] Shortridge, *Middle West* 40-41.

[61] Shortridge, "Expectations" 123.

[62] Morris Dickstein, *A Mirror in the Roadway: Literature in the Real World* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 2005) 56.

[63] Shortridge, *Middle West* 45.

[64] Shortridge, *Middle West* 40.

[65] Shortridge, *Middle West* 62.

supposedly lost traditional values reemerged in American society. Many city dwellers yearned for the rootedness, simplicity, and familiarity of rural communities as something that had been irrevocably lost with urbanization and progress.[66] However, these images no longer reflected the harsh reality of Midwestern life or the slow decay of Midwestern small towns. Instead, the Midwest was turned into a repository for diminishing national virtues and ideals; the last authentic place where the dreams of an agrarian democracy and rootedness were still alive. Steven Schnell summarizes this development in the encyclopedia *The American Midwest* by saying that Americans

> have mentally fenced off … [the] idealized, romanticized Midwest as the last remaining relict stands of a vanishing America, a land of quiet, modest, honest decency in the midst of a corrupt world. As with the national parks, many [Americans] will never even visit this repository of … 'true' national selves; it is enough just to know that it is there, preserving the way [Americans] were, the way [Americans] like to see [themselves].[67]

Cultural geographer James Shortridge argues that the three self-conceptions which define the United States (i.e., pastoral idealism, youthfulness, and leadership in technology) are often contradicting each other. Whereas pastoralism suggests seasonal rhythms, ecological awareness, and a settled, matured society, technology implies quick progress and development. This conflict has been resolved through regionalization and the attribution of these self-conceptions to the Midwest, the West and the East, respectively.[68] Yet, the image of the pastoral ideal is hardly reconcilable with the urban reality and economic problems of the Midwest, which enhances the uncertain identity of the region. Therefore, Holman defines the resulting Midwestern state of mind as being "characterized by its belief in the possibility that the promise of the past can be realized in the future, and the present is thus a constant reminder of the region's and the nation's failure to keep faith with the ideals of the past and with the promise of the future."[69] In order to understand the complex identity of the Midwest, one has to be aware that the contemporary image of the Midwest has been formed by the reactions of regional "insiders," i.e., people living or having lived in the Midwest, to the views of regional "outsiders."

As stated above, the mythic conceptions of pastoralism and its accompanying virtues have generally been assigned to the Midwestern region although reality

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[66] Shortridge, *Middle West* 70-71.

[67] Steven M. Schnell, "Genuine America," *The American Midwest: An Interpretative Encyclopedia*, eds. Richard Sisson, Christian Zacher and Andrew Clayton (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 2007) 70.

[68] Shortridge, *Middle West* 134-35.

[69] Holman 17.

challenges their existence. According to the renowned cultural critic Richard Slotkin, "[m]yths are stories, drawn from history, that have acquired … a symbolizing function that is central to the cultural functioning of society that produced them."[70] Due to the economic development of the United States throughout the 20th century, the myth of pastoralism has obtained contradictory cultural functions. On the one hand, it fulfills the "need for … an anachronistic agrarian heartland," which balances the "industrial materialism in the national self-definition." On the other hand, the pastoral myth turns the Midwest into a "bumpkin-filled backwater" against which other American regions can define and elevate themselves. [71] William Barillas, English professor at the University of Wisconsin, summarizes this identity conflict in the following way: "The principal drawback of midwestern nationalism is that it concedes the region's strength to the nation while ascribing its weaknesses only to the Midwest." [72] Thus, the Midwest is cast into the role of the preserver of American national virtues that are understood to be the pillars of American society. Consequently, the United States can further technological and urban progress but still pride itself in valuing much simpler pastoral ideals, e.g., morality, equality, and independence. [73] Naturally, many Midwestern states refer to themselves as the "heart" of the nation or being a good place to live, which is mirrored in older and recent state slogans, e.g., Iowa's "Fields of Opportunities,"[74] or South Dakota's "Great Faces, Great Places."[75]Furthermore, many Midwesterners identify themselves as Americans rather than North Dakotans or Minnesotans because the Midwest is supposedly the most American of places.[76]

However, since the Midwest has no distinct landscape or regional history and since regional arts are frequently overlooked or classified as local color, the region is often considered as "flyover country" by outsiders. Subsequently, the self-image of the Midwest is constructed in opposition to these outsiders' views. Thus, Shortridge warns that an identity created as an act of resistance against a common enemy, in this case

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[70] Richard Slotkin, *The Fatal Environment: The Myth of the Frontier in the Age of Industrialization 1800-1890* (New York: Atheneum, 1985) 16.

[71] Edward Watts, *An American Colony: Regionalism and the Roots of Midwestern Culture* (Athens: Ohio UP, 2002) 165.

[72] William Barillas, *The Midwestern Pastoral: Place and Landscape in Literature* of *the American Heartland* (Athens: Ohio UP, 2006) 19.

[73] Shortridge, *The Middle West* 8.

[74] Larry Fruhling, "Filming in the Fields of Dreams," *Iowa Commerce*, 2001, Iowa Association of Business and Industry, 31 May 2009 <http://www.iowacommerce.com/Features/Features_062000_movies.html>.

[75] "Signs and Symbols of South Dakota," *South Dakota Official State Government Website,* South Dakota State Government, 31 May 2009 <http://www.state.sd.us/state/sdsym.htm>.

[76] Annette Atkins, "Minnesota: Left of Center and Out of Place," *Heartland: Comparative Histories of the Midwestern States*, ed. James H. Madison (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1990) 11.

the coastal areas of the United States, is "a dangerous game" because "with unity comes repression of the true nature of a place and of the self-knowledge essential to the correct conceptualization and effective resolution of regional problems."[77] An identity that is based on projecting regional troubles on the "Other," i.e., outside forces, cannot sustain a powerful and energetic identity because the resulting self-image is always dependent on the negative "Other" instead of the positive "Self."

Ever since the "Revolt from the Village" movement of the early 20th century, Midwesterners have come to be seen as people who are stuck on the way to the Promised Land in a place where they do not want to be.[78] This status of being stuck in-between is mirrored in the Midwestern identity, for example, in the disparity between the past and the present. The conflict arises because the Midwest is "established as a museum for the nation's past," where pastoral values and morals are believed to be preserved.[79] The ideal American pastoral society seemed once possible in the 19th century but was then corrupted by modernism and urbanization. Hence, the regional complexity of the Midwest has been largely ignored in favor of a simplified nostalgia that casts the Midwest into the role of a "safety valve" for the rest of the nation, i.e., an unchanging place defined by "agriculture, clarity, and whiteness."[80] Consequently, the pastoral myth has become an unattainable and romanticized past that Midwesterners are trying to recreate in the present and future in lieu of a distinct identity. Dainotto criticizes that in this respect "regionalism is not a part of [the Midwestern] *present* … [but] a hypothesis of what *could* have existed and *could* be realized again in the future."[81] Thus, the Midwestern identity and Midwestern regional writing are trapped between reviving the promise of an idealized pastoral past for the future and coming to terms with the contradicting complexity of urbanization, technology, and globalization in the present. Furthermore, the restoration of the past and its inconsistency with the present reality leave Midwesterners "disoriented in the present [as] travelers in a real world following a map of Neverland."[82]

The lost past can be linked to the closing of the frontier at the end of the 19th century, which influenced the Midwestern identity and regional writing. Until historian Frederick Jackson Turner proclaimed the closing of the frontier in his 1893

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[77] Shortridge, "Expectations" 128.

[78] Walter Hölbling, "Open Spaces to Narrow Minds: Soil, Soul, and Intellect in Recent U.S. Writing," *North Dakota Quarterly* 60.1 (1992): 151.

[79] Watts 218.

[80] Watts 218-19.

[81] Dainotto, *Place in Literature* 11.

[82] David Mogen, Scott P. Sanders, and Joanne B. Karpinski, introduction, *Frontier Gothic: Terror and Wonder at the Frontier in American Literature*, eds. David Mogen, Scott P. Sanders and Joanne B. Karpinski (Rutherford: Farleigh Dickinson UP, 1993) 18.

essay "The Significance of the Frontier in American History," the frontier was understood as "the ever advancing line that is the interface between … the Metropolis and … the Wilderness."[83] The "Metropolis" was understood as already developed and ordered society, whereas the "Wilderness" provided unsettled land and abundant resources. The advancement of the frontier and subjugation of the "Wilderness" supposedly contributed to the development of a distinct American character among the settlers, i.e., the energetic, independent, self-reliant, and moral American Adam.[84] The mastery of the wilderness is one of the great American themes, especially in the Midwest, since the flat landscape is "superficially … the one most easily subdued."[85] Scott Sanders, distinguished essayist and English professor, moreover, implies that this yearning for the domination of a menacing nature "has been played out … in the Heartland with fierce energy and … bitter disillusionment" and has led to an "extreme suspicion of sexuality."[86] Furthermore, the westward expansion was seen as a motor for economic growth since the resources in the wilderness were cheap and the breaking and domestication of "virgin" land boosted all branches of economy, for example, the railroad or farming.[87]

All in all, six or seven major stages of American frontier settlement can be distinguished today. However, the Great Plains were overleapt by the population expansion in order to settle the coastal West first. This development is majorly attributed to the hostile landscape of the middle region. The "internal" frontier was eventually settled and developed between the 1850s and 1880s due to railroad advancement and the Homestead Act of 1862.[88] Out of this "triumph of progress" over wild nature, the maturation of a distinct American character through the frontier experience, and the belief in "limitless possibilities," developed the "Frontier Myth" and the "American Dream."[89] All these features seemed to be embodied in the Midwest until the end of 19th century. Hence, an association of the Midwest with the youthful West clearly pertained throughout the 1880s and the novelist Edgar W. Howe

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[83] Slotkin 41.

[84] Frederick Jackson Turner, *The Frontier in American History* (1920; New York: Dover Publications, 1996) 37.

[85] Sanders 49.

[86] Sanders 49.

[87] Slotkin 40.

[88] Slotkin 37-39.

[89] David Mogen, "The Frontier Archetype and the Myth of America: Patterns That Shape the American Dream," *The Frontier Experience and the American Dream: Essays on American Literature*, eds. David Mogen, Mark Busby and Paul Bryant (College Station: Texas A&M UP, 1989) 26.

"still employed the analogy of youth as late as 1892."[90] Nevertheless, the announcement of the closing of the frontier by Turner coincided with the loss of youthful enthusiasm in the Midwest, which eventually turned into "settled complacency."[91] The Turner thesis possibly furthered the regionalization of the United States and the subsequent ascription of American self-conceptions to specific regions in order to avoid contradictions in the American self-image. The frontier myth embodied pastoralism, technological progress, and youthfulness all at once. However, the closing of the frontier designated that no more land was left to settle and that the promise of a boundless place was lost, which is often identified as the "American Tragedy."[92] Thus, the Midwest became a place that was neither "Wilderness" nor "Metropolis" but was assigned the role of a pastoral in-between.

According to Harold Simonson, English professor at the University of Washington, the idea of a closed frontier produced a stifling atmosphere in the United States, which many writers tried to escape either by leaving their hometowns, like Sinclair Lewis, or through self-destruction, like F. Scott Fitzgerald.[93] Furthermore, Simonson claims that another way to escape the closed frontier and accompanying "anxiety about human finiteness" was "to falsify the contraries and opposites of human experience and to settle for comfortable but illusory reconciliation."[94] This negation of contradictions can be traced in the pastoralization of the Midwest during the 20th century and the accompanying disregard of Midwestern societal complexities and troubles. For this reason, the Midwestern identity began to be expressed "in the making of a myth, [and] imagining a frontier era in which … Midwestern people had once been the powerful progenitors of a new civilization."[95] These illusions simplified and "neutraliz[ed] human existence," hindered progress, and left the Midwest stuck in an eternal myth.[96] Still, many contemporary Midwestern writers include the frontier paradigm by having an innocent (or ignorant) protagonist coming to terms with problems arising from the pastoral frontier myth.[97]

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[90] Shortridge, *Middle West* 31.

[91] Shortridge, *Middle West* 50.

[92] Harold P. Simonson, *Beyond the Frontier: Writers, Western Regionalism and a Sense of Place* (Forth Worth: Texas Christian UP, 1989) 84-85.

[93] Simonson 58-59.

[94] Simonson 59.

[95] Andrew R. L. Cayton, and Peter S. Onuf, *The Midwest and the Nation: Rethinking the History of an American Region* (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1990) 122.

[96] Simonson 59.

[97] Mark Busby, "The Significance of the Frontier in Contemporary American Fiction," *The Frontier Experience and the American Dream: Essays on American Literature*, eds. David Mogen, Mark Busby and Paul Bryant (College Station: Texas A&M UP, 1989) 98.

With the death of the frontier, the idea of an American Eden died as well, which in turn influenced the dichotomy of the garden and desert image often associated with the Midwest. [98] This dichotomy was foremost fueled by marketing objectives; however, it was also based on the extreme weather changes in the Midwest. These variations turned the region into an "invisible Lorelei, always luring its residents to stay and try again."[99] Before the "internal" frontier of the Midwest was settled and marketed via a garden image in order to attract more settlers, the region had been described as "Great American Desert" and as a natural "barrier" for westward expansion. The population pressures after the Civil War and the propaganda of railroad companies in the 1860s transformed the desert image into an image of an Eden-like, untamed garden that would support anyone who was willing to work hard.[100] The garden myth, not only drew settlers to the Midwest, but also functioned as justification for the exploitation of nature and relocation of Natives.[101]

The optimism of the garden image diminished after the drought years of the 1890s, which coincided with the publication of the Turner thesis and the proclaimed end of the frontier. Afterwards, the garden image could never reclaim its footing as a prominent factor of Midwestern identity. The garden image also faded because agriculture was turning into a highly industrialized business, which defied the agrarian myth of subsistence farming. The "tragedy" of the pastoral idea is explored, for instance, in *Main Travelled Roads* (1891) by Hamlin Garland. However, the pastoral Arcadia became more vivid in the imagination the more it ceased to exist in reality.[102] Historian Brad Lookingbill claims that as late as the 1930s "literature about the Great Plains [still] offered an idealized frontier version of a fertile, virgin land [and] reinforced the conventional American dreams."[103]

The changing and contradicting ideas associated with the Midwest support Lutwack's argument that place in itself has no inherent values, but that its significance is created through the subjective reactions of people.[104] The Midwest provided an ideal place for projecting values on it since it was considered empty space with no signature landscape and no signs of life, which negated Native inhabitants. Thus, the Midwest

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[98] Simonson 55.

[99] Howard Lamar, "Image and Counterimage: The Regional Artist and the Great Plains Landscape," *The Big Empty: Essays on Western Landscape and Narrative*, ed. Leonard Engel (Albuquerque: U of New Mexico P, 1994) 78.

[100] Shortridge, "Expectations" 117-18.

[101] Lutwack 152.

[102] Lutwack 152-53.

[103] Brad Lookingbill, "'The Living and the Dead Land': The Great Plains Environment and the Literature of Depression America," *Heritage of the Great Plains* 29.2 (1996): 38.

[104] Lutwack 35.

could be turned into "a landscape of mythic dimensions … [which was] accepted as part of America's national experience because there seems to be no *there* there to refute [it]."[105] Hence, a distinct and unifying identity was difficult to develop in the Midwest because the values attached to the region were unstable, ambiguous, and subject to change in accordance with outsiders' perspectives. This elusiveness still marks the Midwestern identity and literature today.

2.2.2 Nothingness

Due to its barren and flat landscape the Midwest has often been characterized as "empty" land. However, the land itself can never be blank or empty, just its image and conception. The image of blankness already appeared in the first travel and explorer accounts of the area. The Spaniard Alvar Nuñez Cabeza de Vaca travelled the Great Plains in 1534 and noticed the lack of mountains in the region. The lack of mountains obviously hindered de Vaca's navigational capabilities because it is reported that he lost his way on the plains.[106] With the expansion of the Western frontier in the 19th century, more and more travel accounts about the yet unsettled parts of the United States were printed, for example, the highly successful *A Tour on the Prairies* by Washington Irving, published in 1835. Irving's description of the land, similar to de Vaca's, revolves around the absence of mountains:

> I now found myself in the midst of a lonely waste in which the prospect was bounded by undulating swells of land, naked and uniform, where, from the deficiency of land marks … an inexperienced man may become bewildered and lose his way as readily as in the wastes of the ocean.[107]

Irving, in lieu of adequate vocabulary to describe the landscape, falls back on familiar metaphors and similes. For example, comparing the prairie to "the ocean" has been a common metaphor for many authors writing from or about the Midwest until today. Many travel writers of European descent judged the landscape through the lens of Romantic ideals, which emphasized the picturesqueness of mountains and trees, i.e., "the vertical spectacular" and "sublime."[108] Furthermore, most of the first travel

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[105] Diane D. Quantic, "Seven Ways of Looking at the Great Plains Literary Landscape," *Heritage of the Great Plains* 39 (2006): 26.

[106] Robert Thacker, "The Plains Landscape and Descriptive Technique," *Great Plains Quarterly* 2.3 (1982): 146.

[107] Washington Irving, "Chapter XXIX: A Buffalo Hunt," *A Tour on the Prairies,* Philadelphia: Carey, Lea & Blanchard, 1835, *Electronic Text Center,* ed. David Seaman, 2000, Alderman Lib., U of Virginia, 31 May 2009 <http://etext.virginia.edu/etcbin/toccer-new2?id=IrvTour.sgm&images=images/modeng&data=/texts/english/modeng/parsed&tag=public&part=30&division=div1>.

[108] Shaunanne Tangney, "But What Is There to See? An Exploration of a Great Plains Aesthetic," *Great Plains Quarterly* 24.1 (2004): 34-35.

writers came from the American East. They were used to a landscape defined by trees, hills, and enclosed space and did not know how to judge the vastness of the prairie and the Great Plains.

Rather than inspiring "a thrilling sense of [godly] awe and fear," the landscape left the people "feeling terrified and speechless."[109] This feeling is a prominent theme in O.E. Rölvaag's *Giants in the Earth* (1927), which tells the story of a Norwegian settlement on the Great Plains, where the female protagonist Beret is driven to madness by the treeless and endless land, whereas her husband Per Hansa revels in the unlimited potential. Thus, "a sense of eternal possibility" as well as "annihilating isolation" can cause madness within the "featureless face of indifference" encountered on the Great Plains.[110] Hence, in literature, the Great Plains landscape is often portrayed as an adversary, an unpredictable and contradictory character in and of itself. The land is defined by a harsh and extreme climate that varies between endless, sterile winters and hot, fertile summers. Consequently, the land cannot be ignored because it can be "potentially deadly," and in order "to survive in this region, one must come to terms with the land."[111] Allen Lloyd-Smith, who has written several books about the American Gothic, adds that the relationship to the land in the Midwest has always been characterized by a "terror of the land itself, its emptiness, its implacability" because it suggests the end of being.[112]

Instead of developing a new aesthetic for the Great Plains landscape, the notion of a "vertical spectacular" was and is still used to judge the scenery. The prairie landscape can not measure up to this image and is therefore classified as "void" and "negative mirror image of the wooded East or mountainous Far West."[113] Since the landscape is identified as a "non-place" it is also "othered … in terms of negativity."[114] For this reason, the Midwest was seen as *tabula rasa* by early literary authors or land promoters and thus could be shaped and imprinted with meaning as desired. Hence, the vastness of the prairie was portrayed as something terrifying in Washington Irving's travel account, whereas it promised freedom in James Fenimore Cooper's *The Prairie* (1827). Quantic argues that the "vast expanses force writers to create meaning from an apparent void" and charge the landscape with symbolic

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[109] Tangney 35.

[110] Quantic, "Unifying Thread" 69.

[111] Barbara Allen, "Shaping and Being Shaped by the Land: The Western Landscape in Oral Narrative," *The Big Empty: Essays on Western Landscapes as Narrative*, ed. Leonard Engel (Albuquerque: New Mexico UP, 1994) 104.

[112] Allan Lloyd-Smith, *American Gothic Fiction: An Introduction* (New York: Continuum, 2004) 93.

[113] Tangney 35-36.

[114] Tangney 37.

meanings that serve specific purposes.[115] For this reason, the Great Plains could be alternately imagined as a garden or desert as well as a pastoral haven or rural backwater.

The idea of the Great Plains as a blank page resulted not only in the negation of Native Americans but also led to the imposition of a survey grid on the land in the 18th century, ignoring natural particularities or Native American land claims. The grid is an abstraction of the land, which impersonalizes it and prevents the development of a strong sense of place. Hence, the grid laid the foundation for a weak and conflicted Midwestern identity imposed from the outside.[116] Shaunanne Tangney, English professor at Minot State University North Dakota, argues that Midwesterners have allowed outsiders to turn them into something they do not want to be.[117] Kathleen Norris, a distinguished Midwestern poet and essayist, adds that "without a strong sense of identity, [the Midwest] becomes a mythic void" with an imposed sense of place.[118] Therefore, the Midwestern self-perception was and is still built on either the acceptance or the rejection of outsiders' perspectives.

This method of self-identification is still relevant today, which is exemplified by Tangney's report about the attitude of her literature students toward the Midwest and by the Midwestern reaction to the National Geographic article "The Emptied Prairie." Tangney explains that although her students were native to the Midwest, they still described the landscape as "barren," "desolate," or "boring." They defined the land by what was not there, namely, the "vertical spectacular," like trees or mountains, and thus could not perceive the horizontal as beautiful.[119] The students, similar to Washington Irving, defined the land through an outsider's point of view because they had not been taught to understand it differently. However, when the Midwest is put into a rather gloomy light, like in Charles Bowden's article "The Emptied Prairie," Midwestern people tend to become defensive of their region and try to define themselves in opposition to the outsider's perspective. The National Geographic article deals with the growing amount of ghost towns and depopulation in North Dakota, leaving the state drained.[120] This article caused an unforeseen uproar among North Dakotans, who reacted with articles and interviews that pointed out the urban

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[115] Quantic, "Unifying Thread" 69.

[116] Barillas 27.

[117] Tangney 39.

[118] Kathleen Norris, *Dakota: A Spiritual Geography* (New York: Ticknor and Fields, 1993) 7.

[119] Tangney 40.

[120] Charles Bowden, "The Emptied Prairie," *NationalGeographic.com* Jan. 2008, 31 May 2009 <http://ngm.nationalgeographic.com/print/2008/01/emptied-north-dakota/bowden-text>.

growth and economic stability of the state.[121] Bowden's article draws attention to these facts as well, but the focus is still on the decline, which reemphasizes the image of the Midwest as "mythic void."

Creating a regional identity in opposition to outsiders' perspectives is an easily accessible venue and saves the region from "cultural disappearance."[122] Many critics push for the creation of a genuine Midwestern sense of identity, which is difficult to achieve in a region that defies delineation and is, contrary to popular belief, rather heterogeneous. Thus, an identity built around the "Other" of the outsider's view acts as a stand-in for a self-image that is not yet strong enough to survive on its own. Even though the region appears "featureless to the casual observer, [it] seems distinct to its inhabitants [although] there is little agreement … concerning the boundaries or even the label of the country's core." [123] Hence, Tangney suggests that a genuine Midwestern sense of place should not be based on things that are not there but on understanding the landscape "in terms of experience." Thus, Tangey argues that the land itself cannot be empty, void, or negative; "only we can fail in our interpretation of, our use of, and our ways of being in a landscape."[124]

2.2.3 Minnesota – Center of Nothing?

Although Sinclair Lewis always had an ambivalent attitude toward his native Minnesota, he said that "to understand America, it is merely necessary to understand Minnesota. But to understand Minnesota you must be an historian, an ethnologist, a poet, a cynic, and a graduate prophet all in one."[125] This notion mirrors the inductive reasoning of regionalism, which claims that through focusing on the particulars one can understand the whole. This concept is challenged today by many critics, for example David Holman, but it cannot be discarded wholly. Decoding the American psyche just by deciphering Minnesota, as Sinclair Lewis implies, might be far-reaching, but understanding Minnesota definitely helps to understand the Midwest and vice versa. The Midwest is indeed not homogenous, which is an aspect of the region rarely acknowledged by outsiders. Yet, it is difficult to pinpoint these differences

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[121] Clay Jenkinson, "The Empty Prairie Is Still a Good Place to Live," *The Bismarck Tribune* 13 Jan. 2008, 31 May 2009 <http://www.bismarcktribune.com/articles/2008/01/15/ news/columnists/jenkinson/146529.txt>

[122] Dainotto, *Literature of Place* 31.

[123] Diane D. Quantic, "Theories of Land and Society," *The Nature of the Place* (Lincoln: U of Nebraska P, 1995) 4.

[124] Tangney 38-39.

[125] Sinclair Lewis, "Minnesota: The Norse State," *The Minnesota Stories of Sinclair Lewis*, ed. Sally E. Parry (St. Paul: Borealis Books, 2005) 15.

because "of the area's own invisibility to itself."[126] Minnesota is considered a part of the Midwest; however, it is rarely seen as the most Midwestern state. James Shortridge identifies Iowa, based on self-definition in surveys and popular literature as the core of the Midwest, whereas Minnesota is classified as "domain," i.e., the Midwestern culture is less dominant and modified by regional characteristics.[127]

One of these distinctive features is that the Minnesota industry is not exclusively built on agriculture, but also on lumber, mining, tourism, and white-collar industry. This diversity has saved Minnesota's economic health and has given the state an air of sophistication.[128] Another characteristic is the stark dichotomy between its rural and urban areas. Although the majority of the geographical space is rural, over 60 % of Minnesota's population lives in the Twin Cities area of St. Paul and Minneapolis.[129] Thus, the Twin Cities dominate the cultural, economic, and political life, which "creates a sense of power and … vitality that can eclipse the rest of the state … [and] has spawned a value-laden vocabulary of *instate* and *outstate* that rural Minnesotans object to but [cannot] erase."[130] The dominance of the Twin Cities plays an important part in Minnesota's identity since societal influence is usually divided between different cities in other Midwestern states. For example, Iowa's capital is Des Moines but its State University is located in Iowa City. Aside from the great influence of the Twin Cities, another issue that contributes to the distinctive identity of Minnesota, but at the same time reiterates its Midwesterness, is the existence of various, contradictory labels, which leave Minnesotans confused about the state's identity. Minnesota can be liberal and conservative, urban and rural, wild and metropolitan, all at the same time.

Minnesota takes pride in embodying the most noble and virtuous Midwestern characteristics, like hard work, morality, equality, niceness, or innocence as portrayed, for example, in the TV-show *Little House on the Prairie*. In this "self-congratulatory vein, Minnesotans like to think of themselves as the truest of the true Americans, the most superior of the morally superior."[131] Minnesota writers, e.g., Garrison Keillor, Jon Hassler, or Sinclair Lewis, often use satire to counter the smugness that evolves from the belief of Minnesotans that their state is more advanced and sophisticated than the rest of the Midwest. Breakthrough medical facilities like the Mayo Clinic in

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[126] Mark Vinz, and Thom Tammaro, introduction, *Imagining Home: Writing from the Midwest*, eds. Mark Vinz and Thom Tammaro (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1995) viii.

[127] Shortridge, *Middle West* 98.

[128] Shortridge, *Middle West* 111.

[129] Minnesota, Dept. of Administration, Office of Geographic and Demographic Analysis, *Minneapolis – St. Paul Metropolitan Area Comparison: Fact Sheet*, State Demographic Center, Apr. 2002, 23 Feb. 2009 <http://www.demography.state.mn.us/FactSheets/MSACompare/>.

[130] Atkins 20.

[131] Atkins 26.

Rochester, high-profile shopping malls like the Mall of America, the Walker Arts Center, the Loft Literary Center in Minneapolis, more theater seats per capita in St. Paul/Minneapolis than in any other US city outside New York, and more than 100 theater companies feed into the superiority complex.[132] Shortridge even suggests that Minnesota "is the closest approximation … to the regional dream" of the Midwest because it was able to sustain a balance between a pastoral society and modern industries.[133] This development resulted in making Minnesota the state with the highest median household income within the Midwest and the 8th highest median household income in the whole United States as of 2007.[134]

However, although Minnesota considers itself a successful and progressive state it is still a state of the Midwest. For this reason, "Minnesotans have in addition to their superiority complex an accompanying inferiority complex."[135] They know that the Midwest is regarded as "flyover country" and that tourists tend to skip the Heartland. They know that the attention-grabbing things usually happen outside of the Midwest and that they are behind trends. They know that many important cultural figures left the state for the East or West Coast, for example, Sinclair Lewis or F. Scott Fitzgerald, and that "status symbols of the Midwest [still] acquire their status partly out of being eastern."[136] They know that Midwestern literature is typically identified as regional writing, whereas literature from the East Coast is considered as American writing. Garrison Keillor refers to this sense of inferiority as being the "sixth sense" of Midwesterners, i.e., "a feeling that if we [Midwesterners] were really any good, we wouldn't be living here."[137] Thus, Minnesota seems out of place in the Midwest but simultaneously appears to be the epitome of Midwestern identity.

Minnesota does not only does exemplify the superiority-inferiority conflict of the Midwest but also the "Wilderness"-"Metropolitan" or garden-desert dichotomies. The North Country and the Boundary Waters in the North of Minnesota are still an almost undeveloped wilderness and still carry the promise of the frontier myth, but they also spark controversies between preservationists and developers. Justine Kerfoot's, for instance, deals with this conflict in her autobiographical novel *Woman of the*

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[132] "Theater," *Minneapolis.org*, 2009, Meet Minneapolis, 18 Feb. 2009 <http://www.minneapolis.org/page/1/minneapolis-theater-district.jsp>.

[133] Shortridge, *Middle West* 116.

[134] United States, Dept. of Commerce, Housing and Household Economics Statistics Division, *Three-Year-Average Median Household Income by State: 2005-2007*, US Census Bureau, 2007, 18 Feb. 2009 <http://www.census.gov/hhes/www/income/statemedfaminc.html>

[135] Atkins 27.

[136] Atkins 29.

[137] Garrison Keillor, "Sweet Home Minnesota," *TIME.com* 24 Mar 1997, 15 Dec. 2008 <03/24/1997http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,986090,00.html>.

Boundary Waters (1986). Hence, it is indeed difficult to label Minnesota, a dilemma poignantly summarized by historian Annette Atkins:

> This sense of being both superior and negligible leaves Minnesotans confused. The state is urban enough, diverse enough, corporate and artistic enough to make a claim to sophistication. It is rural, safe, homogeneous, and isolated enough to be decidedly unsophisticated and proudly American. The state is in the center of everything, but central to almost nothing. It's ahead of times and behind the times.… It's in the Midwest, though the sisterhood is sometimes uncomfortable. This conflict, this divided consciousness, this sense that the state is many things gives the state energy and enlivening vitality.[138]

The "divided consciousness" creates an atmosphere that obstructs the development of a complacent and settled state identity. The dichotomous nature of Minnesota's self-identification leaves its identity ricocheting between different poles that are hard to unite or balance, which creates ambiguousness but also a vibrant energy.

This "vitality" and desire for a balance is often present in Minnesota literature. The beginnings of Minnesota literature can be dated back to the end of the 17th century. Until the early 19th century literature from the Minnesota area consisted mainly of travelogues written by explorers, missionaries, or fur traders, for example, Father Hennepin, Jonathan Carver, or Zebulon Montgomery Pike. This literature served foremost to attract new settlers to the undeveloped territory. An early prominent literary figure of Minnesota might be William Joseph Snelling, who was one of the first writers to realistically portray Native Americans and the frontiersmen of the Minnesota country in his *Tales of the Northwest* (1830). With the coming of statehood in 1858 and the arrival of more and more settlers in Minnesota, literature grew in correspondence. Literature of this time was primarily defined by a longing for the East or the homeland culture and an imitation of the East Coast style. [139]

Toward the end of the 19th century, Midwestern and Minnesota authors increasingly found inspiration for their writing in their native region. Hamlin Garland pioneered the use of distinct Midwestern settings and themes in his books, for instance, *Main-Travelled Roads* (1891) or *A Son of the Middle Border* (1917). Furthermore, he was one of the first authors to criticize the harsh life on Midwestern farms. Although Garland only lived in Minnesota for a short period of time, his work set the stage for Sinclair Lewis's famous book *Main Street* (1920). Two other Minnesota authors rose to national acclaim during the 1920s, namely O.E. Rolvaag

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[138] Atkins 29.

[139] Grace L. Nute, *A History of Minnesota Books and Authors* (Minneapolis: Minnesota UP, 1958) 4-9.

with *Giants in the Earth* (1927) and F. Scott Fitzgerald with *The Great Gatsby* (1925). However, these books are often considered national instead of regional literature, possibly because they do not address Minnesota with specificity of place. *Main Street* (MS) refers to Minnesota explicitly, but the book states that the "story would be the same in Ohio or Montana, in Kansas or Kentucky or Illinois."[140] After World War II, Frederick Manfred, who spent his adult life in Minnesota, gained national and international recognition with his biographical novel *Lord Grizzly* (1954). Furthermore, the essayist Meridel Le Sueur contributed to the formation of a Minnesotan self-identification with the book *North Star Country* (1945), a people's history of Minnesota. Since the 1970s, Garrison Keillor's popular radio broadcast "A Prairie Home Companion" and his *Lake Wobegon* novels continue to shape the public and national perception of Minnesota.[141]

In view of the status of the Midwestern small town in American society, it should come as no surprise that in 2003 the most widely known Midwestern small town was Garrison Keillor's Lake Wobegon although or especially because it is only a fictive place.[142] On the surface, Lake Wobegon undoubtedly depicts the quaint, folksy, and simple town that American society seeks and expects. However, Keillor also portrays, tongue-in-cheek, a more dreary side of small town life that can be traced back to Sinclair Lewis's criticism in *Main Street*. These two novels, which have influenced the perception of Midwestern small towns considerably, are both set in Minnesota. Thus, the Minnesota setting takes on a special role in the construction of the Midwestern small town image. However, this issue poses another problem for the creation of a distinct Minnesota state identity since Minnesota is continuously associated in popular opinion with fictional and thus frozen-in-time small town communities. This perception defies the progressive image the state aims for. Yet, the state subversively uses the literary versions of Minnesota small towns to its advantage by turning Sinclair Lewis's hometown Sauk Centre and the fictional Lake Wobegon into touristic attractions. Although the town never existed, the name "Lake Wobegon" is used to attract visitors to Minnesota, for example, the Lake Wobegon Café in St. Stephen or the Lake Wobegon Trails. Thereby, the boundaries between imagination and reality are effectively blurred.

Many contemporary authors writing from and about Minnesota, for instance, Mark Vinz or Sheila O'Connor, believe that Minnesota has a flourishing literary

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[140] Sinclair Lewis, introduction, *Main Street* (New York: Dover, 1999). *All page references within the text refer to this edition.*

[141] Nute 15-28.

[142] Richard O. Davies, Joseph A. Amato and David R. Pichaske, "Crisis on Main Street 1960-90," *A Place Called Home: Writings on the Midwestern Small Town*, eds. Richard O. Davies, Joseph A. Amato and David R. Pichaske (St. Paul: Borealis Books, 2003) 306.

community. The networks among writers are strong, authors receive financial support, and are welcomed by society.[143] However, outside of Minnesota, cultural centers like Minneapolis are rarely celebrated as homes of novels or poets. Nevertheless, the literary community of Minnesota has grown notably in recent years and has become quite diverse although few of the published books are recognized beyond Minnesota or the Midwest. *Main Street, Lake Wobegon Days* (1985), *Staggerford* (1977) by Jon Hassler and *The WPA Guide to Minnesota* (1938) are often considered books that define the "state's identity to the people who live there, and to the world outside its borders."[144] Although there is usually little consensus about a Minnesota canon given the variety of authors, lesser known Minnesota books, like *Letters from the Country* by Carol Bly (1981), *Cape Ann* by Faith Sullivan (1988), *Grass Roots: The Universe of Home* by Paul Gruchow (1995), *The Heart Can Be Filled Anywhere on Earth* by Bill Holm (1996), *Last Standing Woman* by Winona LaDuke (1997), *Where No Gods Came* by Sheila O'Connor (2004), *Sweet Land* by Will Weaver (2006), or poetry by Mark Vinz are just as important for the creation of the state's identity.

2.3 The Midwestern Small Town in American Society and Literature

In recent years, the focus of American cultural studies and literary studies has shifted toward a "de-centering of the American sense of self," "a deconstruction of the … American canon," the exploration of "grey zones, where American identities have become a blur of many cultures," and the rise of themes like "multiculturalism" or "borderlands."[145] De-centering both gives rise to feelings of placelessness and the yearning for a sense of place, which the small town seems to cure by being a metaphorical abstraction as well as a real place. Robert Kroes, professor of American studies at the University of Amsterdam, wonders how the topic of the small town as "vital or dead center of American life" can still be relevant. However, he also argues that the small town carries on "ignoring the slights as well as the many announcements of its death" because it "links Americans to an America as they feel it."[146] Elmer Suderman, English professor and poet, furthermore, defines the small town as a place

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[143] Mark Vinz, and Sheila O'Connor, discussion, Visiting Writers Festival, Concordia College, Moorhead, 28 Sept. 2007.

[144] Brad Zellar, "Great Minnesota Books," *Star Tribune* [Minneapolis – St. Paul] 06 Apr. 2008: F4.

[145] Rob Kroes, "The Small Town: Between Modernity and Postmodernity," *The Small Town in America: A Multidisciplinary Revisit*, eds. Hans Bertens and Theo D'Haen (Amsterdam: VU UP, 1995) 7.

[146] Kroes 8.

where people live in a carefully defined area, situated at some distance from a major metropolitan area, all parts accessible by foot, the center of the town a main street or square, the people knowing each other intimately, with a tacitly understood class structure, … the people [being] more aware of and more influenced by nature than their city and suburban cousins. In short a landscape, a 'place', sometimes a community.[147]

This definition shows that attempts to delineate the small town have to be taken with a grain of salt because a bedroom community, where people only sleep but not live, might not provide the intimacy one might expect from small towns. Furthermore, the intimacy might not always extent to social outcasts or misfits.

Statistically, the population demarcation for small towns can vary from state to state and it can be hard to distinguish a small town from a small city. However, "in emotional and attitudinal terms" the small town often seems to be understood as a place "where people know each other as opposed to the faceless metropolis."[148] Hence, insiders and outsiders often define the small town as an escape from urban life. The American small town has become "one of the most important icons of American self-mythification [because] it is where America has always thought of itself as being at its normal, common, average best, at its most neighborly and democratic."[149] This image has mainly been attributed to small towns in the Midwest because the Midwest as a whole is believed to be a place of superior morality and pastoral values. Hence, "if the small town [is] typically American, the Midwestern small town [is] doubly typical."[150] For this reason, the Midwestern small town has often been chosen by novelists as a prototype for the archetypal small town. Although the Midwestern identity has largely developed on the ground of its supposedly non-existent landscape, Quantic adds that the Great Plains society is "determined … by towns" since the buildings of towns often seem to be the only signs of life in this environment.[151] This status of Midwestern towns is still relevant today given the declining population density and depopulation of rural areas. Compared to the beginning of the 20th century, when the majority of the US population had been living in small towns, the

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[147] Elmer Suderman, "The Literary Landscape of Minnesota Small Towns: Gopher Prairie, Staggerford, and Lake Wobegon," *Midwestern Miscellany* 25 (1997): 11.

[148] Hilfer 6.

[149] Ickstadt 9.

[150] Hilfer 4.

[151] Quantic, "Theories" 18.

situation is now completely reversed. For instance, Minnesota's rural population has dropped from 65% in 1900 to 30% in 1990.[152]

The first Midwestern towns were established as service centers for the surrounding farmland along rivers or railroad tracks. Railroad speculators and promoters played an important role in establishing Midwestern small towns because they built towns in order to create "demand for passengers and freight service" and "generate profits from the sale of land." For reasons of efficiency, the towns were mostly planned and designed upon a grid pattern that provided a "reassuring … visual image of permanence and security."[153] Since railroad towns had to be set up at a reasonable distance, these small towns became rather isolated "island communities" until the rise of the automobile. Nevertheless, in the 19th and early 20th century, small towns wielded important political power in the Midwest since the majority of the population lived in these towns.[154]

Until the 1920s, most Midwestern towns generally enjoyed a "high tide of existence," i.e., an efficient economy, population growth, and sound infrastructure. For this reason, the small town had been portrayed as a pastoral ideal until this point. The pastoral image was supported by the so-called Friendship Village stories, which were initiated by Zona Gola's romantic and glorifying perspective on small towns in her books *Friendship Village* (1908) and *Friendship Village Love Stories* (1909).[155] These stories furthered the myth of the small town as a place "characterized by sweet innocence, an environment in which the best in human nature could flower serenely, a rural paradise exempt from the vices, complexities, and irremediable tragedies of the city" and as a "perfect community" that dissolves conflicts with a "primal universal togetherness."[156] For example, a girl who eloped with her sister's fiancé is embraced by the village community or an unpleasant newcomer is eventually accepted by the town ladies when she gets pregnant.

The Midwestern small towns of the early 20th century were placed on a pedestal, which was severely criticized in books like Sinclair Lewis's *Main Street*, Sherwood Anderson's *Winesburg, Ohio* (1919), or Edgar Lee Masters's *Spoon River Anthology* (1915). This criticism came to be known as "Revolt from the Village." These authors emphasized "the lack of cultural sophistication, the racial and cultural intolerance, and

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[152] United States, Dept. of Commerce, Economics and Statistics Administration, *Urban and Rural Population: 1900-1990*, US Census Bureau, 1995, 23 Feb. 2009 <http://www.census.gov/population/censusdata/urpop0090.txt>.

[153] Richard O. Davies, Joseph A. Amato, and David R. Pichaske, "The Formative Years 1790-1900," *A Place Called Home: Writings on the Midwestern Small Town*, eds. Richard O. Davies, Joseph A. Amato and David R. Pichaske (St. Paul: Borealis Books, 2003) 13-14.

[154] Davies, "The Formative Years 1790-1900" 16-17.

[155] Hilfer 23.

[156] Hilfer 3, 17.

the powerful conforming influence wielded by religious zealots and small-minded men and women over the free flow of ideas."[157] Hence, these authors opposed the abstraction of the mythic small town with their own abstraction.[158] The "Revolt" writers cannot be credited with presenting the reality of small towns in the Midwest; however, they reflected "the reality of the perception of small towns in America."[159] What these writers criticized was not an actual place but the mental conception of the village which existed in American society: "[T]he village represented what Americans thought they were, what they sometimes pretended (to themselves as well as others) they wanted to be."[160] The "Revolt" writers themselves had a rather ambivalent attitude toward small towns, wavering between rejection and a belief that small towns could still "be transformed from a place of lost opportunity into … the 'City upon a Hill,'" if things were done right.[161] Most of the "Revolt" writers had grown up in Midwestern small towns, but they felt that small towns could no longer hold the promise of an "open society" or "open mind" associated with the open space of the Midwest. The Midwestern small towns rather evoked a feeling of being "closed in."[162] Sinclair Lewis, whose novel *Main Street* was the most influential and successful book of the "Revolt from the Village" movement, portrays this phenomenon as "village virus":

> It is an unimaginatively standardized background … a rigid ruling of the spirit by the desire to appear respectable. It is … the contentment of the quiet dead, who are scornful of the living for their restless walking. It is negation canonized as the one positive virtue. It is the prohibition of happiness. … It is dullness made God. (MS 237)

Throughout the 20th century, this criticism had a lasting effect on the perception and image of the Midwestern small town as it became a synonym for "lackluster mediocrity and petty conformism as well as bleak and graceless architecture."[163]

The "Revolt from the Village" was already the first sign of an impending long-term decline of the Midwestern small town. The steady growth of urban areas, revealed in

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[157] Richard O. Davies, Joseph A. Amato and David R. Pichaske, "Main Street Ascendant 1890-1930," *A Place Called Home: Writings on the Midwestern Small Town*, eds. Richard O. Davies, Joseph A. Amato and David R. Pichaske (St. Paul: Borealis Books, 2003) 84-85.

[158] Hilfer 31.

[159] Andrew L. Lutz, *Up and Down Main Street: An Examination of Character. Place, Myth, Community and Culture Through Contemporary Small Town American Fiction*, diss., State University of New York at Stony Brook, 1998 (Ann Arbor: UMI, 1998) 11.

[160] Hilfer 4.

[161] Hölbling 158.

[162] Hölbling 148.

[163] Hölbling 151.

the 1920 census, already indicated that the decline of the Midwestern small town was inevitable. The Great Depression in the 1930s severely affected the Midwestern farms and dependent small towns and enhanced the negative perception of these places. During World War II and the postwar time, many people left Midwestern small towns for metropolitan areas in order to find better jobs because industry could rarely be attracted to the rural Midwest. The increasing popularity of cars made shopping trips to the urban areas possible and, eventually, led to the decline of small town shops on Main Street. Furthermore, many small towns had to be consolidated because, based on the garden myth, too many towns and roads had been built, which could no longer be maintained due to the impending depopulation.[164] Moreover, the rise of television in the 1950s put an end to social activities in small towns, which affected their sense of community severely.[165] In consequence, "the city represented big growth and thus big opportunities. The small town represented slow growth (at best) and stability."[166] Kathleen Norris notes that especially in larger small towns people still believed in the self-sufficiency of their community although reality increasingly contradicted this idea. [167] However, admitting this problem would have "cast doubt on the identity-sustaining premise that the past was golden."[168]

   The economic and cultural desolation of small towns did not improve during the following years. More and more shops on Main Street closed as the constructions of highways allowed people to drive to better shopping facilities in a short amount of time. The railroad became less and less important as the car developed into the main mode of transportation and shopping centers, such as Wal-Mart, were built near the highway on the outskirts of towns. Geographer John Jakle argues that this development "intensified the small town's lack of self-respect, and its worship of the big city." [169] The highway and the shopping center symbolized progress but also de-centered the community core, blurred its boundaries, and gave rise to an "every man for himself" attitude. These problems were not uniquely Midwestern but were more acute in the Heartland "since the sense of place that is the Midwest had for so long

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[164] Shortridge, "Expectations" 126.

[165] Richard O. Davies, Joseph A. Amato and David R. Pichaske, "Depression, War, and Resurgence 1930-60," *A Place Called Home: Writings on the Midwestern Small Town*, eds. Richard O. Davies, Joseph A. Amato and David R. Pichaske (St. Paul: Borealis Books, 2003) 214-16.

[166] John A. Jakle, *The American Small Town: Twentieth-Century Place Images* (Hamden: Archon Books, 1982) 147.

[167] Kathleen Norris, "Gatsby on the Plains: The Small-Town Death Wish," *North Dakota Quarterly* 53 (1985): 45.

[168] Shortridge, "Expectations" 127.

[169] Jakle 162-63.

been rested on the ubiquitous small town."[170] Ironically, at the same time the small town communities were unraveling, unstable and tense situations in urban areas, e.g., the Civil Rights Movement in the 1960s, gave rise to escapism and nostalgia for the rural. As urban life was viewed more critically, due to increasing ecological awareness and the loneliness of mass society, Midwestern small towns came to be seen as places that retained "the 'old-fashioned' ideas of family, [good] community, and sensitivity to nature."[171] People began to realize that the advantages of urban society had been achieved with a price, i.e., the loss of community or rootedness.[172] In 1985, a survey revealed that nearly half of the Americans living in larger cities would prefer to live in a small town with 10.000 people or fewer.[173] This nostalgia, in addition to the small town crisis, resulted in a kinder attitude toward Midwestern small towns within popular literature, whereas Sinclair Lewis's satirical perspective began to lose its allure. Still, writers of the 1970s and 80s and the rising "New Regionalism," e.g., Garrison Keillor, Carol Bly, Faith Sullivan, or Jon Hassler "continued to be critical of the weaknesses of small-town society while also acknowledging its positive aspects."[174] These authors showed that positive and negative sides of the small town should not be understood in opposition but as different facets of the same place.

Even today the popular image of the Midwestern small town is often caught in the tension between the "myth of the small town" and the "Revolt from the Village." The depictions of Midwestern small towns in literature and American culture range from being idealized as unchanging and pastoral to being rejected as oppressive and backwards. The small town is at once something to be ashamed and proud of.[175] Consequently, the small town self-image, just like the Midwestern identity, suffers from an inferiority complex accompanied by a superiority complex. Negative perspectives are often visible in American horror movies, where the setting of the small town is used to create an atmosphere of constriction and isolation. In contrast, a good example for the idealization of small towns in popular culture is Main Street, Disneyland. Walt Disney himself grew up in a Midwestern small town, which greatly influenced the conception of Main Street, Disneyland. The architecture represents the purity of childhood but also the "innocent" and "golden" years of Midwestern small

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[170] Davies, "Crisis on Main Street" 305.

[171] Shortridge, *Middle West* 73.

[172] Shortridge, *Middle West* 70-71.

[173] Jean B. Elshtain, "Our Town Reconsidered: Reflections on the Small Town in American Literature," *Political Mythology and Popular Fiction*, eds. Ernest J. Yanarella and Lee Sigelman (New York: Greenwood, 1988) 117.

[174] Hölbling 153.

[175] Jakle 167-68.

towns around the turn of the 20th century.[176] However, Disney's Main Street still remains an abstraction of reality and recreates small town America "as it should have been" and "without the other, or darker side of life [e.g.,] funeral parlors, pool halls, or bars."[177] Nevertheless, Disney's "reconstruction of remembered space" has helped to shape the small town into a romanticized icon.[178] This image influences how people perceive small towns in reality, going as far as remodeling them after Disney's Main Street.[179] Although small towns have drastically changed within the 20th century, their image often remains constant and frozen in time, either positively or negatively, and is reinforced by popular culture and literature as shorthand for setting and values. Thus, the audience can easily recognize the implicit symbolism and can understand what is left unsaid by the author.[180]

Today, the lure of the city is still as strong as ever and many Midwestern small town communities that are too far removed from urban centers are quietly vanishing due to population loss, aging, and reduced economy. Small towns that thrive usually do so as bedroom communities or suburbs near larger cities. This development is notable in North Dakota where rural counties have lost up to 20 % of their population, whereas counties with large cities have gained over 10% in population.[181] Charles Bowden describes the situation of rural and small town North Dakota in his infamous article "The Emptied Prairie" as "a giant skeleton of human desires."[182] This trend is, to a lesser degree, also visible in Minnesota although most rural areas in Minnesota, except for the agriculturally defined south, can still boast population growth according to the 2007 census.[183] Many small towns have adjusted their economic and social appearance to the urban standards in order to avoid further decline and appear progressive (e.g., through chain stores). Hence, many critics lament that small towns have become less distinctive places, communities of strangers without a core, and sites where "locality and place play an ever-diminishing role in the lives of the small-town

[176] Richard V. Francaviglia, *Main Street Revisited: Time, Space, and Image Building in Small-Town America* (Iowa City: U of Iowa P, 1996) 147.

[177] Francaviglia 156.

[178] Kroes 18.

[179] Francaviglia 169.

[180] Jakle 172.

[181] United States, Dept. of Commerce, Economics and Statistics Administration, *State and County Quick Facts: North Dakota*, US Census Bureau, 28 Feb. 2009 <http://quickfacts.census.gov/qfd/states/38000.html>.

[182] Bowden, "The Emptied Prairie."

[183] United States, Dept. of Commerce, Economics and Statistics Administration, *State and County Quick Facts: Minnesota*, US Census Bureau, 28 Feb. 2009 <http://quickfacts.census.gov/qfd/states/27000.html>.

inhabitants."[184] Andrew Lutz adds that by constructing buildings that look the same everywhere and do not serve human interaction, American society has created a "nowhere" or "great hollow … where millions of people live unconnected to other people."[185] Consequently, the cultural boundaries between urban areas and small towns are becoming more and more blurred, and small town residents face the problem of a vague self-image and transience. Thus, the fate of the small town is a sign of a globalized world where people are less bound to and by place, as well as a symptom of a mobilized and uprooted America.

Still, the Midwestern small town remains an important theme and setting in American literature. It not only offers a "*surveyable* (fictional) place … [where] small town community life … serves as a stabilizing frame of reference that provides a sense of continuity"[186] but also satisfies the yearning for a supposedly lost and absent "home" or "hometown," which is an important need in American culture.[187] Will Weaver often takes up the theme of loss in his short stories about the changing rural Midwest. In his short story "The Last Farmer," published in the short story collection *Sweet Land* (SL), the main character, Spence, drives restlessly through the night after helping to pull down an old farm house and muses about the vanishing small towns on the prairie: "For the more he drove, the fewer lights he saw on the land. He kept driving far beyond the time when he should have reached town, driving until he understood that there no longer was a town. It was all gone. As far as the eye could see, there was no one home."[188] As a remedy for growing dislocation and disorientation in American society, the small town has emerged as a "spatial metaphor, a place within real characters might emerge and exist in relation to one another … and that exists in our cultural and individual myth as a more desirable place to be than the one most of us happen to be in."[189]

The small town literature of the early 20th century portrayed the village as a place to escape from and as a myth of community turned sour. However, although the Midwestern small town is often associated with the "restrictive" characterization established in *Main Street,* contemporary small town literature shows that the small town can also be "generative" because it is "doubtful that creativity could blossom out

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[184] Richard O. Davies, Joseph A. Amato and David R. Pichaske, "From Farm Crisis to the Present," *A Place Called Home: Writings on the Midwestern Small Town*, eds. Richard O. Davies, Joseph A. Amato and David R. Pichaske (St. Paul: Borealis Books, 2003) 375-76.

[185] Lutz 146.

[186] Hölbling 158.

[187] Hölbling 152.

[188] Will Weaver, *Sweet Land* (St. Paul: Borealis Books, 2006) 179.

[189] Elshtain 135

of a true vacuum, especially when there is so much diversity in small towns."[190] Contemporary Midwestern small town fiction often presents the return to the hometown as a desirable option although the amount of people living in urban areas seems to imply that the return to the small town is not an actual reality. Yet, the development of suburbs near large cities appears to be an attempt to recreate small town communities and satisfy the yearning for the hometown. Contemporary writers often try to include these ambivalent attitudes toward small towns in their work because

> [t]he 'small town' … provides a focus … as metaphor of a state of mind (or social being), abhorred, rejected in its unmetaphorical, its factual or historical realization … and yet longed for and constantly returned to as image: namely the imagined normality of a full social life.[191]

Small town literature is "at once warning us off and drawing us in"[192] because it fulfills the desire "for a sense of community and belonging, for reassurance against social disruption and the threat of loss – the need, in short, for a sense of place."[193]

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[190] Terri L. Symonds, *The Other Side of Oppression and Conformity: Diversity in Small Towns in the Literature of the Midwestern United States and Canada*, diss., Indiana University of Pennsylvania, 1997 (Ann Arbor:UMI, 1997) 125.

[191] Ickstadt 11.

[192] Elshtain 135.

[193] Stephen Wilbers, "Lake Wobegon: Mythical Place and the American Imagination," *American Studies* 30.1 (1990): 8.

3. Death in American Society and Literature

3.1 Death and Modern Western Society

Death always has had a special place in human society because humans have, compared to other species, a strong awareness of their own mortality. This consciousness causes individual and societal difficulties since not death in itself but rather the knowledge of one's own mortality triggers the fear of death within human society.[194] Philippe Ariès discusses this issue in depth in his widely referenced books *The Hour of Our Death* and *Western Attitudes toward Death*. He argues that in modern industrial Western society death has become excluded from daily life and experience and has turned "shameful and forbidden." Simultaneously, he laments the loss of the "tamed" and ritualized public death prevalent in the early Middle Ages.[195] Even if Ariès is often criticized for his romantic view of medieval death, most critics and scholars agree that the attitude toward death has drastically changed in Western society during the 20th century. Especially the effects of industrialization and the influence of American ideas make the altered perception of death in Western society noteworthy.

The German sociologist Norbert Elias claims that the increased predictability and security of life, given the improved medical care in industrialized countries, has contributed to this change and has led to a diminished belief in spiritual aid. For this reason, death is rarely encountered in daily life except through the media and thus its presence can be easily ignored or repressed.[196] Birgit Richard adds that the media makes death visible but also makes it bearable because it removes society from the "real" dead body. Hence, death can only be accepted as a societal image and symbol via the refraction through the media.[197] The American psychiatrist Robert Lifton refers to this process as "numbing," which denotes "the incapacity to feel or to confront certain kinds of experience, due to the blocking or absence of … imagery that can connect with such experience."[198] Hence, an image of death replaces the actual dead body. This change has been furthered by the acceptance of death as a natural and biological phenomenon due to the medical progress in the 20th century. The medicalization of the human body as well as the common Western belief that body

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[194] Norbert Elias, *Über die Einsamkeit des Sterbenden in unseren Tagen*, 7th ed. (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1991) 11.

[195] Philippe Ariès, *Western Attitudes Toward Death: From the Middle Ages to the Present*, trans. Patricia M. Ranum (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins UP, 1974) 14, 85.

[196] Elias 15-17.

[197] Birgit Richard, *Todesbilder: Kunst, Subkultur, Medien* (München: Wilhelm Fink Verlag, 1995) 76-77.

[198] Robert J. Lifton, "On Death and the Continuity of Life: A Psychohistorical Perspective," *Death, Dying, Transcending*, Perspectives on Death and Dying Ser.3, ed. Richard A. Kalish (New York: Baywood Publishing Company, 1980) 139.

and soul are separated at death has facilitated the marginalization of death, dying, and the dead in society.[199] Hence, death has become the "Other" so that members of society can define themselves as "living."[200]

Consequently, the connection between life and death has been severely damaged, which has led as far as applying symbolic death to people who are not dead yet, but who slow down society and can no longer contribute to it, e.g., elderly or mentally challenged people.[201] As a result, dying people, who are a reminder of mortality for the "living" community, are often separated from society by relocating them to hospitals or retirement homes because their existence seems to make no sense in a time that values youth and the extension of life. The medicalization of dying denies individuality and turns people into objects whose death is determined by medical instruments instead of ethical or biological boundaries.[202]

This change has fueled other developments in how modern Western society faces death. For example, the perception of the dead or dying body as nauseating, which might be a reason for the rise of cremation since it is a hygienic and fast way of disposal. Moreover, the commercialization of death has grown, which widens the gap between the dead and dying and their social circle even further. For example, the funeral director or cemetery custodians take care of the burial procedure instead of the family.[203] This removal from death even affects the perception of cemeteries since the fact that decaying bodies are buried there is often silenced or ignored, which is, for instance, visible in the popularity of cemetery tours to see the graves of famous people. Furthermore, Elias argues that the societal expectation of displaying piety in a graveyard and in the vicinity of death distances society from the dead and is an expression of the fear of death. Additionally, less and less societal rituals and festivities concerning the remembrance of the dead are upheld in contemporary Western society. Thus, death and the deceased are increasingly excluded from everyday life. For this reason, the dead seem to have no place in modern society except in the memory of the living.[204]

The individualization of society, beginning in the Renaissance, has also changed the modern perception of death. The rise of cities, mobilization, and technology has

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[199] Philippe Ariès, *The Hour of Our Death: The Classic History of Western Attitudes Toward Death Over the Last One Thousand Years*, trans. Helen Weaver, 2nd ed. (New York: Vintage Books, 2008) 606.

[200] Richard 82.

[201] Richard 82.

[202] Richard 71-72.

[203] Richard 68-69.

[204] Elias 52-53.

led to the diminishment of personal interconnectedness within human communities.[205] Hence, people believe that they have to find the purpose of their lives individually and alone, which, according to Elias, is absurd and futile because the meaning of a person's life can only be measured by the effects he or she had on other people.[206] The growing disconnectedness and rootlessness of modern life as well as "images of absurd holocaust and annihilation" have drained individual life of its significance and made death "profoundly threatening [and] unacceptable."[207] Dana Luciano, English professor at Georgetown University, takes this argument one step further by claiming that "the loss of death stands … for the loss of meaning" and thus "the condition of modernity is to mourn the loss of death itself."[208]

Additionally, the issue of people dying alone, mentally or socially, has become more prominent in the 20th century. As indicated by Ariès, this development can be traced back to the increasing intimacy and emotionality of family relations in the 18th and 19th century and the accompanying growing fear of death. Hence, it became difficult for families to accept or deal with the death of loved ones.[209] As the site of death shifted from the family home to the hospital in the 20th century, this sentiment was transformed into the modern mindset:

> [O]ne must avoid – no longer for the sake of the dying person, but for society's sake … – the disturbance and the overly strong and unbearable emotion caused by the ugliness of dying and by the very presence of death in the midst of a happy life.[210]

This restriction of emotions curbs the open display of grief on the sight of a loved one dying. Similarly, the dying should not upset the living by "provoking an emotive tension incompatible with the equilibrium of everyday life" but rather demonstrate an "acceptable style of dying." This way of dying, compared to the "embarrassingly graceless dying," is a death that is meant to ease dramatic emotions and can be accepted by the living.[211] Likewise, mourning has become acceptable only in seclusion because "too evident sorrow does not inspire pity but repugnance; it is the sign of

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[205] Elias 88-89.

[206] Elias 96.

[207] Robert J. Lifton, and Eric Olson, *Living and Dying* (New York: Praeger, 1974) 28-29.

[208] Dana M. Luciano, *Literary Morbidity: A Narrative Form and a Way of Life in Turn of the Century America*, diss., Cornell University, 1999 (Ann Arbor: UMI, 1999) 7.

[209] Philippe Ariès, "The Reversal of Death: Changes in Attitudes Toward Death in Western Societies," trans. Valerie M. Stannard, *Death in America*, ed. David E. Stannard (Philadelphia: U of Pennsylvania P, 1975) 139-40.

[210] Ariès, *Western Attitudes* 87.

[211] Ariès, "Reversal of Death" 142.

mental instability or of bad manners: it is *morbid.*"[212] Consequently, many funeral and mourning rituals have been reduced to the essential or have been emptied of their societal significance. Survivors are expected to hide their grief and continue with their usual life because a display of emotion would cause them to be avoided in society or "shunned in the same way as those who are social misfits."[213]

For these reasons, death is believed to have replaced sex as the principal societal taboo during the 20th century.[214] Whereas death has become an almost unspeakable topic within Western society, sexuality has evolved from an embarrassing and covert force in the Victorian age to a socially acknowledged and communicable issue. Elias attributes this development to the fact that the danger of death is more absolute and definite than sexuality.[215] Ariès, moreover, argues that in order to maintain order and morality in society, unpredictable forces of nature, like sexuality or death, had to be "tamed" and controlled by ritualization and codes.[216] However, as these social codes have lost their meaning and significance over time, death and sexuality could turn "wild" and thus into a threat for society. Hence, they had to be repressed and tabooed, first sexuality in the 19th century and later death in the 20th century.[217]

3.2 Death and the United States

The perception and relationship with death differs from culture to culture although the characteristics mentioned above are traceable in most of Western society. The attitude toward death is not only based on the physiological process but also on its sociocultural perception. Places where the modern attitude toward death meets resistance, e.g., Catholic countries or lower educated classes, still hold on to the romantic "cult of the dead and the veneration of cemeteries," which developed in the 19th century. However, these traditions might decline further with the advance of industrialization.[218]

Ariès argues that the altered perception and suppression of death in modern Western society emerged first in the United States around the beginning of the 20th century due to the rising influence of technology, mobility, and urbanization as well as

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[212] Ariès, *Western Attitudes* 90.

[213] Ariès, "Reversal of Death" 151.

[214] Geoffrey Gorer, *Death, Grief and Mourning* (New York: Arno Press, 1977) 128.

[215] Elias 69-70.

[216] Ariès, *Hour* 604.

[217] Ariès, *Hour* 579.

[218] Ariès, "Reversal of Death" 153.

the accompanying belief that death could be overcome and eliminated.[219] Although the modern approach toward death prevalent in America is similar to the attitude in Northern and Western Europe (e.g., the isolation of the dying or the suppression of mourning), the burial and funeral rituals deviate remarkably. In contrast to the almost complete societal removal of the dead body after death in Northern and Western Europe, American society maintains a set of complicated traditions, performed after the death and before the burial of the deceased. For example:

> [E]mbalming the body in order to restore to it the appearance of life; laying the body out for viewing in the room of a funeral home where the deceased, surrounded by flowers and music, receives a last visit from family and friends; [or] … burials [performed] in cemeteries designed like parks.[220]

Especially the ritual of embalming which, according to Jessica Mitford, emerged during the American Civil War in order to allow the bodies of fallen soldiers to be sent home, has become a widespread custom in the United States, whereas it is almost unknown in Europe.[221] The embalming serves to give the dead body the appearance of a living being in order to allow relatives to say their goodbyes without the reality of death.[222] In a way, "embalming serves less to preserve or honor the dead than it does temporarily to maintain the appearance of life in order to protect the living."[223] The funeral home serves as a neutral place to pay respects to the dead without being excessively personal, like the home, or sterile, like the hospital. Additionally, the funeral directors have become self-appointed "doctors of grief" who are "responsible for assuaging the pain of the bereaved," which mass society only accepts to be displayed during the period of the funeral but not in daily life.[224] Even the cemetery has become more and more depersonalized. Today, many graves look standardized and are no longer tended by the often faraway living family but by cemetery custodians. The mobilization and individualization of society has also affected small towns, where death used to have an impact on the whole community. Rural cemeteries lie now abandoned and death shakes the unraveled community only slightly because too many people have already left or the community has become estranged.[225]

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[219] Ariès, *Hour* 595.

[220] Ariès, "Reversal of Death" 154.

[221] Jessica Mitford, *The American Way of Death* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1963) 196.

[222] Ariès, "Reversal of Death" 156.

[223] Ariès, *Hour* 600.

[224] Ariès, *Hour* 598.

[225] Ariès, *Hour* 532-33.

These funeral traditions have served to make burials socially acceptable and have taken direct responsibility away from the immediate family. Furthermore, these traditions have turned the American funeral into an article of consumption that can be advertised. That this development is tolerated in the time of silenced death shows that American society has a need for maintaining funerary rites, which partially breaks the modern taboo of death. The deceased are not treated like death in general; instead, they are granted "their special place in society that traditional civilizations have always kept for them."[226] Hence, American society has created unique and often ridiculed funeral traditions that are a compromise between the "hasty and radical deritualization [present in] Northern Europe" and the "repugnance for having no solemn time for reflection."[227]

However, the partial disruption and transformation of the death taboo in American society does not "annihilate death or the fear of death," but rather reduces death to the "insignificance of an ordinary event that is mentioned with feigned indifference," which shows that "neither the individual nor the community is strong enough to recognize the existence of death."[228] Death is especially hard to accept in a culture that values "collective happiness,"[229] is characterized by progress, uprootedness, mobility, youthfulness, and, as a result, emanates an atmosphere of "deathlessness through … [its] distancing of the past."[230] Consequently, mortality stands in contradiction to the base pillars of American culture as an "unforgivable denial of the American myths of potency and expansiveness"[231] and is thus often understood as "un-American" or "anti-American."[232] For this reason, historian Charles Jackson cautions that the denial and marginalization of death in American society makes death more terrifying because the culture "can provide essentially no resources to the individual which might assist one in meeting one's own death or that of others."[233] However, this statement is foremost applicable to coping with death within the immediate familial or social circle because psychiatrist or social workers can provide depersonalized assistance. Still, the denial of death threatens to deconstruct the American self-identity since it abandons

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[226] Ariès, "Reversal of Death" 154.

[227] Ariès, "Reversal of Death" 155.

[228] Ariès, *Hour* 614.

[229] Ariès, *Western Attitudes* 94.

[230] Luciano 2.

[231] Thomas LeClair, "Death and Black Humor," *Critique: Studies in Modern Fiction* 17.1 (1975): 36.

[232] Luciano 1, 4.

[233] Charles O. Jackson, "Death Shall Have No Dominion: The Passing of the World of the Dead in America," *Death and Dying: Views From Many Cultures,* Perspectives on Death and Dying Ser. 1, ed. Richard A. Kalish (New York: Baywood Publishing Company, 1980) 53.

any connections with past and future generations and thus breaks "the chain of historical continuity at every link."[234] Even though Americans often pride themselves in living life to the fullest, the irrelevance frequently assigned to the end of life in modern American society threatens to make life itself insignificant.[235]

3.3 Death and Literature

Although the critical response to death in social sciences and literary research has noticeably increased since Ariès monumental work *L'homme Devant la Mort* or *The Hour of Our Death*, it still has not been extensive, which mirrors modern society's neglect or even anxiety of death.[236] However, in contrast to the silence surrounding death in real life, mortality has always been a more or less important topic in literature or philosophy. Literature addresses death in order to understand its meaning for human life.[237] Yet, if death has to be talked about it is expressed through euphemisms or metaphors, which helps to avoid any uncomfortable allusion to death or dying since "death is not outside of language and expression but its presence inside the word is one of radical disruption and deconstruction."[238] For example, in the United States the term "undertaker" has been replaced by "funeral director," "coffins" have become "caskets," and "corpses" are generally referred to as "loved ones."[239] Euphemisms in the English language are often taken from a biblical background or refer to mythology, traveling, time, home, or sleep, for instance, "go west," "cross the frontier," "pay the debt to nature," "the grim reaper," "the pale horseman," "meet one's maker," "go home," "the last sleep," "kick the bucket," "the great unknown."[240] The association of death with the "frontier," "nature," or "home" is often used in Midwestern literature because it reflects the life in the Midwest. Elias adds that the modern inability to acknowledge mortality has rendered many rituals and phrases surrounding death meaningless. Hence, people are often left without any means to cope or face the death of a beloved person and express their emotions accordingly. This speechlessness, in

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[234] C. Jackson 54.

[235] C. Jackson 54.

[236] Joachim Pfeiffer, *Tod und Erzählen: Wege der literarischen Moderne um 1900* (Tübingen: Max Niemeyer Verlag) 19.

[237] Peter Brooks, "Death of /as Metaphor," *Partisan Review* 46.3 (1979): 440.

[238] William Watkin, *On Mourning: Theories of Loss in Modern Literature* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP, 2004) 220.

[239] Jessica Mitford, *The American Way of Death Revisited* (New York: Vintage Books, 2000) 17.

[240] Heidi Anders, *Never Say Die: Englische Idiome um den Tod und das Sterben* (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang , 1995) 38-56.

turn, leads to the isolation of the dying since the resources to communicate about or with them have been deconstructed.[241]

Hence, death is taken up in contemporary literature in order to fill the gaping silence as well as make sense of mortality and gain knowledge about death which is inaccessible in real life. The "existential incongruity," which arises out of the paradox of an imagined medical immortality and encounters with death in real life, is often dealt with through irony or black humor.[242] This indirect approach reveals a consciousness of death and, accordingly, questions established societal responses to death. Furthermore, the "death moment portrayal in modern fiction … suggests an awareness of death as a key to comprehending self-identity, communal identity, and their attendant problems."[243] Thus, it becomes "the vehicle by means of which a culture seeks an articulation of the meaning of life."[244] Consequently, to make death more accessible and intelligible, mortality is transformed into images and metaphors that "give shape to the shapeless" and "endow it with meaning."[245] Since death cannot be experienced directly by either the author or the reader, the moment of death remains as an open gap in the text that cannot be left empty.[246] However, as it is difficult for humans to imagine their non-existence, the gap is bridged by metaphors and ideas of "an after-life or nothingness" in order to diffuse the fear of annihilation.[247] For this reason, death holds a great fascination and intrigue for writers because "it remains the most radically unstable of all signifiers, a pure sign with no literal referent."[248]

Consequently, the meaning of death is constructed by the author but also by cultural traditions, which means that conflicting representations of death can exist. A prominent image of death in ancient times was the skeleton, which can be attributed to the physical experience of decomposing bodies in these times. Other important images of death include Thanatos, Hades, and Charon, as well as other gods or bringers of death from Greek mythology. The representations of death as pale horseman, the Grim

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[241] Elias 45.

[242] LeClair 33.

[243] Robert Detweiler, "The Moment of Death in Modern Fiction," *Contemporary Literature* 13.3 (1972): 273.

[244] Brooks 440.

[245] Karl S. Guthke, *The Gender of Death: A Cultural History in Art and Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1999) 8.

[246] Frank Kelleter, *Die Moderne und der Tod: Das Todesmotiv in moderner Literatur, untersucht am Beispiel Edgar Allan Poes, T.S. Eliots und Samuel Becketts* (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 1997) 112.

[247] Kurt Eissler, "The Pleasure Principle," *The Interpretation of Death*, ed. Hendrik M. Ruitenbeek (New York: J. Aronson, 1973) 67.

[248] Diana Y. Blaine, introduction, *Studies in the Novel* 32.2 (2000): 107.

Reaper, or the angel of death have biblical origins.[249] During the Romantic age, death became increasingly associated with eroticism, exemplified by the German lied "Der Tod und das Mädchen" (Death and the Maiden) or by Edgar Allen Poe's poem "Annabel Lee." Just as sexuality, death became more and more "thought of as a transgression which tear[ed] man from … rational society."[250] A natural progression of this sentiment seems to have been the growing identification of death with the female in the late 19th century Western society.[251] On the one hand, "as the mother, 'woman' is the original prenatal dwelling place; as the beloved, she draws fantasies of desire and otherness; and as Mother Earth, she is the anticipated final resting place."[252] However, on the other hand, the feminine, often "reminds man … of his own biological origin and therefore his own, no less biological death"[253] and thus posits a threat for a "stable masculine subjectivity."[254]

Since death often represents the negation or opposition of life in Western cultures it must be "othered," denied, or beautified in order to avoid a disruption of society. For this reason, death in literature is frequently represented through a social outsider figure, e.g., mentally impaired persons, elderly women, or children. As it is difficult for modern authors to write about death, considering its tabooing, death is often portrayed by these marginalized figures or "Todesboten" ("harbingers of death"), as the German sociologist Karin Priester calls them.[255] Furthermore, Priester argues that these "harbingers" are not a sign of the societal denial of death but actually help to deconstruct the taboo. As figures on the edge of society, they are allowed to give death an otherwise barely existent voice and meaning. Thus, the outsider figures pose a threat for the regulated self-image of modern society.[256] Furthermore, they become a modern day *memento mori,* reminding people of their own mortality and the need to live a fruitful life because it is possible to "find a tentative identity in the certainty and finality of death."[257]

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[249] Guthke 11-12.

[250] Ariès, *Western Attitudes* 57.

[251] Guthke 15.

[252] Elisabeth Bronfen, and Sarah W. Goodwin, introduction, *Death and Representation*, ed. Elisabeth Bronfen and Sarah W. Goodwin (Baltimore: John Hopkins UP, 1993) 13.

[253] Guthke 190.

[254] Blaine 107.

[255] Karin Priester, *Mythos Tod: Tod und Todeserleben in der modernen Literatur* (Berlin: Philo, 2001) 97. (Translation mine).

[256] Priester 97-99.

[257] Detweiler 284.

4. Death and Dying in Minnesota Small Town Literature

4.1 Death and the Deconstruction of the Small Town Myth

4.1.1 The Small Town Setting and the Decay of the Community

The uncertainty and uncontrollability of the land and the nature in the Midwest parallels the perception of death in American society. Open land in the Midwest is often portrayed as an antagonist that "may kill the unhoused or the unwary."[258] Both death and nature are menacing because they cannot be controlled and, consequently, act as a reminder of mortality and the possibility of dying. Especially the extreme contrast between harsh winters and fertile summers, conditions very common in the Midwest, fuels the perception that nature in the Midwest is difficult to dominate. Sanders adds:

> The Midwest has no monopoly on death, of course, but the frozen sterility of December seems all the more appalling by contrast with the steamy fertility of June. The distance between summer and winter may stand for the extreme poles in our vision of the land – as generous or grudging, lush or lean – and for the full range of our feelings – from rapture to numbness, from fierce attachment to fearful distance.[259]

These "poles" are also present in Minnesota small town literature. The duality of deadly winters and fertile summers presents an apt imagery of the ambiguous identity of the Midwest and Minnesota; however, it also suggests that the unrestrained forces of nature are an essential part of Midwestern life.

In *Main Street,* the winter is perceived as a suppressive power with "clouds hewn of ponderous timber weighing down on the earth" (MS 100). This image is intensified by the snow which stretched "without break from streets to devouring prairie beyond, [and] wiped out the town's pretense of being a shelter" (MS 100). The winter and the snow seem to consume the tiny "specks" (MS 100) of civilization and humanity, a concept also voiced in O.E. Rölvaag's settler saga *Giants in the Earth,* where the winter brings an "empty silence" and turns the landscape into "a universe of nothing but dead whiteness."[260] In *Lake Wobegon Days* (LWD), the winter is continuously associated with death and dying. For example, the highly prized Lake Wobegon tomatoes tend to be killed by the first frost.[261] Furthermore, Lake Wobegon resident

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[258] Sanders 40.

[259] Sanders 43.

[260] O.E. Rölvaag, *Giants in the Earth: A Saga of the Prairie*, trans. Lincoln Cord and O.E Rölvaag (New York: Harper Collins, 1999) 283.

[261] Garrison Keillor, *Lake Wobegon Days* (New York: Penguin, 1986) 188. *All page references within the text refer to this edition.*

Clarence Bunsen thinks the snow smells "like a hospital," bringing him to believe that he is dying (LWD 205). The narrator comments that "winter is absolute silence, [and] the cold swallows up sound except for your feet crunching and your heart pounding" (LWD 247). Moreover, the narrator spends several pages on listing ways of dying during the winter, for example, being hit by a falling icicle, walking into a snow-covered bear trap, or having one's lungs frozen over if breathing through the mouth (LWD 245-47). The deadliness of winter is mentioned in *Staggerford* (ST) only in reference to the mysterious and ghastly Bonewoman, whose presence seems to hasten the "decay" and "freezing" of the gardens in town.[262] In *The Cape Ann* (CA), on the other hand, the winter acts as a dreary background for the end of the novel, when Lark and her mother are leaving Harvester for California. The town suddenly looks "bedraggled in the cheerless gray light," and Lark is afraid that her father will freeze to death if he goes out alone.[263] Moreover, "leafless black trees, twisted and painful-looking, were outlined against dirty snow. Small and shabby and huddled together was how everything looked" (CA 324). The snow is described as a force which weighs down everything like a "deep blanket" and creates a profound silence and stillness (CA 331). Thus, the repeated use of snow burying the fictive small towns appears to embody the repressive and stifling atmosphere of small town communities.

Although the winter in Minnesota seems to be the epitome of deadly natural forces, one can also find images of mortality in the descriptions of the fertile prairie and corn fields. These images appear, for instance, in the dark clouds casting shadows on the "golden" fields in *Main Street* (MS 22) and *Staggerford* (ST 62). In *Lake Wobegon Days,* these clouds reemerge as "clouds of locusts from on high/ [which] Blacken the dreary land and sky" (LWD 54). In *The Cape Ann*, the presence of mortality is expressed in the "absolute quiet" of the "rolling prairie" (CA 269). Furthermore, in *The Cape Ann* the prairie seems to take over the town because vacant lots on Main Street are "filled with mustard and dandelion and foxtail" (CA 130). Thus, the prairie threatens to consume the town, which effectively contradicts the old settler's "dream of dominating the wilderness."[264]

Although Minnesota has a large variety of landscapes, for instance, an abundance of lakes and woods, the prairie is often used as scenery for its small town literature. The small town has provided Midwesterners with a sense of place in a seemingly barren and hostile landscape. For this reason, the small town has evolved into a

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[262] Jon Hassler, *Staggerford: A Novel* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1986) 42. *All page references within the text refer to this edition.*

[263] Faith Sullivan, *The Cape Ann* (New York: Penguin Books, 1989) 310. *All page references within the text refer to this edition.*

[264] Sanders 44.

popular setting in Minnesota literature although it is "seldom celebrated." [265] Just as the image of the small town is ambivalent in American society, its portrayal in Minnesota literature remains no less contradictory - caught between being revolting and desired. Thus, the Minnesota small town is often depicted in "light grey to black" colors instead of "bright pigments."[266] The large distances between towns give rise to feelings of aloneness in a seemingly infinite space, i.e., "feelings of all-engrossing silence," and "the feeling of emptiness itself." These feelings can create a "sense of isolation" and can "add tension" to small town communities.[267] Quantic adds that "the struggle with the land is often a metaphor for the individual's inner conflict, his or her quest for a place in society that offers only a rudimentary identity."[268] Since small towns are often isolated from other places of civilization by the surrounding prairie and nature, the inhabitants are dependent on the community, even though consensual opinions are not always attainable. The interconnected and close community is an ideal of the small town myth; however, it is also a necessary part of every real small town. The community acts as the core and the heart of a small town and can create a sense of belonging for its inhabitants.[269]

The small town sense of community, whether mythic or real, developed mainly in pre-automobile times before "the highway loosened the bonds of self-containment."[270] The eventual outward focus toward the city "encouraged individual self-interest" as opposed to communal interests. This development has led to a "tugging and pulling" between community and individuality within the small town identity.[271] Furthermore, the reality of a tangible small town community has gradually vanished during the 20th century, which is perceptible in the small town landscape. Symbols of a stable community, like Main Street, the courthouse square, or the regularity of the street grid, have been replaced and deconstructed by symbols of decentralization and individualism. Modern highways leading to shopping centers have rendered the shops on Main Street meaningless, and "[housing] subdivisions outside of town have come

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[265] Jean Ervin, introduction, *The Minnesota Experience: An Anthology*, ed. Jean Ervin (Minneapolis: Adams Press, 1979) 14.

[266] Ervin 14.

[267] Carroll D. Laverty, "Rölvaag's Creation of the Sense of Doom in *Giants in the Earth*," *The South Central Bulletin* 27.4 (1967): 47-48.

[268] Quantic, "Theories" 22.

[269] Hilfer 6.

[270] Jakle 169.

[271] Jakle 169.

to symbolize a new freedom from traditional social restraint."[272] As a side effect, the interpersonal interaction in small towns has been "gradually breaking down."[273]

Consequently, the depiction of the town setting is often used in small town novels to depict the decay of the small town myth. In his influential novel *Main Street,* the main character, Carol Kennicott, takes a walk around her new home, the Minnesota small town Gopher Prairie and notices that

> [t]he broad, straight, unenticing gashes of the street let in the grasping prairie on every side. She realized the vastness and the emptiness of the land. The skeleton iron windmill on the farm a few blocks away, at the north end of Main Street, was like the ribs of a dead cow.… A Ford, in reverse, sounded as though it were shaking to pieces.… There was no other sound or sign of life.… Dahl & Oleson's Meat Market – a reek of blood. … a huge wooden clock which did not go. A clothing store with a display of 'ox-blood-shade Oxfords with bulldog toes.' Suits which looked worn and glossless while they were still new, flabbily draped on dummies like corpses with painted cheeks. (MS 29-31)

Lewis draws a bleak picture of decay that mirrors his perception of the repression, ignorance, conformity, and suffocating atmosphere seething under the surface of the small town myth. Lewis's death images are explicitly linked to withering and decomposing bodies, e.g., "the ribs of a dead cow" or "the reek of blood," which makes the town appear not only lifeless but also repulsive. The clothing store dummies look like "corpses with painted cheeks" and remind the reader of embalmed bodies, which are beautified in order to make them appear living and hide the uncomfortable truth of death underneath. This death imagery can also be applied to the aspect of small town life that Lewis criticizes in the novel, namely, the need to "bury one's own personality" for the sake of a stable community. [274] Thus, Sinclair Lewis questions the social codes that enforce compliance and conformity in small towns by means of showing the decay of the small town setting.

In the first chapter of *Lake Wobegon Days* (LWD), poignantly called "Home," the reader is given a detailed description of the scenery:

> The town of Lake Wobegon, Minnesota, lies on the shore against Adams Hill, looking east across the blue-green water to the dark woods. From the south, the highway aims for the lake, bends hard left by the magnificent concrete

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[272] Jakle 170.

[273] Janet M. Fitchen, Endangered Spaces, Enduring Places: Change, Identity, and Survival in Rural America (Boulder: Westview Press, 1991) 112.

[274] Ervin 14.

Grecian grain silos, and eases over a leg of the hill past the SLOW CHILDREN sign, bringing the traveler in on Main Street toward the Town's one traffic light, which is almost always green. A few surviving elms shade the street. Along the ragged dirt path between the asphalt and the grass, a child slowly walks to Ralph's Grocery, kicking an asphalt chunk ahead of him. (LWD 1)

Keillor draws a more positive picture of Lake Wobegon than Lewis did with Gopher Prairie. Thus, Lake Wobegon seems to embody a pastoral small town haven where "nine hundred souls" live "in small white frame houses … boasting large tidy vegetable gardens and modest lawns" (LWD 3). Moreover, Lake Wobegon seems to swim in an air of tranquility and peacefulness, exemplified by the rarely changing traffic light and the almost lethargic boy. Yet, the boy seems to be the only sign of life in an otherwise picturesque but motionless setting. The association of grain silos with "Grecian" or "magnificent" shows that Keillor likes to criticize Lake Wobegon and the small town myth through good-natured satire and humor. This venue of critique is also apparent when the history of Lake Wobegon, or "Lac Malheur," as it was called by French voyagers, is related through mock scientific historical evidence, added to the story via footnotes (LWD 24). The reader learns, for example, that Lake Wobegon took its name from the Ojibway word "Wa-be-gan-tan-han," meaning either "the place where [we] waited all day in the rain" (LWD 39) or "Here we are!" (LWD 8). Hence, the name humorously refers both to the stoic patience often ascribed to people in Minnesota and the general invisibility of Midwestern small towns. This obscurity is nicely exemplified by the fact that Lake Wobegon is situated in the "phantom" Mist County, which incidentally cannot be found on a map due to a surveyors mistake (LWD 8). Furthermore, the word "wobegon" is similar to the English word "woebegone," which means that someone feels "forlorn", "desolate" or "depressed."[275] Keillor thus addresses the more dreary parts of Midwestern small town life. However, in contrast to Lewis, "life's inconsistencies do not become … a target of stinging satire [for Keillor]."[276]

Nevertheless, Keillor uses the death theme as a tool to assess the small town myth just as Sinclair Lewis did. The air in Lake Wobegon, for instance, is described as having a "sweet air of mud and rotting wood, a slight fishy smell and … the sweetness of old grease, a sharp whiff of gasoline, fresh tires, [and] spring dust," suggesting not only decay but also familiarity (LWD 2). The cemetery of the town, the "Prairie Home

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[275] "Woebegone," *Oxford Paperback Thesaurus*, 2nd ed., 2001.

[276] John E. Miller, "The Distance between Gopher Prairie and Lake Wobegon: Sinclair Lewis and Garrison Keillor on the Small Town Experience," *Centennial Review* 31.4 (1987): 443.

Cemetery," is meticulously divided into a Catholic and Protestant division, separated by an iron fence with spikes, which the boys jump over after service as a rite of passage "because if you missed you'd fall on the spikes and be impaled and die there" (LWD 120). This act gives the phrase "dying for one's belief" a whole new meaning and simultaneously ridicules the denominational competition in town.

Furthermore, decay and transience appear in the downtown of Lake Wobegon. The narrator states that one can stand on the wide Main Street for hours without bothering anyone; a description that subverts the pulsating and active small towns the "Yankee promoters" had imagined when planning the Midwestern towns along the railroad (LWD 3). Moreover, the buildings on Main Street are described as being "quite proud in their false fronts, trying to be everything that two stories can be and a little bit more … and meant to make them modern" (LWD 4). This pretense is at once a reaction to expectations from the outside world regarding the small town myth, and the desire to be more progressive, which creates a "tension between the concreteness of the visual detail and the comic misapplication of someone else's notion of grandeur."[277] The stores on Main Street in Lake Wobegon pretend to have marble store fronts instead of something "a child might have cut … off a cornflakes box," which reveals that the picturesque small town myth cannot stand the test of a closer inspection (LWD 4-5).

In Jon Hassler's *Staggerford*, the obligatory scenic description of the town portrays the mythical Midwestern small town without any apparent signs of decay: "[Miles Pruitt] passed the city hall and he passed the spacious lawn of the Staggerford Library. At the corner of Main Street he turned and walked past the Weekly office…. He walked past the Hub Café, the Morgan Hotel, the hardware store, the bakery, and the bank" (ST 15). In contrast to Gopher Prairie or Lake Wobegon, the crumbling of the small town myth is not as obvious in Staggerford. However, further into the novel the reader realizes that not all is well in Hassler's fictitious town. When Miles Pruitt, the novel's protagonist, goes hiking alongside the "Badbattle River," he notices an old footpath which is now used by families, whereas "the traffic had moved from the path to U.S. Highway 4," suggesting that civilization is essentially passing by Staggerford on its way to more exciting places (ST 59). Furthermore, the path has seen "so many and bloody … skirmishes" between Native Americans and settlers "that the Minnesota Historical Society could not be certain which battle the river had been named for" (ST 59). As an ironic afterthought it is added that "now, of course, everything was peaceful" (ST 59) although problems and rifts still exist between Native Americans and Whites in Staggerford, eventually culminating in a Native American uprising. Another sign that something is amiss appears when Miles looks over the town from the highest point in the landscape, which ironically is the "Staggerford Evergreen

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[277] Wilbers 11.

Cemetery." He can see the water tower with the city name although he can only make out the word "STAGGER" (ST 62). The word "stagger" brings to mind a fall or stumble, foreshadowing Miles's fate at the end of the book as well as the fate of the town. Although death references are not as numerous in the description of Staggerford, they still suggest that the small town myth is not as intact and perfect as it seems to be because unacknowledged communal problems are seething beneath the surface.

In Faith Sullivan's *The Cape Ann* (CA), death images and demise are presented in various ways throughout the descriptions of the small town settings of Harvester and Morgan Lake. Harvester is the small town where the six-year-old child-narrator Lark Erhardt lives with her parents Arlene and Willie, while Morgan Lake is the hometown of Arlene's sister Betty. Lark and Arlene stay in Morgan Lake during Betty's ill-fated pregnancy in order to help with the household. Interestingly enough, Lark does not describe the Main Street of Harvester but a side street where "businesses sprawled messily out … [with] vacant lots and weedy patches between them" (CA 35). These businesses

> didn't fit on Main Street, due either to their nature or their size. Rayzeen's Lumberyard. Grubb's Junkyard and Body Shop. The Nite Time Saloon…. And Marcella's Permanent Wave, which … was a cover-up for the bootleg, hard liquor business of Marcella's husband, Barney Finney.… A couple of hundred yards distant from the [train] depot, the hobo jungle was the exposed basement of a warehouse long ago razed or burned to the ground. It was a hole in the ground with concrete and stone walls, but no stairs. (CA 35-36)

By not describing the stereotypical small town Main Street, the narrator, not only suggests that the small town myth falls apart under the surface, but explicitly depicts it. The image of the "hollow" warehouse is a poignant representation of the state of the small town myth and the Midwestern small town; that is, the core has fallen apart over time, leaving only a shell of its former glory behind. One has to take into account that *The Cape Ann* is set during the Great Depression. However, the sight of a broken down warehouse, as the sign of an economic crisis, is just as symbolic for problems of the past as it is for the present. Considering Charles Bowden's National Geographic story "The Emptied Prairie" about the ghost towns in North Dakota, one realizes that the town description in *The Cape Ann* is not purely fantasy.

An even bleaker vision is presented by the small town Morgan Lake, which possesses a Main Street that is "only a block long" (CA 124). Ironically, the cemetery of Morgan Lake, St. Ambrose, seems to be the most beautiful place of the whole town with "weeping willow, cedar, and aspen" lining the path to the center of the graveyard

(CA 182). Although Lark thinks that Morgan Lake's Main Street looks "bright and quiet," she also notices that "a number of its little frame buildings were boarded up" and that there were "vacant spaces between several of the buildings" (CA 129-30). The desolate situation of Morgan Lake becomes obvious when Lark peers into a "dead café" on Main Street and imagines it to be a kind of "limbo" where the stillborn baby of her aunt could be:

> Dust lay thick along the chipped and rotting windowsills … and dust filmed the little counter and the few tables and chairs inside. The cardboard sign tacked on the wall showing a small blond eating Butter Nut was faded to sepia. Nothing was ever going to happen again in the café. It was like limbo. Nothing good would happen and nothing bad. (CA 194)

The café on Main Street seems to be frozen in time as well as its surroundings, which is both a warning and a critique. It is a warning of the silent deaths of Midwestern small towns and a criticism of the tendency to perceive small towns as a kind of nostalgic museum where "everything was set in place as it would remain forever" (CA 194). This conception leaves small towns, not only in an existential "limbo," but it also masks the fact that change does actually occur. Even the café will not be in this place forever since it is already "rotting" and "fading" away. Hence, the café symbolizes the quiet vanishing of small towns all over the Midwest due to younger generations leaving their home for urban areas, which also happened in Morgan Lake.

Ironically, the more small town communities disappeared, the more they have become mythologized in popular perception as an escapist fantasy: "The loss of the community makes the myth complete … and necessary – to preserve in art what is being lost in reality."[278] The myth of the small town community satisfies the American cultural need of belonging to a "community that is 'home'" and the longing "to feel part of a group that is larger than a family but more embraceable than a nation."[279] This desire is linked to the development of an increasingly mobile and detached American society during the 20th century. Hence, the Midwestern small town society has been repeatedly imagined as a community defined by "honesty, fair play, trustworthiness, good-neighborliness, helpfulness, sobriety"[280] and a place where

[278] Lutz 51.

[279] Osha G. Davidson, "Decline and Denial," *A Place Called Home: Writings on the Midwestern Small Town*, eds. Richard O. Davies, Joseph A. Amato and David R. Pichaske (St. Paul: Borealis Books, 2003) 385.

[280] Arthur J. Vidich, and Joseph Bensman, *Small Town in Mass Society: Class, Power, and Religion in a Rural Community* (New York: Anchor Books, 1960) 31.

"class barriers and economic conflicts that jar actual human society are dissolved into a "primal universal togetherness."[281]

However, the external and internal decay of the small town setting presented in *Staggerford*, *The Cape Ann* and *Lake Wobegon Days* questions the pastoral myth of the small town as a place of "togetherness," innocence, and simplicity, prevalent until the 1920s and later reanimated during the turbulent 1960s. Thus, death imagery is used to question the nostalgic longing for an idealized small town community. Writers like Garrison Keillor, Faith Sullivan, or Jon Hassler try to free the small town from being a purely escapist fantasy, unchangeably frozen in a time when things were easier. One of the dangers of this misconception is that the actual economical crisis of Midwestern small towns as well as their slow disappearance or transformation into bedroom communities can be overlooked. Environmental journalist and author Osha Davidson argues this point by stating:

> The old man, in his age, his poverty, and his wonderful ability – and awful willingness – to endure hard times stoically, is as nearly perfect a symbol of late-twentieth-century rural America as one could hope to find. But most of all he embodies the plight of small towns across the country in his near invisibility.[282]

"Invisibility" here refers to the fact that old age and the dying body have no place in the progress and youth-oriented American society and are thus marginalized and relocated to nursing homes or hospitals. In the same venue, the unsettling reality of crumbling and dying communities is replaced by nostalgic images of a time when small towns were still in their prime. These stereotypes veil the realities of modern small town life; therefore, the towns become invisible by being "just dim blurs alongside the gleaming superhighway."[283] They become clichéd distortions of reality in societal perception, whereas the sometimes unpleasant truth is buried under the popular conception of the American small town as bastion of normalcy. This problem is especially prominent in the Midwest because this region has been increasingly associated with traditionalism, intolerance, and old age instead of youthfulness. This development has been uncovered by a survey conducted by James Shortridge in the

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[281] Hilfer 17.

[282] Osha G. Davidson, *Broken Heartland: The Rise of America's Rural Ghetto* (New York: Free Press, 1990) 71.

[283] Davidson, *Broken Heartland* 71.

1980s[284] and various other academic and newspaper articles, for example, a research conducted by the psychologist Jason Rentfrow in 2008.[285]

The popular nostalgia and escapism, which found its way back into small town representations after the tumultuous 1960s and 1970s, does not only deny the reality of small town communities but also the tensions within the town society, between diversity and conformity, individuality and community. Sinclair Lewis negatively criticizes the pressures within small towns in *Main Street*. The main character, Carol Kennicott, contemplates during a winter walk "why the good citizens insisted on adding the chill of prejudice, why they did not make the houses of their spirits more warm and frivolous" (MS 100). Although some virtues of small towns still exist in Gopher Prairie, "especially friendliness and a sense of decency," they have been twisted into absurd extremes, like "unhealthy curiosity" and "rigid moral standards."[286]

However, the bitterness found in Lewis's portrayal of the Minnesota small town community is hardly present in *Lake Wobegon Days*, *Staggerford* or *The Cape Ann* since the authors question the small town image through humorous criticism. In contrast to Lewis, they are trying to portray the flaws of small town communities along with positive aspects in order to represent the small town as a multifaceted place. However, the "unhealthy curiosity" prevalent in *Main Street* and the propensity to judge people who do not fit into the set standards of the small town society are also present in the novels of Keillor, Hassler, and Sullivan.

Although gossip is an important feature of small town life because it provides a "sense of continuity" as oral history, it also creates tension between individual privacy and the public ideology of neighborliness.[287] Small town gossip, positive and negative, is a means of interpersonal communication but also of exclusion, for example, by not participating in gossip or by being the object of gossip. In *Lake Wobegon Days,* the talented baseball player Wally Bunsen is "torn apart" by the "way people talked that he'd been a failure, that if he was any good he'd be in Chicago" (LWD 184). Keillor uses almost the exact same wording in his 1997 article "Sweet Home, Minnesota," which deals with Minnesota's inferiority complex.[288] He claims that the sentiment of

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[284] Shortridge, Middle West 81.

[285] Stephanie Simon, "The United States of Mind," *Wall Street Journal.com* 23 Sept. 2008, 16 May 2009 <http://online.wsj.com/article/SB122211987961064719.html>.

[286] Sally E. Parry, "Gopher Prairie, Zenith, and Grand Republic: Nice Places to Visit, but Would Even Sinclair Lewis Want to Live There?" *Midwestern Miscellany* 20 (1992): 19.

[287] Lewis E. Atherton, "Belonging to the Community," *A Place Called Home: Writings on the Midwestern Small Town*, eds. Richard O. Davies, Joseph A. Amato and David R. Pichaske (St. Paul: Borealis Books, 2003) 89.

[288] Keillor, "Sweet Home Minnesota."

inferiority present in Minnesota and its small towns makes them inferior because it becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy. According to Cynthia Miller

> Wobegonians exhibit the complex duality of Minnesota's collective state character: a sense of exceptionalism and smugness … that contrast starkly with darker fatalism, self-doubt, pessimism, … and stoic acceptance of the weather … as expressed in the towns motto, 'Sumus quod Sumus,' or 'We are what we are.'[289]

Although Wally Bunsen knows that he is a good baseball player, he just cannot play with a glove. Eventually, he starts to believe the town gossip about himself and thereby validates the inferiority complex of the whole town. Ultimately, Wally ends up spending his days sleeping on the porch and waiting for the Sunday volunteer games where he is one day hit in the head by a baseball and dies (LWD 184).

In *Staggerford*, the main character, Miles, becomes the object of town gossip when the relationship to his student Beverly Bingham is called into question. The vigilant and observant atmosphere in the town becomes especially apparent when the school principal, Wayne Workman, is able to list every meeting between Miles and Beverly in detail. Wayne Workman accuses Miles of being careless of the Staggerford faculty's reputation although Miles and Beverly never act on their attraction to each other. Still, the people in Staggerford will talk about it and pass their own judgement (ST 202-03). Another example of gossip appears in the description of the mysterious Bonewoman, which is interrupted several times by the parenthesized insertion "it was said" (ST 12). This phrase suggests that the presented "facts" about the Bonewoman are unverified assumptions made by the town's people.

Another example for a more severe criticism of the conflict between community and the individual in small towns appears in a chapter of *Lake Wobegon Days* called "News." In this chapter the narrator deviates from his usual gentle satire. The main text of the chapter tells the story of Lake Wobegon's newspaper editor Harold Starr and the inconsequential stories printed in the paper. The second text runs parallel to the main text on the bottom of every page via several footnotes that are loosely connected to the main text. The footnotes are from a manuscript which was sent to the Lake Wobegon newspaper by a former resident; however, the manuscript was never printed because it contains 95 theses that severely and mercilessly criticize the upbringing in a small town. For example:

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[289] Cynthia A. Miller, "Garrison Keillor's Lake Wobegon," *The American Midwest: An Interpretative Encyclopedia*, eds. Richard Sisson, Christian Zacher and Andrew Clayton (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 2007) 109.

9. You taught me to be nice, so that now I'm full of niceness, I have no sense of right and wrong, no outrage, no passion. 'If you can't say something nice, don't say anything at all,' you said, so I'm very quiet, which most people think is politeness. I call it repression. (LWD 254f.)

30. You taught me not to be 'unusual' for fear of what the neighbors would say. They were omniscient, able to see through walls. We knew they'd talk, because we always talked about them. We thought they were nuts, but still we shouldn't offend them. (LWD 261)

57. You taught me that no matter what I thought, it was probably wrong. The world is fundamentally deceptive. The better something looks, the more rotten it is down deep. (LWD 265)

74. You misdirected me as surely as if you had said the world is flat and north is west and two plus two is four; i.e., not utterly wrong, just wrong enough so that when I took the opposite position – the world is mountainous, north is east. I was wrong, too, and you being wrong about the world and north made me spend years trying to come up with the correct sum of two and two, other than four. *You gave me the wrong things to rebel against*. My little boat sailed bravely against the wind, straight into the rocks. Your mindless monogamy made me vacillate in love, your compulsive industry made me a prisoner of slot, your tidiness made me sloppy, you materialism made me wasteful. (LWD 269)

The unknown author of the manuscript clearly blames his shortcomings foremost on how he was raised by his parents, but it is also an indictment of the whole community and its pressure on the individual. In contrast to the main text or other footnotes that are used to give the text a mock-scientific appearance, the 95 theses are not humorous or sentimental but rather bitter, occasionally mean-spirited, and "disturbing to read."[290] Garrison Keillor stated that the theses are a self-reflexive response to the book being reduced to a nostalgic longing for a mythic place.[291] The split structure allows the reader freedom in dealing with text because the footnotes can be read along with the main text, separately from it, or ignored entirely, which in turn affects the interpretation of the text. Foremost, the structure creates a dialectic between "nostalgia

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[290] Marcia Songer, *Garrison Keillor: A Critical Companion* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 2000) 51.

[291] Peter A. Scholl, *Garrison Keillor* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1993) 129.

and reality,"[292] which reveals a "community that is all harmony on the surface while discord and pain beneath."[293]

This duplicity is explicitly addressed in thesis 57, which states that everything is ugly underneath the surface and nothing can be trusted. However, in thesis 58 the manuscript author criticizes the constant need to doubt since a person that is "always looking for hidden meanings … misses the lovely surface of the world, even in spring" (LWD 266). Thereby, the author cautions that only searching for what is "ugly" makes life just as miserable as focusing only on the positive, because "surely those green leaves are hiding bare branches [and] [i]f you look hard enough, you will glimpse them: dark, malevolent, and a big trunk that if you ran into it hard enough, it would kill you" (LWD 266). Thus, the narrator argues that life in a small town is often ambiguous, but that a difference exists between being aware of this ambiguity and creating problems out of it, for instance, running into a tree trunk.

The small town setting of communities, like Lake Wobegon, Staggerford, or Harvester, reveals unpleasant truths about the small town community that clash with the often positive popular perception of small towns. Yet, the difficulty of acknowledging the decay of the small town is similar to acknowledging the existence of death in American society. By showing the cracks in the small town façade and the tensions within the community, Keillor, Sullivan, and Hassler criticize the imperfections of the small town myth. Still, they make a point of showing that despite their flaws, small town communities do have virtuous features that help preserve the individual in an isolating landscape.

4.1.2 On the Edge of Society – Social Misfits and Death

The flaws and the failings of small town societies, and the conflict between the individual and the community, portrayed in *Main Street* through bitter and unrelenting satire, are also addressed in *Lake Wobegon Days*, *The Cape Ann,* and *Staggerford* by using mostly gentle criticism. Furthermore, the concept of social "othering," i.e., blaming problems on deviants, is also repeatedly used for this purpose. In these novels, not only dying people are isolated from society, but social misfits are also associated with death symbols in order to portray their marginalization within the community. American society often excludes and "others" death by silencing it and turning it into a taboo. This modus operandi is used in *Staggerford*, *The Cape Ann,* and *Lake Wobegon Days* as well. Thus, the social exclusion in supposedly empathetic

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[292] Charles R. Baker, "Garrison Keillor," *John James Audubon to Gustaf Sobin*, American Writers: A Collection of Literary Biographies Suppl. 16 , ed. Jay Parini (New York: Scribner, 2007) 174.

[293] Songer 51.

and friendly small town communities is used as a means to deconstruct and question the small town myth.

Rick Cypert explains in his essay "Intellectuals, Introverts, and Cranks: What the Misfits Tell Us about Small Town Life" that small town inhabitants who do not want to or cannot participate in small town life as expected, like Hilly Stillman in *The Cape Ann* or the Bonewoman in *Staggerford*, are pushed to the margins of society because they are feared. The small town society is afraid of their introspective silence and "abnormal" behavior because it is "discordant with the ideal of the small town."[294] Thus, these individuals are denied, ignored, or "othered" in order to maintain the social structure of the small town:

> Townspeople fear that if the non-conformists of the community are not identified, labeled, and ridiculed, that resulting behavior or belief might be considered acceptable and adopted by others, in consequence, destroying the small town myth.[295]

Essentially, the misfits do not adhere to the societal expectations of "respectability and conformity." [296] Consequently, they have to be alienated from society. Their acceptance in society would threaten to unravel the image the small town tries to project to the outside world. This so-called "witch doctrine" is used as a measure of control because it justifies societal expulsion "as a means of maintaining the 'good'" within the community.[297] The alienation of misfits helps to ignore issues seething under the surface and assists in meeting the standards of popular small town ideology because if the community "[does] not recognize [its] defeat, [it] [is] not defeated."[298]

"Othering" in small town communities is similar to the "othering" of death in American society. Both death and social misfits pose a threat to the stability of society and therefore have to be marginalized and pushed to the sidelines. For this reason, death in literature is often represented in the role of a social outcast, which Priester refers to as "harbingers of death." [299] According to Priester, these "harbingers" deconstruct the social taboo of death by giving it an otherwise denied voice. Yet, in the Minnesota small town literature of Keillor, Sullivan, and Hassler the misfits also deconstruct the myth of the small town community. The denial of outcasts in the small

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[294] Rick Cypert, "Intellectuals, Introverts, and Cranks: What the Misfits Tell Us About Small Town Life," *Markham Review* 16 (1986): 3.

[295] Cypert 3.

[296] Cypert 7.

[297] Norris, "Gatsby" 52.

[298] Vidich 320.

[299] Priester 97.

town society contradicts the small town myth of neighborliness, friendliness, and honesty.

In *Lake Wobegon Days,* these outcasts are portrayed through short, intertwined vignettes since the novel does not have a standard plot structure. These vignettes follow the lives of the people in Lake Wobegon and often resemble folk tales, gossip, or anecdotes. For this reason, the novel introduces a large variety of characters that are either reappearing throughout the novel or just mentioned once. One of these characters is the son of the Hegelund family, who, in the story, is not even given a first name to be remembered by. He is expected to die within six month but never does. While the people of Lake Wobegon think he is dying, he receives early Christmas presents and even a letter from the governor. However, "nobody [talks] about him [because] it [is] too sad" and thus he is gradually forgotten (LWD 139). Although the small town friendliness is present when, for example, the school children wave at the boy lying in his bed at the upstairs window in his house, the boy is still no longer allowed to participate in everyday life because it makes people uncomfortable. For instance, the narrator remembers that as a child he was scared of meeting the same doomed fate as the Hegelund boy. As a living *memento mori* of death, the Hegelund boy is shut away and allowed to fade into oblivion. The small town society treats the boy as if he were already dead because it makes it easier to deal with mortality. The irony is that the boy recovers after his mother is tired of his illness and sends him back to school. However, when he returns to school everybody ignores him because "his death had worn out … interest in him" and nothing was "left for his resurrection" (LWD 139). Hence, the Hegelund boy remains a living dead, making him a social outcast because he no longer has a place in the community.

Neighborliness and compassion are only existent until the individual can no longer meet the expectations of the small town myth or fulfill his or her place in the community. The story does not deny that small town virtues exist; however, it presents an imperfect side of the small town society. In addition, *Lake Wobegon Days* includes various tales of more gruesome deaths and murders; for example, two daughters killing their parents in order to inherit their house, "a newborn child found in a privy" (LWD 60-61), or a boy that was supposedly buried alive (LWD 197). According to Peter Scholl, an English professor at Luther College in Iowa, Keillor uses the theme "Et in Arcadia Ego," meaning that death exists also in Arcadia, repeatedly as a "counterforce against the sentimental pull of the pastoral." [300] Death and social exclusions question escapist small town fantasies that can lead to "primitivism,"

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[300] Scholl 112-13.

"infantilism," or the "neurotic refusal" to acknowledge the benefits of urban civilization and the problematic situation of small towns.[301]

Still, *Lake Wobegon Days* can be read as a validation of popular assumptions and escapist fantasies about small towns because it includes all the stereotypes "that simply make us laugh,"[302] by mentioning, for example, that having cars with low mileage is not odd in Lake Wobegon but something to be proud of (LWD 5). However, the underlying satire as well as the morbid stories "enable Keillor to maintain silent criticism."[303] He finds the small town wanting in some respects, "but for him the defects lie in the human heart, not in some imagined 'village virus' that condemns all small towns to narrow, twisted existences."[304] That is, the societal conflicts highlighted by the treatment of misfits like the Hegelund boy arise out of familial, educational, generational, and foremost communication problems rather than from the small town itself, which makes the characters human and the small town setting less sterile. Keillor satirically criticizes the myth of the consensual small town community by "integrating the light side and the dark side in his work" instead of "wavering between diametrically opposed positions."[305] Thus, he neither vilifies nor idolizes the small town and its society but rather understands its shortcomings as a result of human flaws.

In *The Cape Ann*, Hilly Stillman and Mrs. Wheeler take on the roles of social misfits in Harvester. Hilly Stillman had been a glorified member of the Harvester community once because "he was the first boy from the county to volunteer" for World War I (CA 9). "His picture appeared in all the weekly … papers in St. Bridget County. Girls promised to write him, and everyone was proud to have known him, to have been his friend" (CA 9). Hilly's mother, Mrs. Stillmann, who had had a shaky standing in society because her cousin became pregnant while living in the Stillman's household, was now "invited everywhere" (CA 9). However, when Hilly returns from Europe with a shellshock syndrome and with his mind reverted back to the state of a five-year old, he becomes an embarrassment for society:

> Most people turned away when they saw him. They crossed the street to avoid him. Boys taunted him, and if no one were around to stop them, they pelted him with stones, chasing him home and up the wooden stairs of the butcher's shop. Women were frightened by Hilly. He lacked decorum … and most of what he said made no sense. Some women feared, or said they did, that Hilly

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[301] Scholl 112.

[302] Lutz 72.

[303] Lutz 71.

[304] Miller, "Distance" 439.

[305] Miller, "Distance" 444.

could be dangerous.… He was a public nuisance and embarrassment. (CA 11-12)

This description of Hilly's place in Harvester echoes Rick Cypert's argument that non-conformist behavior in a small town has to be ridiculed or labeled. By calling Hilly "dangerous" or "insane," the people of Harvester justify his exclusion from the community. His behavior threatens the community's understanding of "normalcy" and cannot be overlooked like the "widening urine stain" that appears on Hilly's trousers during his "welcome back" reception at the Harvester train station (CA 10).

Hilly actively tries to reintegrate into the community; for instance, he likes to carry other people's mail or polish their cars. Still, Hilly's irrational behavior, like running down Main Street naked, makes his societal exclusion imperative for the popular image of Harvester (CA 11-12). Hilly's marginalization is emphasized by his continuous association with death throughout the novel. The first sign appears when Lark takes a walk along the train tracks and is surprised by the "figure of a man" that appears "in the shadows among the trees" (CA 40). Hilly standing in the shadows is not only an image of death but also represents his position in the society of Harvester. At first, Lark is afraid of the man, whom she believes to be the "bogeyman" her grandfather has told her about, and runs away until she realizes that it is actually Hilly with "wildflowers cradled in one arm" (CA 40-41). Thus, the idea that Hilly might be "dangerous" is both addressed and contradicted in this scene. The flowers Hilly had collected as a bouquet for Lark, and his face that still "retained the curved, unformed look of an eighteen-year old boy's" portray Hilly as a figure of innocence (CA 42). Even Lark notices that the skin on Hilly's face still showed no signs of aging "despite years in the sun and cold of Main Street," and she wonders whether his face will grow old if he gets "his sanity back" (CA 42). Here, "the sun and cold" do not only imply the harsh Minnesota weather but also the social climate Hilly has to face. Lark also questions whether Hilly can maintain his innocence if he ever becomes aware of how his beloved community has treated him.

The breaking point for Hilly's sanity appears when he is chased by a car near the Catholic cemetery. Stella Wheeler, who stops the tormenters, later describes the scene as a "nightmare":

> There were three young men in the car – no, two young men in the front seat and an older man in the back. It looked like . . . I'm not sure who it was. […] The two young men in the front were honking the horn and yelling […]. They were saying . . . awful things to him. They were chasing him with the car, chasing him like he was an animal, honking and yelling. They were telling him what . . . what they would do to him when they caught him. (CA 75)

Mrs. Wheeler is clearly shaken by these events and becomes melancholic afterwards. She claims not to have recognized the older man in the backseat of the car although Lark and Arlene as well as the reader question the truthfulness of that statement. William Watkin states in his book *On Mourning: Theories of Loss in Modern Literature* that the repeated use of the three dots, like in Mrs. Wheeler's speech, suggests a "deathly silence," which indicates that she is keeping something to herself.[306] After Hilly's death, Mrs. Wheeler confesses to Mrs. Stillman that she did, in fact, recognize the man in the backseat as Axel Nelson from the hotel and that the men in the car had hurt Hilly. However, she is neither able nor willing to do anything about it or make it public (CA 292-93). It is ironic that even though Stella Wheeler's position in Harvester is similar to Hilly's, she does not compromise the man in the back seat. Although Mrs. Wheeler has been turned into a societal outcast because she is depressive, she tries to keep the positive image of the small town alive. Mrs. Wheeler is aware of the positive and negative aspects of Harvester, which might be one of the reasons for her depression; however, she is not willing to reveal Harvester's flaws. With all its faults the small town community is still an important source of identity and support. Thus, the recognition of its shortcomings would leave Mrs. Wheeler with nothing left to hold on to.

Stella Wheeler's depression degrades her in the eyes of the community, which is voiced by her daughter Sally, who does not "trust [her mother's] uncontrolled reactions" (CA 229). Sally is afraid that her mother will cry in public and then "people would think that she was crazy" (CA 74), which incidentally happens at the annual Knights of Columbus picnic. After Mrs. Wheeler defends Hilly's participation in the parade to the snobby Mrs. Eggers, she breaks down crying with the "source of her sorrow lying to deep for examination" (CA 88). Consequently, the people at the picnic "either stared at [her] … or conspicuously didn't" (CA 88).

As the story progresses, both Hilly and Mrs. Wheeler close themselves off to society by becoming more silent, less communicative, and less visible. Lark comments, for example, that she "rarely saw [Mrs. Wheeler] anymore," and it was "as if she were hiding in the corners, not in a sneaky way, but like a frightened animal" (CA 229). Hilly, on the other hand, after being chased by the car, slowly regains his sanity and becomes "woebegone" (CA 80). When Lark and Arlene visit the Stillmans after the incident, Hilly does not look at or speak with them but looks like "he would rather be alone in his room … and had joined [them] only for courtesy's sake" (CA 80). Thus, Hilly and Mrs. Wheeler adhere to society's expectations by becoming invisible and take their designated place at the margins of the community, where they are no longer a remembrance of the flaws within the social fabric of the small town.

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[306] Watkin 137.

Hilly's submission to society standards is brought to the attention of the reader when he participates in the Knight of Columbus military parade:

> He had difficulty keeping in step, and of course his gait was lurching due to his bad foot, but he made a great effort to conform. He didn't break rank, dashing ahead of the band and waving his arms, as he had the year before last. Nor did he jog alongside the Homecoming Queen's open car, polishing the fenders, as he had last year. (CA 90)

Apparently, Hilly has changed his behavior in order to fit in and not draw attention to himself. Hilly has come to realize, just like Mrs. Wheeler, that the community to which they wanted to belong does not want to be associated with them as long as they do not behave according to societal rules. Hilly, at first, tries to meet the expectations by "keeping in step" during the parade, but he eventually isolates himself from the community. For example, he no longer attends the church bazaar or comes to the door at Halloween to see the costumes (CA 210-11). Hilly even seems to have forgotten his friendship with Lark, and when she gives him a children's book for Christmas, which she used to read to him, he accepts it with a perplexed politeness (220). Afterwards, Hilly and Lark keep their friendship alive by communicating through letters because it seems to be the only venue for Hilly to articulate his feelings; for example, he expresses his gratitude for Lark reading to him and his sadness about the looming World War II (CA 257). Hilly gradually comes to understands the cruelty and hypocrisy of his once beloved hometown. This insight, in turn, makes him grow older and weary, just as Lark had predicted:

> His robe and pajamas hung on him. The insteps of his feet in the brown felt house slippers looked thin and bony, as did his wrists below the sleeves. Adding to the sorry picture was the condition of his robe, worn and laundered to the weight of a dish towel, and with elbows so threadbare, his pajamas sleeves poked through. Curiosity flickered in Hilly's eyes, then disappeared. Gone entirely was his old happiness at seeing [Lark]. (CA 211).

In a matter of months Hilly has turned into an "old man," whom Lark can no longer recognize because he "never … said strange things" anymore (CA 219). The saner Hilly becomes, the older he appears and the more he resembles a dying person. His "bony" feet and wrists, the "threadbare" robe, and the "dusting of gray" in his brown hair reinforce a resemblance with a skeleton rather than a healthy man (CA 219). Mrs. Wheeler's appearance is described in the same way as "she is too thin for her own good" and "her clothes [fall] along the sharp planes of her body, like heavy rain sheeting down a windowpane" (CA 86).

Hence, the social misfits in Harvester are clearly associated with death imagery because they look increasingly gauntly and haggard. They have become "harbingers," not only of death, but also of social cruelty and hypocrisy. Like death, they threaten the social construct of the community and thus have to be pushed into the isolation and silence which exists at the margins of the small town society. Hilly, moreover, acts as a "harbinger of death" through his suicide. Thus, he confronts the small town community with mortality and how to deal with it. Many people ignore Hilly's death, just like they ignored Hilly, but those who do recognize the meaning of Hilly's death also act on it. For instance, both Arlene and Mrs. Stillman eventually leave Harvester because they have outgrown it. Even Lark starts to think that her crib, where she has been sleeping since her infancy, now feels like a cage instead of a safe haven (CA 292). Moreover, her dream of living in a catalogue house, the Cape Ann house, slowly turns into nothing more than a hollow fantasy because Hilly, whom she had pictured picking flowers in the garden, is dead and her mother and father live in an unhappy marriage. Most importantly, she refuses, despite her father's anger, to visit the Catholic Church any longer because they will not bury Hilly (290). Thus, Hilly's suicide becomes a critique and deconstruction of the small town myth and community. Hilly's last and unfinished letter to Lark reveals that he had yearned for happier and simpler times (CA 292). However, when Hilly realized that losing his mind in a war had led neither to peace nor appreciation in his home community, he may have understood that he had sacrificed his sanity for protecting a community that was nothing more than a beautiful myth. Lark summarizes this poignantly by saying: "In 1918 [Hilly] had been hurled into a sea of shell-shock. In 1939 he was climbing out onto a tiny island of sanity, only to find himself in a world of Huns" (CA 226).

Still, the treatment of social misfits in Harvester and Hilly's death do not condemn the small town community in itself since it is "like a family" for many of its inhabitants, which does provide support and stability; for example, Mrs. Stillman hides Lark when her father wants to punish her, and Arlene shares food with the homeless men living at the hobo jungle. [307] However, a small town is also a family that "wants to define its children … and wants to mold them into acceptable, preconceived roles." [308] Like Harvester, "small towns are a coin with a face on either side." [309] Although the reader can perceive this discordance in Harvester, most of its inhabitants do not acknowledge it. They are hung up on an idealized small town myth, which does provide certain constancy and behavioral guidance. Nevertheless, Hilly's death reveals

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[307] Faith Sullivan, mail interview, 26 May - 07 June 2008.

[308] Faith Sullivan, mail interview, 26 May - 07 June 2008.

[309] Faith Sullivan, mail interview, 26 May - 07 June 2008.

the cracks in the façade of the small town myth because it shows that those who should benefit most from the community are left alone.

In the novel *Staggerford*, the connection between death and "othering" in a small town community is also portrayed in a distinctive way. The author creates an intricate net of death symbols and foreshadowing, which eventually culminates in the sudden and unexpected death of the lovable protagonist, Miles Pruitt. The story is, for instance, set in the fall, which is a season of endings and decay. Furthermore, the time frame of the novel includes Halloween, All Saints Day, and All Souls' Day. All these days are in some way related to the dead and the deceased and, therefore, indicate the presence of an imminent death. Just before Miles enters the church on All Saints Day for the first time in ten years, Agatha McGee, his landlady, prays for the restoration of Miles's faith and then opens her missal to the "Prayers for the Dead" (ST 93). Later, Miles tells her that his patron saint is St. Mylor "who was famous for his piety, … beheaded by his uncle" and purged from the Catholic calendar after the Second Vatican Council in 1965 (ST 98).

Another image of death appears in Miles sleeping "on the top bank of the bleacher" in the football stadium during a free period and "resting his head on his briefcase and folding his hands on his chest" (ST 8). Thereby, he takes on the position of a dead body in a coffin. While in this position, Miles watches a funeral procession across the street before falling asleep (ST 8). Additionally, Miles likes to call his good friend and first love "Thanatopsis" instead of her real name Anna Thea. No one in Staggerford tires of reminding Miles that "Thanatopsis" is Greek for "view of death" and, therefore, not a proper nickname (ST 87). However, her nickname does become appropriate in the sense that Anna Thea is one of the people who see Miles dying. At the Halloween party of Anna Thea and her husband, Wayne Workman, Miles wears the uniform of the deceased park ranger Lyle Kite as a costume, and Superintendent Stevenson reminds him with horror that these are "the clothes of a dead man" (ST 86). On the day of his death, Miles meets a blood-stained hunter in the town's café, reads in his horoscope that this day is "good for 'disposing, once and for all, of disquieting perturbations'" (ST 263), and is told by his boss Wayne Workman that "[his] life is at stake" (ST 266).

Other characters have their own experience with death in the small town community. Superintendent Stevenson, for example, believes that he has a serious heart disease and that his heart could stop beating any minute. For this reason, he spends "his days in almost perfect isolation" and passes "his evenings and weekends … looking into his fireplace" (ST 34). Although Stevenson was once an active member of the community and the school board, he has "come to an absolute standstill" and now walks "hunched over in an attempt to curl himself around his

faulty heart and ward off the blows of daily life" (ST 34). The Superintendent isolates himself from the community because he believes he will die if he exerts himself too much. However, many people doubt his illness and think that he is using it as "a ploy to hold his job while shirking his duty" (ST 34). This supposition might be the reason why he is still invited to parties and visited by colleagues instead of being avoided and pushed to the margins like Fred Vandergar.

Fred Vandergar works as a teacher at the Staggerford high school until he is diagnosed with cancer and has to stay at home, isolated from the rest of the community. He never leaves his house until his death, except to attend his retirement party. Although everyone in town and at school knows that Fred is going to die, the retirement party is uncomfortable and "horrifying" for many guests because Fred looks like a living dead: "Though he still breathed, the process of corruption seemed to have begun. His eyes had sunk deep in their sockets and the cords stood out in his neck" (ST 66). Just like Hilly and Mrs. Wheeler in *The Cape Ann or* the Hegelund boy in *Lake Wobegon Days,* Fred has turned into an apparition of death. He has become a social outsider because he reminds other people of their own mortality. Like Hilly, Fred knows his status in the community and, thus, complies with the unspoken rules of social isolation and an "acceptable death."[310] He is not physically dead, but he is socially obsolete. When Miles visits the Vandergars for a signature, he notices that the "Vandergar house was dark," making it look like a tomb rather than a home where people are living (ST 63). At the end of his visit, Miles does not know what to say to Fred and his wife, so he just hugs them "because it was the only way to express what he felt" (ST 64). Anna Thea later tells Miss McGee that the embrace meant much to Fred, and that more people should have gone over to their house to hug them (ST 198). In a town where so many people are afraid of death, Miles literally seems to embrace and accept the unavoidable as a part of life.

Miles's embrace effectively portrays that death is a societal taboo, which can no longer be expressed through conventional phrases. The inability to acknowledge death in society deconstructs the communication with the dying and leaves them isolated. For this reason, the community only accepts Fred Vandergar's appearance in public during his retirement party because people can pretend that it is a retirement party and not a farewell. Still, Fred's colleagues do not know how to approach him:

> Some of the faculty gingerly sidestepped Fred entirely, preferring to study him
> from a distance while pretending to be in conversation with someone else.
> Some shook his hand, backing away even as they did so. Some went to the

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[310] Ariès, "Reversal of Death" 142.

rest room until dinner was served, and only when Fred was occupied with his food did they come out of hiding. (ST 66)

Clearly, Fred's presence makes people uncomfortable and self-conscious because they have no idea how to talk to him. For this reason, the faculty just disappears after Fred's "retirement" speech, "leaving Thanatopsis and Miles to help the Vandergars home" (ST 68). No one wants to say goodbye to Fred because everyone knows, while pretending not to know, that it would be a final farewell.

Death is even more effectively portrayed through the figure of the Bonewoman. Even Jon Hassler stated in an interview that the Bonewoman "is symbolic of death" in *Staggerford*.[311] The Bonewoman is the mother of Beverly Bingham, one of Miles's students. The Binghams live on a farm "in the gulch – a hopeless, rocky farm on the riverbank west of town where little grew but weeds and chickens because the topsoil had long ago been washed into the river" (ST 12). Mr. Bingham was sent to jail for the murder of a salesmen, which had actually been committed by Mrs. Bingham (as Beverly reveals toward the end of the book). Mrs. Bingham now raises chicken for a living and goes from door to door every evening, asking for bones to feed her animals. For this reason, everyone in town thinks that she is deranged. However, Miles questions what the town really does know about the Bonewoman apart from what Beverly tells about her family. The Bonewoman is like a ghostly figure whose "dark shape in the alleys of Staggerford" many inhabitants have seen, and "her voice when she [asks] for bones" many have heard (ST 243). Hence, many people in Staggerford are afraid of the Bonewoman. Mr. Stevenson, for instance, does not want his wife to open the door to the Bonewoman because his "passionate clinging to life had fixed his attention squarely on death" (ST 42). Thus, the Bonewoman calls up "a sense of the end of things" (ST 42). Consequently, the Bonewoman is often perceived as a bad omen or as an omen of death by the people in Staggerford. Thus, many people refuse to speak to her or give her bones. Even Miles senses "that the Bonewoman had somehow brought to the neighborhood the shadows and frost of the end of October – that by walking through the garden she was somehow hastening its decay, its freezing, its cover of snow" (ST 42). In a similar way Miles describes the Bonewoman's visit to Miss McGee's house:

> In the darkness, the fragrance of Miss McGee's old garden, turned up and tired, seemed to be rising in faint whiffs from the Bonewoman's deep footprints – the tuberous smell of roots freshly exposed and the sour smell of

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[311] Joseph Plut, "Conversation with Jon Hassler: About Staggerford," *South Dakota Review* 39.1 (2001): 106.

tomatoes spoiled by frost and left with a few blighted potatoes to blacken and nourish the spent, gray soil. (ST 28)

The Bonewoman is associated with the decay of life in the fall and the approaching Minnesota winter, which is in itself often perceived as a deadly "adversary" because it rarely leaves room for being.[312]

The dismissive attitude toward death is not restricted to small towns, but death and dying naturally have a bigger impact on close-knit small town communities. For this reason, dying people, just like other kinds of social misfits, are marginalized and isolated because it is easier to deal with their demise if it happens out of sight. The physical and social closeness of the small town seem so trigger this detachment in order to avoid the pain of death. Furthermore, death and dying disrupt the myth of the small town community because they bare the human flaws of society. The people in Staggerford do not marginalize the Bonewoman or Mr. Vandergard out of pure meanness, but rather because they are scared and confused. Hence, the people are caught between the small town myth and their own human fears, which leads to silence and "othering." Like Fred Vandergar, the Bonewoman is avoided and excluded from society because she is a *memento mori* of death and, hence, does not fit into the Staggerford society. She confronts the individuals with their own mortality and the society with its underlying flaws. She does not like to communicate with the people in town, lives in a house with junk cars in the yard, and likes to remain in the shadows so that no one will see her. When Miles, accidentally, runs into Mrs. Bingham during daylight, she does not acknowledge or speak to him. However, Miles notices that "her face was not lined by age" as he had imagined but that "the only mark of having lived a lifetime in the gulch was a hint of desperation in her eyes" (ST 72). This discovery reveals the Bonewoman's humanness to Miles as well as to the reader because it shows that she suffers from her societal isolation.

This "desperation" is also exemplary for other Staggerford outcasts, including the disadvantaged Native Americans, living at the margins of the town on the Sandhill Reservation, and the High School students in Miles's class, who reveal their yearning for acceptance through their "What I Wish" essays. For example, Beverly wishes that she would not have to be the Bonewoman's daughter (ST 111), and Lee Fremling wishes that he could make the football coach and his father happy by doing everything right for once (ST 257). Despite his wish, the Staggerford football team ties a game against the rival team because of a mistake made by Lee Fremling. Coach Gibbon complains about the "near-win" throughout the whole book and becomes furious when Miles suggest that a tie might be as good as a win because it shows that both teams are

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[312] Allen 104.

equal (ST 55). In the newspaper, Lee is even made unidentifiable on the pictures of the game because his father is the editor and embarrassed about his son's failure. Hence, Miles feels as if the essays about the "wrongs and losses and near misses of 114 people … took on the heaviness and solidity of rock" in his briefcase and "teased him off the road of hope into the gulch of despair" (ST 229). Thus, although the Bonewoman might be the most prominent social outcast in Staggerford, she represents the difficulties and interpersonal distances that many inhabitants experience.

The lack of understanding and the death of communication within the community in regards to the Bonewoman or Fred Vandergar are not only an echo of the silence surrounding death but also illustrate the failings of the community. Absurd examples of miscommunication or talking at cross-purposes arise during the faculty meeting at the Staggerford high school. When asked for their opinion about new report cards, the Parents' Night, and smoking in the rest rooms, the faculty offers the following opinions:

> 'What's wrong with the report card we've got?'
> 'When is Parents' Night?'
> "*Why* is Parents' Night?"
> 'I thought we should have beat Owl Brook by two touchdowns. We were that much better.'
> 'Aw, that goddamn Fremling.'
> 'I'm wondering if there's anyone besides myself who would like to see the Faculty Handbook burned.'
> 'Huzzah.' (ST 150)

The conversation continues like this for a while longer, but this passage already illustrates that almost nobody in the room is paying attention to the other persons present. It seems as if the faculty members are holding monologues instead of a conversation. Therefore, it is not surprising that at the end of the meeting they have reached no resolution for the problems. A similar situation occurs when the leaders of the Native Americans meet with the officials of Staggerford in order to solve the tensions created by Jeff Norqist. Whereas Miles and the tribe leaders eat sandwiches together and talk about how Jeff Norquist has run away with his Native American girlfriend, Wayne Workman offers them compensations without paying attention to the ongoing discussion due to his fear of the tribal leaders (ST 272-73).

Most of Hassler's characters seem oblivious to the fact that no actual conversation is taking place, whereas it is highly apparent to the reader. It is ironic that in a place where everyone is supposed to know and look out for each other, most people are distant, self-centered, and living in their own little bubble. In other words, Hassler

criticizes his characters through "affectionate irony" rather than unforgiving and bitter satire. [313] Author C.W. Truesdale furthermore adds that this stance toward the characters is "probably the way [Hassler] views himself and the human condition." Moreover, "[Hassler] seems to be saying that we would all do well to look at ourselves and others this way."[314] By exposing the decay of "social interchange" within the community, Hassler deconstructs the myth of the small town. Not communication itself has failed, but "people have failed (the possibilities) of communication."[315] For instance, instead of giving Mr. Vandergar a hug, most people avoid him, and instead of easing the tension with the Native Americans through laughter, Wayne Workman chooses to scowl at them (ST 227).

However, the miscommunication within the community, the communicational and behavioral exclusion of social misfits, and the silence surrounding death are not used to condemn the small town but to gently expose the pretensions of the small town myth. In this regard, Miles's character acts as a lens to the flaws of society. Through his actions Miles often reveals the shortcomings of society; for example, he visits Fred Vandegar when no one else wants to go, he visits Beverly at her home in the gulch and takes an interest in her future, he negotiates with the Native Americans during the uprising, he takes a compassionate interest in his students' lives, or makes fun of the foibles of small town life. His visits to the Vandergars, Stevensons, Binghams or Norquists are a display of neighborly and communal affection that the rest of the community shrinks from because it makes them uncomfortable. Hence, Miles is at once at the heart of Staggerford and at the same time a social outsider. As a school teacher, Miles has the advantage of understanding the crisis of the community, but he

> cannot communicate [his] insight and perception of the problem to other members of the community because such insights and perceptions are a threat to the illusions of the externally oriented segments of the population.… He survives in the community by not threatening anyone, but his survival is based on the fact that no one wants to understand him. [316]

For this reason, Miles writes down his critique of Wayne Workman's handling of the Native American uprising in his journal rather than telling Wayne in person. Furthermore, when Miles tries in vain to explain to the coach that it might be beneficial to the psyche of the players to understand that a tie is as good as a win, he

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[313] C.W. Truesdale, "On the Novels of Jon Hassler," *South Dakota Review* 32.1 (1994): 77.

[314] Truesdale 77.

[315] Ickstadt 13.

[316] Vidich 316-17.

eventually changes the topic because the coach starts to study Miles "closely from two or three angles, the way a woodpecker examines bark for bugs" (ST 55).

Miles's death at the hand of the Bonewoman is unsettling for the reader but not wholly unexpected, considering the elaborate foreshadowing throughout the novel and the repeated portrayal of the Bonewoman as a "harbinger of death." Miles's death, even more so than the Bonewoman, confronts the community with their own mortality because no one could prepare for it. They could not cut Miles off from the community beforehand like they did with Mr. Vandergar. Hassler aims exactly for this effect because he wants to teach the readers as well as his characters about life and its pitfalls.[317] You cannot always get what you wish for, which the students in Miles's class have already realized in their "What I Wish" essays. Just like Keillor and Sullivan, Hassler shows that small towns are not perfect because they are human places. Thus, people can be lonely even in small towns. Murders happen even in small towns. People even die in small towns.

4.2 Death and the Construction of a Sense of Place

In *Lake Wobegon Days*, *Staggerford* as well as *The Cape Ann,* the main characters leave their respective hometowns in some way. The pivotal characters of *Lake Wobegon Days*, Gary Keillor and Johnny Tollefson, leave their hometown for the lights of the big city. At the end of *Staggerford,* the beloved teacher Miles Pruitt is shot by the Bonewoman, and in *The Cape Ann*, Lark and her mother leave Harvester for California after Hilly's suicide. These events seem to support the American fear of stagnation as well as the belief that remaining in the same place for a long period of time "is a form of death."[318] Furthermore, they appear to affirm Minnesota's inferiority complex and the conviction that Midwestern people are stuck in a place where they do not want to be.[319] These story elements are to some degree an expression of resentment or critique but they should not be understood as a condemnation of the small town itself. Gary Keillor leaves Lake Wobegon for college because he knows that "smart doesn't count for much" in his hometown (LWD 97), and Johnny finds it hard to live in a place where people "have so little interest in ideas" (LWD 311). In *The Cape Ann*, Arlene eventually leaves Harvester with Lark because she does not like to be "boxed in" (CA 331), and her marriage and the town community make her feel "like having a hippopotamus sitting on [her] face" (CA 342). Miles's death at the end of *Staggerford* can also be understood as an escape from

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[317] Plut 104.

[318] Lutwack 223.

[319] Hölbling 151.

a town with defective interpersonal communication and from a life that holds no more surprises in store. Truesdale criticizes Miles's death as a "simplistic" resolution for the conflicts in the novel, like Miles's relationship with Beverly or the societal status of the Bonewoman. [320] However, dark themes, like death, suicide, murder, social harassment and exclusion, can hardly be understood as being "simplistic" since they are painful and thought provoking events. Furthermore, they defy the myth of the perfect small town community where America believes itself to be at its "most normal"[321] and people supposedly solve conflicts with a "universal togetherness."[322]

For this reason, the death symbols weaved through *Lake Wobegon Days, Staggerford,* and *The Cape Ann* cannot merely be considered as an escape from or a deconstruction of the small town myth but also as a reaffirmation of the life in Minnesota and Midwestern small towns. Literary critic Chris Godsey, for example, argues that when Miles visits the Staggerford cemetery he "is standing in the physical and symbolic center of Minnesota, near his mother's grave – in his motherland."[323] This sentiment toward the cemetery is also present in *The Cape Ann* and *Lake Wobegon Days*. Lark, for instance, is shocked that Mrs. Stillman plans to leave Harvester although her son's remains are buried there (CA 319). *In Lake Wobegon Days*, the remains of Virgil Bunsen, a former inhabitant of Lake Wobegon, are sent from Nevada to be buried in his hometown because his family feels that he should be laid to rest close to his ancestors (LWD 195). Thus, the cemetery can be understood as an important place in the Midwestern small town since it connects people with their past and roots them to a certain place. However, the denial of death, which prevails in modern American society, often breaks the links between the individuals' and communities' past and future and thus hinders identity construction.[324]

Yet, death is still an omnipresent force within the novels' small town communities, which suggests that death is an important and undeniable part of life, especially in Minnesota where the nature and the weather can be treacherous but also giving and bountiful. The often detached narration of deaths in *Lake Wobegon Days* gives the impression that death is not an unusual occurrence in Lake Wobegon or any other Midwestern small town for that matter. However, more emotionally relevant death experiences appear in the tales of the I-narrator, Gary Keillor, who almost dies while riding the bucket to the top of the Lake Wobegon grain elevator at the age of 15. He

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[320] Truesdale 75.

[321] Ickstadt 9.

[322] Hilfer 17.

[323] Chris Godsey, "'A Tie Is as Good as a Win': Minnesotan Voices in Jon Hassler's *Staggerford*," *North Dakota Quarterly* 65.4 (1998): 122.

[324] C. Jackson 54.

later remembers that because he did not die, it became the night when "[he] loved Lake Wobegon the most" (LWD 10). Another significant story is the fable about an unnamed man who, against the pleas of his family, drives into town during a blizzard to buy cigarettes. On his way home he drives his car into a ditch and continues to walk on foot toward his house while he thinks about his life and home:

> He's about a quarter-mile from home. The cigarettes, however, must be sitting on Wally's counter.… *A pretty dumb trip*. Town was a long way to go in a blizzard for the pleasure of coming back home.… He takes deep breaths and the cold air goes to his brain and makes him more sensible. He starts out on the short walk to the house where people love him and will be happy to see his face. (LWD 337)

This scene, according to Peter Scholl, bears an eerie resemblance to the ending of O.E. Rölvaag's *Giants in the Earth*.[325] Thus, it is questionable whether the unknown man ever arrives at home or dies in the snow like Rölvaag's main character Per Hansa. Yet, these tales about death and dying illustrate that a "sense of being requires a corresponding sense of place."[326] For this reason, Gary loves Lake Wobegon the most after his near-death experience because he feels more alive than ever. Similarly, the unknown man in the blizzard has an epiphany about how "some luck lies in not getting what you thought you wanted but getting what you have, which once you have it you may be smart enough to see is what you would have wanted had you known" (LWD 337). Although the narrator often mocks Lake Wobegon for its simple-mindedness and reluctance to change, it is still portrayed as an "abiding and sheltering place without which [one] would drift willy-nilly towards annihilation."[327] Without a place that provides an individual with a "sense of being", i.e., home, the construction of an individual identity seems impossible.

The communities in *Staggerford*, *Lake Wobegon Days*, and *The Cape Ann* are far from embodying the small town myth. They are not perfect because they are inhabited by humans, who are naturally flawed. A plausible, real sense of place can only emerge through "humanness" rather than through frozen ideals of how a place should be.[328] For this reason, the repeated use of the death theme is ideal to satirize and criticize the small town myth; however, it also shows the humanity of these communities and portrays them as a "sheltering place" to which one can still go home, like the unknown man in *Lake Wobegon Days*. In *The Cape Ann,* Lark is protected by Mrs. Stillman

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[325] Scholl 132.

[326] Simonson 140.

[327] Simonson 140.

[328] Simonson 140.

when her father is angry at her for refusing to go to church after Hilly's death (CA 291). Similarly, in *Staggerford*, Beverly is taken in by Miss McGee after Miles's death (ST 279). Thus, the novels make a point of showing that

> [j]ust below the surface of, or smoothly blended with, … gentle satire … is a reaffirmation, often moving and even reverential, of the traditional values and ways of life that are hard to find in contemporary urban society but somehow preserved…. Charm, intimacy, sympathy, and warmth are the qualities, maybe rare nowadays, that reviewers value.[329]

In contrast, Carol Kennicott feels that Gopher Prairie provides no shelter for her when she looks upon the town during a winter walk (MS 100). Whereas Lewis desires to destroy "idols of tradition … and provinciality," Keillor, Sullivan, and Hassler are "searching for serviceable values and places of repose for people traumatized by culture in which all fixed principles and values are rendered problematical."[330]

Hence, these novels neither denounce the small town nor do they idealize it as a pastoral haven with a homogenous community. They acknowledge the dynamic relationships of small towns with the world by including stories about economical crisis, domestic abuse, racial prejudice, societal isolation, murder, miscommunication, or desperation instead of creating idyllic communities. Thereby, they illustrate that the small town population suffers from many of the same problems as the people in metropolitan areas. Nevertheless, small towns are often expected to embody a nostalgic myth that is constructed as a cure for placelessness in modern American society but leaves no room for human flaws. The small town myth provides an identity, which causes small towns to enforce the standards of a mythic community by excluding people that are "discordant with ideal of the small town."[331] Through the depiction of ambiguity in small town societies, Keillor, Hassler, and Sullivan prevent their fictional small towns from becoming clichéd. Furthermore, they have created regional literature that tries to build a specific sense of place for Minnesota because "in a region dominated by contradictions, the burden of the writer is to find new ways of seeing, of uniting the tension between harshness and beauty, boosterism and cynicism, loving and hating."[332]

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[329] Wayne H. Meyer, "From Gopher Prairie to Lake Wobegon, Minnesota: From Sinclair Lewis to Garrison Keillor," *Sinclair Lewis at 100: Papers Presented at a Centennial Conference* (St. Cloud: St. Cloud State University, 1985) 120.

[330] Miller, "Distance" 443.

[331] Cypert 3.

[332] Mark Vinz, and Thom Tammaro, introduction, *Inheriting the Land: Contemporary Voices from the Midwest*, eds. Mark Vinz and Thom Tommaro (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1993) xii.

The death theme often highlights these regional contradictions; therefore, it has become a popular theme in Minnesota small town literature. The death theme illustrates the disruptive force of death, but at the same time it depicts that life, especially in the Midwest, will and has to go on. The vastness of the land will remain no matter what, as will the constant cycle of fertile summers and unbearable cold winters. Thus, death is often portrayed as an inevitable part of the circle of live rather than the dreaded end of being. In *Lake Wobegon Days*, the narrator, for example, wonders if it is true that "our lives are being lived over and over by others," and if so whether one "should laugh or cry" (LWD 334). The cyclical structure of *Lake Wobegon Days* is also emphasized by the seasonal chapter division, which suggests that life revolves endlessly. In *The Cape Ann*, Hilly's death provides a turning point for several characters. Mrs. Stillman contemplates leaving Harvester for California after Hilly's death because there is nothing left for her to do in her hometown. Furthermore, after the Catholic Church refuses to bury Hilly, Lark finally realizes that humans and the world are more complex than she had imagined. Eventually, Lark and her mother accept that their dream of the perfect Cape Ann house and the accompanying perfect life cannot be uphold against reality. For this reason, they leave Harvester to start a new life in California. Hence, the novel conveys the tragedy of Hilly's suicide but also that life cannot come to a standstill for the living. Similarly, in *Staggerford*, Miles's death triggers the "rebirth of Superintendent Stevens,"[333] who comes to the conclusion that his heart, after surviving the shock of Miles's death and funeral, might still be healthy:

> When he stood at the snowy open grave, his heart shuddered the way it had the previous week when the study-hall girls screamed bloody murder.… But it didn't stop, and that is why on the day after the funeral the superintendent began to revise his opinion of his heart.… Any heart that jumped, rattled, thumped, and shuddered, and then returned to this steady beat must be a fairly good heart, a serviceable heart.… After school he went home and put his arm around the heavy softness of Mrs. Stevenson's middle and lifted her, astounded, three inches off the floor. (ST 293-94)

Superintendent Stevenson finally realizes that he cannot live any longer in a self-imposed social grave while he still has the chance to make his life worthwhile. The unexpectedness of Miles's death makes him understand that death will come no matter what and that there is no use in living if one does not feel alive. Miles's death just happens, as does Hilly's suicide in *Staggerford,* or someone getting hit by an icicle in *Lake Wobegon Days.* This sentiment is also expressed through the indifferent attitude

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[333] Plut 105.

of the young gravediggers in *Staggerford*, who have an intense discussion about snowmobiles while digging Miles's grave (ST 288). This unusual juxtaposition of life and death exemplifies that life will and has to go on.

The deaths in *Staggerford*, *Lake Wobegon Days,* and *The Cape Ann* are often narrated in a "practical, understated" manner, which furthers the impression that death is an event that is "simply part of life."[334] The narration of Miles's death is so short that one almost misses it, and the various deaths in *Lake Wobegon Days* are narrated matter-of-factly and detachedly. Although the aftermath of Hilly's death is described in a more emotional and dramatic way since it is told from a child's perspective, the death itself is related through gossip rather than being experienced by Lark first-hand. This reserved approach to narrating death is, according to Godsey, a "Minnesotan" feature as it mirrors the often noted Minnesotan understatement and diffidence. Furthermore, Godsey argues that this detachment allows the story "to create its own meaning" without solving the ambiguity of death and life. [335]

Neither the novels nor the narrators answer the question whether the stories are "ultimately tragic" because they are defined by death, or "joyous" because life is given new meaning through the experience of death.[336] This coexistence of darkness and light within life is also poignantly alluded to by *Staggerford's* Agatha McGee while contemplating how the luminous green ferns in her flowerbed "are still alive and beautiful" (ST 107) even though it is November: "If you let sunshine stand for the goodness in the world and you let rain stand for evil, do goodness and evil mingle like sun and rain to produce something? To bring something to maturity, like those ferns?" (ST 108). Again, neither the character nor the author answers this question, but it is rather a "negotiation of extremes which precludes needless despair and maintains rational optimism."[337] Thus, instead of attempting to resolve the unsolvable tension within Minnesota and the Midwest, Hassler, Keillor, and Sullivan use the experience of ambiguity and ambivalence in Minnesota small towns to create a sense of place.

After all, the Midwestern identity rests more on small towns than in other areas because they are often understood "as a proof of being" in the vast and flat land.[338] William Bevis, English Professor at the University of Montana, adds that people "need to *be* something … beyond [their] name; of a people, a tradition, a place" in order to

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[334] Godsey 130.

[335] Godsey 131.

[336] Godsey 131.

[337] Godsey 131.

[338] Quantic, "Unifying Thread" 76.

create a valuable identity.[339] Hence, the communities of Midwestern small towns are often represented as a cure against isolation or placelessness and as an embodiment of the pastoral myth of "togetherness." Indeed, even Hilfer argues that "its sense of community" is the "real strength of the Midwest."[340] For this reason, the small town is often chosen as a symbol in Midwestern regional literature to counteract the "mythic void" assigned to the Midwest due to its landscape and uncertain identity.[341] Hassler, Keillor, and Sullivan do not deny this aspect of the small town setting since they repeatedly present the Minnesota small town as a shelter and a home that roots the individual in a place and community. However, they refuse to portray the Minnesota small town only from this perspective. Instead, they criticize its societal flaws through the repeated use of death symbols. Death is an ever-present force in the Midwest and thus a natural part of Midwestern small town life. Like Tangney suggests in her article "But What Is There to See? An Exploration of a Great Plains Aesthetics," Keillor, Hassler, and Sullivan create a Minnesotan sense of place not through geographical determinism but by portraying the experience of living in a Minnesota small town.[342]

The contradictions between myth and reality, isolation and community, accepting death and fearing it, hope and despair, light and darkness mirror the fractured psyche of Minnesota and its small towns. Thereby, these novels create human places, reminding the reader "that we live by stories which remind us of our differences, our angers, our foibles and failures, stories that at bottom tell us how we face matters of life and death."[343] All three authors acknowledge that the ambiguities within small town societies cannot be solved because they reveal human struggles that are intensified by the surrounding setting. Hence, Staggerford, Harvester, and Lake Wobegon can be understood as places "to which we [the readers] can return in order to be reminded that here there are values, not always the values we value, but the source of values rooted in a community in which we have common experience."[344] In other words, all three authors try to create a Minnesotan sense of place by using communities that do not live up to the standards of the American small town myth. Nevertheless, these communities portray a "common experience" because they are recognizable human and recognizable Minnesotan in their unsolvable ambiguity.

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[339] William Bevis, "Region, Power, Place," *Reading the West: New Essays on the Literature of the American West*, ed. Michael Kowalewski (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1996):32.

[340] Hilfer 18.

[341] Norris, *Dakota* 7.

[342] Tangney 38.

[343] Suderman 18.

[344] Suderman 18.

5. Conclusion

The image of the Midwestern American small town has changed drastically during the 20th century. The perceptions of small towns have ranged from being unspoiled by the vices of urban life to being regressive and inwardly corrupted. These differing views have pulled the Midwestern small town identity in opposing directions as they have raised the desire to become more urban and stay small and intimate at the same time. Furthermore, the pastoral myth of the small town, which was a popular image of the Midwestern small town before the 1920s, regained its popularity in the 1960s and 1970s as an escapist fantasy. During the late 20th century, the small town myth additionally became a means to fill the "communal void" in everyday American life and satisfy the yearning for supposedly lost hometown communities.[345] Thus, the Midwestern small town has turned into a "repository for values that Americans wish to preserve but not [always] live by … [e.g.,] simplicity, integrity, neighborliness, egalitarianism, … and decency."[346]

Midwestern small towns are understood as a place that can provide roots and identity in a society that is defined by movement and change. Especially in the Midwest, the regional self-identification is difficult to define and delineate due to the often unrecognized complexity and contradictory attributes assigned to the region. Therefore, in criticism the Midwest has often been admonished for being a region which "has liquefied all its assets, so that it does live nowhere, or at least its 'where' is interchangeable with any other where."[347] Since the Midwestern identity has always been influenced by outsiders' views and objectives, the region came to embody many aspects at the same time: a garden or a desert, being superior or inferior, being terrifying or elating, being a wild frontier or pastoral society. Having barely any unifying history or culture, the region could be molded to fit different purposes, i.e., land speculation or pastoral repository. Thereby, the Midwest acquired its pliant and flexible identity, which is also mirrored in Minnesota's state identity. Minnesota is characterized by a dichotomous self-consciousness that tries to find a balance between the feeling of superiority and inferiority. Minnesota is more advanced and progressive than other Midwestern states; however, it is mostly irrelevant outside the Midwest.

Due to the fluidity of the Midwestern identity and the growing mobility of American society, the Midwestern small town has become an "escape to constancy" for many Americans and thus performs "a socio-psychological function."[348] Whether or not this perception of small towns is accurate is almost irrelevant since the image of

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[345] Lutz 231.

[346] Sanders 39.

[347] Bevis 28.

[348] Lutz 232.

the small town has been romanticized and mythologized so much "that *they* [small towns] are constant."[349]

The three books discussed here, *Staggerford*, *Lake Wobegon Days,* and *The Cape Ann* challenge the popular image of the small town as an escapist fantasy as well as the negative perceptions of Midwestern small towns established by "Revolt from the Village" authors like Sinclair Lewis. The fictional Minnesota small towns Staggerford, Lake Wobegon, and Harvester are depicted as communities that are to a certain extent repressive in order to "retain a certain control, a certain integrity."[350] At the same time, they are portrayed as a "home" that provides its inhabitants with a sense of belonging. In both cases, the authors use an intricate web of death references and symbols to deconstruct the escapist small town myth as well as to create a sense of place. Death symbols are used in various ways in order to show the imperfection of small towns; for example, in the descriptions of the small town setting, or in the tension between nature and town.

However, the most meaningful incorporation of death is accomplished through death figures. According to Priester, these "harbingers of death" fill the gap of silence surrounding death in American society and act as a reminder of mortality for the surrounding community. [351] Hilly in *The Cape Ann*, the Bonewoman and Mr. Vandergar in *Staggerford*, or the Hegelund's boy in *Lake Wobegon Days* certainly fulfill this role as they confront the small town community with the value of life. Additionally, these characters are cast in the roles of social misfits in their hometowns, partially due to their association with death and dying. Their presence reveals the flaws of the small town myth and that the popular idea of an "universal togetherness" within the small town community is no more than an ideal. Still, this ideal is the basis for the small town identity of Staggerford, Lake Wobegon, and Harvester. Thus, the communities try to "avoid fragmentation by imposing a repressive atmosphere, enforced in part by silence and rejection of 'highbrow' stuff."[352]

The repression and marginalization of social outcasts contradicts the mythic unison of small towns but also depicts the humanness of these communities. Hence, Keillor, Hassler, and Sullivan create small towns that help the readers to understand that not the towns themselves are the problem but the humans living in them. Their novels show that human relationships are not easier because they are situated in a small town and that interpersonal problems are the same no matter where people live. Furthermore, these novels are trying to show that "the more [one] recognizes the

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[349] Lutz 232.

[350] Symonds 118.

[351] Priester 97.

[352] Symonds 118.

contingency, the unsettledness of life as part of its normality, the more [one] should be ready to accept the extraordinary everydayness of the world and the need … to feel normal, in it."[353] This notion is conveyed in *Staggerford*, *Lake Wobegon Days*, and *The Cape Ann* by setting up death as an ever-present and unavoidable part of life in Minnesota small towns. Thereby, the authors confront their characters as well as their readers with the unpredictability and "unsettledness" of life, which is made even more salient by the unrelenting Midwestern weather and landscape. Keillor, Sullivan, and Hassler create fictional places that are neither perfect nor appalling, but contradictory, ambiguous, and full of human flaws. However, they reflect the reality of Minnesota small towns and their perception in society much more honestly than, for example, Zona Gola's *Friendship Village* or Lewis's *Main Street*. In contrast to the Minnesota literature of the early 20th century, *Staggerford, The Cape Ann,* and *Lake Wobegon Days* "forgive … Minnesota for being merely … Minnesota" and accept the state and its small towns for what they are. [354] The books, although often drawing on a shared Minnesota experience, do not attempt to delineate a clear-cut Minnesota identity, let alone a Midwestern identity, which seems representative of the ideas of the "New Regionalism." However, for the people of Minnesota the books often reflect their own experience with small towns. Thus, the readers can find something of themselves in these places, which in turn creates a sense of place and a sense of belonging.

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[353] Ickstadt 21.

[354] David Pichaske, "Where Now 'Midwestern Literature?'" Midwest Quarterly 48.1 (2006): 113.

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