A SUCCESSFUL REVOLT?: THE REDEFINITION OF MIDWESTERN LITERARY CULTURE IN THE 1920s AND 1930s

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by

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INTRODUCTION

In 1920 Carl Van Doren used a descriptive phrase in the *Nation* that has characterized and haunted Midwestern literature ever since. Addressing the work of writers such as Sherwood Anderson, Sinclair Lewis and others, Van Doren commented that the trend in regional writing, particularly out of the Midwest, appeared to be that of a “revolt from the village.” The writers were part of a movement that was harshly critical of life in the small town and stridently casting off the narrow perspectives and restrictive morals that were often characteristic of that provincial way of life. Van Doren’s critical perspective contains a degree of accuracy; however, early twentieth century regional writing, particularly out of the Midwest, was engaged in a much more nuanced struggle than his comments allow. The idea of a “revolt” appealed to popular literary critics of the time and continued to influence the opinions and trends in the decades that followed. Midwestern writing has either been recognized for supporting this observation through negative connotations of small town life or dismissed for exhibiting colloquial or local characteristics of little value to literary study. The unfortunate side effect of Van Doren’s observation is that Midwestern literature has much to contribute to understanding not only regional history but also American literature and culture, particularly in the decades immediately following his article, which has been and continues to be overlooked as a result of this distinction. Rather than continuing to explore and study the subject, many critics see Van Doren’s comments as sufficient and fail to look at regional literature for
the other characteristics it may contain. Midwestern literature in the 1920s and 1930s provides insight into regional aspects of American identity and represents evolving aspects of American literature and culture that are important to understanding our nation’s past, present, and future. Comparing works of literary modernism with Midwestern literature and culture adds to that understanding and highlights the stylistic and creative aspects of regional literature. In return, the Midwest expands the definition and understanding of literary modernism, revealing a more localized aspect of modernization and art that contrasts the movement’s national and global scope.

All literature is a reaction to something, and for Midwestern literature in the early twentieth century, the idea of a revolt is not irrelevant. American culture and that of its regions was always in a state of defense, whether from social, political, historical, or economic forces and movements. Due to the changes and cultural shifts taking place, writers were revolting against provincialism, industrialism, nationalism, or any other movement felt to be limiting or restrictive. Most art revolted against the past as it attempted to accurately define the present or propose suggestions or solutions for the future. Tom Lutz captures the revolutionary spirit in American writing by commenting that,

Van Doren, as I have suggested, was wrong to see these authors as revolting against a tradition of idyllic pastoral. They were simply revolting, as American authors would continue to do, against the exclusions, the ‘gaps’ in the storytelling that had preceded them. They were determined to be more cosmopolitan than their predecessors, which
is to say they were determined, like their predecessors, to be literary artists. (123)

As if children trying to break away from the restrictions of their parents, the trend in American writing was often to break away from the traditions and culture of the past. For Midwestern writers this translated into a love/hate relationship with their region and small town life; many of them wanted to embrace the comfort and traditions of the past while at the same time finding that past oppressive in light of contemporary changes or the promise of future developments. This is a perpetual struggle, and viewing how Midwestern writers addressed historical and cultural issues can teach readers and scholars about understanding regional and individual identity.

The Midwestern writers of the 1920s and 1930s were not all that different than the modernist writers creating literature during the same period. Literary modernism, while not always characterized by the idea of revolt, was a movement dedicated to trying to create new art that was free of much of the immediate past. Modernist authors often distanced themselves from their own pasts in order to achieve this artistic freedom. As many Midwestern writers became influenced by modernism and many writers who stayed in the Midwest were writing in reaction to it, an in-depth comparison is necessary to better understand this relationship, particularly as these two movements are not often looked at synonymously. Examining this larger picture reveals that American literature as a whole was influenced by various elements of revolt in the early twentieth century, some writers trying to rally to the cause and others writing to calm the churning social and cultural waters. While not always consciously or deliberately, regionalism and
modernism influenced each other and through those interactions and comparisons shaped Midwestern and modern American literature.

In order to establish this comparison, my study focuses on the novels and stories of Midwestern writers during the 1920s and 1930s, examining their representations of the social and cultural conditions within the country and the Midwest. The writers selected for this study were developing and establishing their careers during these two decades, creating literature that was an immediate reaction and contemporary reference to the region and world as it was at that moment. While writers like Willa Cather and Sinclair Lewis were also publishing during this time and have more prominent reputations as Midwestern writers, their careers, particularly in regard to the region, had peaked very close to 1920 and therefore the focus in their body of work is distributed through and influenced by a much larger literary and historical era. In my examination of the authors and literature in this study, I also explore the writers’ own lives and, where applicable, their personal comments on modernization and the Midwest, to trace emotions and beliefs that may have motivated their portrayal of the region and their perspective on modern society. In order to ground the comments and creativity of these Midwestern authors, I also examine some of the social and literary commentary of the time to establish the cultural climate of the Midwest and American literature at large. The lives of these Midwestern writers and the literature they produced provide a picture of regional and national life in the early twentieth century, recording the history and culture of a region and nation struggling to establish a strong sense of definition and identity.
My first chapter, “Regionalism, Modernism, and Midwestern Writing,” explores the problematic definitions associated with regionalism, modernism, and the Midwest. Regionalism, despite its long history of affecting and shaping American literature, has had inconsistent critical reception. The late nineteenth and early twentieth century provided some of the strongest foundations in American regional writing and criticism, and yet the nature of the term has been clouded by literary politics and complicated by its ambiguous critical reception. Modernism, while a more established literary genre, suffers from problems of definition as well. Many readers and critics tend to view the common criteria of modernism as having a monolithic status in literary study and, as a result, overlook the more subtle effects and influences the movement may have had in other areas of literature. The Midwest is often perceived as a region of stable homogeneity, far from being a place of strong artistic circles and radical thought. Midwestern literature has a long and complicated history, however, that demonstrates the region’s diverse history and artistic potential. Chapter one traces many of the common historical and literary elements of the region, to establish the cultural climate that surrounded many of the authors discussed in this study.

The focus of chapter two, “Midwestern Writers and the Modern Midwest,” is on Midwestern writers who stayed within the region to produce their literature. These writers found value in the places they lived and the pioneers and cultures that founded those locations. Bess Streeter Aldrich, Ruth Suckow, August Derleth, and others wrote about the landscape around them and the people, past and present, who inhabited that area. The writers in this chapter had substantial literary careers and produced a
significant number of novels and stories that characterize and record life in the Midwest. Their literature showed a dedicated interest in Midwestern people and issues. While often being marginalized for this perspective, many of these writers were still addressing and interacting with larger literary concerns, many of the same concerns affecting the modernist movement. Midwestern writers, while not creating with the same experimentalism and style as modernist writers, were addressing the same issues of history and modernization that were giving rise to much of the work being produced in cities such as Paris or New York. In essence, Midwestern writers, despite their distance from the perceived literary centers of American literature, were producing texts that commented on the region’s past, present and future while at the same time addressing issues facing the larger world, such as the changing sense of individual identity or the impact that industrialization had on family and social life. The region’s history and the loyalty of many of these authors to that history and the traditions that stemmed from it created an interesting way of perceiving the evolution of the Midwest and larger American society.

In chapter three, “Midwestern Expatriates and the Region They Never Left,” I examine the other side of Midwestern authorship: the authors who left the region behind to create their literature elsewhere. These writers are selected because they were born in the Midwest and achieved more prominent success and reputations in literary circles outside of the region, despite their distance from the area and the lingering influence of it in their writing. Despite the intentions of many of these authors to begin new lives independent of their regional connections or influences, most of these writers still
referred to the region in their literature and even built aspects of their reputation on those references. Writers such as Ernest Hemingway, F.Scott Fitzgerald, Glenway Wescott and others are generally more well known in American literary study than the authors who stayed in the region. Leaving the Midwest, due to the cultural stereotypes of the region and public perceptions of it, increased the likelihood of this recognition, in that these writers traveled in what became more popular and accepted literary circles in New York or Paris. These writers are generally classified as modernists or realists, and yet their work carries many inherent signs of regionalism as well. The Midwest, in myriad ways, never left their writing and shaped their views of the modern world, as their work also commented on the changing nature of the region.

In chapter four, “Midwestern Radical Writers, Modernism, and the Regional Proletariat,” I explore how Midwestern writers grew from the discussions and literary innovations of the 1920s, particularly as they addressed the changed economic climate of the 1930s and the radical philosophies that were popular in American culture. While not always as militantly radical as many New York Communists or Socialists, Jack Conroy, Meridel Le Sueur, James T. Farrell and others were more concerned with the working classes and their ability to find success and happiness in a world where the odds often seemed stacked against them. This concern was manifested rather subtly in their novels and stories and more overtly in many of their other social and political writings, making both areas a focus of analysis in this chapter. These writers were selected because their writing demonstrates a dedicated focus on improving conditions and issues for Midwestern workers and farmers through a significant volume of work and publications
that attempted to advance that cause. As American culture during the 1930s became significantly affected by the Great Depression, these writers strove to recognize and record the harsh conditions that often resulted and argued through their fiction for more equality and better conditions for workers. For many of them, their Midwestern experiences or ties gave them firsthand knowledge of the struggles and restless migration that characterized much of the search for work and prosperity, particularly in a region that had a history of being a place of hope and promise. The radical Midwestern writers used aspects of literary modernism along with the techniques of social realism in documenting the realities of the world that surrounded them in order to call attention to what was happening and provide alternatives or commentary through their literature that sought to provide a solution.

The goal of this study is to rectify much of the problematic scholarship surrounding studies of regional literature. Despite considerable scholarship devoted to studies of modernism and, more recently, regionalism, common definitions regarding these terms still have yet to be reached, something necessary in order to better understand the literary categories they represent and how they might compare. Literary modernism encompasses more than the work of a small band of European writers and American expatriates, just as regional literature contains more than colloquial characters and descriptive passages of flora and fauna. As American literature and culture becomes more globally influenced and while globalization is flattening out the world at large and making things more homogenous, understanding the degrees of difference suggested by regional and modernist texts informs our knowledge about the literature that was shaping
the art and culture of the early twentieth century and how that literature contributes to our understanding of contemporary culture as well.

This project also revives and argues for greater recognition of the contribution of Midwestern authors and the literature they produced. As so many of these writers have been marginalized or overlooked for decades, their contributions to understanding both a significant region of American culture and American identity have been ignored. The Midwest plays a significant role in American culture, for both the stereotypes it represents and for the role it has played in American history, and this region, like many other regions of the country, needs to be examined more closely to better understand influence. Midwestern literature in the 1920s and 1930s has a great deal to offer in clarifying understanding of American literature and the role of regionalism in defining national identity and culture.
INTRODUCTION NOTE

The Midwest is typically defined as the twelve states of North Dakota, South Dakota, Nebraska, Kansas, Missouri, Iowa, Illinois, Minnesota, Wisconsin, Michigan, Indiana, and Ohio. This is the common definition used by contemporary scholars and reference texts like *The Dictionary of Midwestern Literature* (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 2001).
Too often, literary study becomes caught up in a debate over categorization or definition, whether of actual texts, the politics or beliefs of individual authors, or in the search for understanding genres and subjects. Definition is important. It enables us to arrange texts by time period or technique in a way that allows for comparison to other literary works or to apply characteristics to a text in a way that furthers understanding. However, the act of defining a text can also assist in marginalizing or dismissing a literary work because it does not fit established definitions or clearly contribute its own form of definition or category. Definitions are by no means concrete. Like words and language, definitions themselves have the ability to change with the times or adapt to encompass new discoveries or conclusions. Literary study has shown this through the evolution of the literary canon and the increased inclusion of work by women, minorities, and formerly dismissed or marginalized genres like science fiction.

Regionalism is a genre that has been affected by the evolving nature of literary studies. American literary regionalism is a subject that has been argued for and supported in fiction and poetry for decades, and yet many of the works that emerged from regionally oriented writing have been in and out of fashion (mostly out) for decades. The definition of regionalism has shifted over the years and the very uncertainty and malleability of the genre has contributed to much of its uneven treatment in scholarship. However, regionalist writing records and explains segments of American literature and
culture that are vital to an understanding of national identity and experience. One of the significant aspects of regionalism is that the birth of the movement coincided with the evolution of literary modernism, a genre that gets far more attention in literary study. Modernism contributes a great deal to understanding the social and cultural climate of the early twentieth century, but in an American context it lacks the capacity to represent the national culture as a whole. Modernist ideas were infusing and defining American art. However, most scholars focus on the centers where modernism flourished, locations such as Greenwich Village in New York or the American expatriate circles in Paris. By noting only those locations and not examining the connection modernism had with literary work on the periphery, the writing emerging out of and about regional towns and communities, scholars are missing a much broader representation of American culture. Looking at modernism and regionalism in a coexisting and complimentary context provides insight into the change taking place in American society and identity at the beginning of the twentieth century, redefining the ideas, styles, and subjects that modified and contributed to the progression of a national art and culture.

Regionalism

As long as literature has been written in and about the United States, it has had some sort of regional label applied to it. Whether looking at the various aspects of American colonial life or exploring the regional variations of land and topography, the differences in the American cultural and physical landscape have always had an influence on literary creation in this country. As history has shown, with expansion, regions within
the United States took on greater and greater individualized distinctions, culminating in
the mid-nineteenth century with the most overt example of regional distinction and
divide: the American Civil War. While defining the “American” element of a national
literature was not necessarily a new subject, editorials like John DeForest’s 1868 article
in the *Nation*, which highlighted a search and a need for a “great American novel”
furthered the discussion at a time when regional distinctiveness was foremost on the
nation’s mind (27). The Civil War had divided the country into antagonistic sections,
most notably North and South, and the differences between the two regions were
emphasized far more than any similarities. While at the time finding a unifying element
to American literature and culture was more of a driving force than perhaps any other
time in our nation’s history in order to bring the country together, regional loyalties and
cultural distinctiveness never entirely faded. Regionalism is an aspect of American
culture that continues to be debated to this day. In seeking unity, many authors and
scholars during the late nineteenth century turned to examining the parts of the country
that made up the whole. Regional writing was one way that many authors attempted to
address the issue, by describing and detailing life as they saw it or imagined it in various
regions and portions of the country. Often part travelogue, part record of rural
idiosyncrasy, part effort to capture regional reality (leading into the realism era of
literature), these narratives turned from looking at life on a grand scale to examining the
smaller, more local areas of the country.¹ Examples of the notable regional writing
during this time period can be seen in the work of Kate Chopin, Sarah Orne Jewett, Booth
Tarkington and others. By the late 1890s, authors like Hamlin Garland were calling
attention to the value of this literary “veritism.” While few of these writers achieved much success during their lifetimes, their work was demonstrating the move toward realism that was taking place in American writing, although in a more localized context. In their drive to describe and record regional aspects of American life and culture these writers were finding unifying themes in the situations facing their characters that had resonance outside that local area. By focusing on the struggle to establish a new life on a frontier and prosper, thereby achieving the American dream, or addressing the relationship between a variety of different people from different places trying to form a family or community, these subjects were perhaps the most consistently American things about the country that could be used as criteria for national literature. But as many regional writers at the end of the nineteenth century showed (as well as the effects of historical crises like the Civil War), there was a great deal of diversity in national composition instead of homogenous harmony.

While criticism marked this evolution toward a local literary focus in small ways initially, regionalism as a major focus of discussion and as a subject of critical concern began to cohere in the 1930s. Many definitions and articles regarding regionalism use Mary Austin’s “Regionalism in American Fiction” (1932) as a benchmark to set standards for classifying regionalism as a literary movement. An author herself, Austin’s work exemplified a focus on regional places and people through her work on the American Southwest. Her article exemplifies much of her motivation and advocates writing stories that are more authentically regional, which are of the region and not just set in it. She states that the American reader needs to settle for something more than “the
proverbial bird’s eye view of the American scene, what you might call an automobile eye view, something slithering and blurred, nothing so sharply discriminated that it arrests the speed-numbed mind to understand characters like garish gas stations picked out with electric lights” (107). Most other writers of the time agreed with Austin that a strong sense of the region as something more than setting was necessary to classify a text as regional. Many critics of the 1930s also questioned the place of regional writing within the larger literary tradition as a whole. This continued the debate of what constituted an “American” literature and served as a precursor to the later New Critical and formalist movements in literary study, particularly as many of the critics concerned with these issues would form the core of the later movement, such as Robert Penn Warren, John Crowe Ransom, and Allen Tate (demonstrated not only by their publications in various journals of the time, including The Fugitive, but also in their culminating manifesto I’ll Take My Stand published in 1930). These critics and others worried that by focusing purely on the local, regional writers were ignoring qualities of great literature. While some regional writers, such as Willa Cather, were granted more accepted status for being attributed many of these great or classical qualities (Sinclair Lewis too, for his more critical take on the regional), other writers focusing on regional images or issues were overlooked or dismissed as being trite or provincial or battling some kind of literary or regional inferiority complex for not being part of one of the “great” centers of art and culture such as Greenwich Village or Paris.

Writers and critics during this period also start to define a difference between regional writing and “local color,” the latter becoming a more pejorative term in literary
scholarship for the next several decades. Used particularly when focusing on the writing of women authors in the late nineteenth century such as Sarah Orne Jewett and Kate Chopin (and also extended at times to writers such as Hamlin Garland), critics drew a line between these writers who focused more on local colloquialisms and regional dialect over later twentieth century writers who situated their stories regionally but addressed more universal or contemporary issues. An editorial in The Nation titled “Local Color and After,” published in September of 1919, declared an end to local color writing due to the fact that

the nation was even more homogenous than it knew, and consequently the local singularities which could be observed at all were more or less surface singularities, minor differences in accent or gesture, and little more. The pursuit of local color was therefore a meticulous kind of research, bound, since there were few deeper distinctions, to content itself with shallower ones. (427)

This simplistic view of regional writing prior to 1920 demonstrates some of the troubling distinctions being drawn by critics, assigning only marginal value to local literature. Implying that “local color” writers prior to 1920 were only looking at trite regional differences and not contributing literary work of greater national or international value diminished the work of early regional writers and created a difficult expectation for later writers to overcome of a universal American literary quality. The local was perceived as indistinct and the writers who stuck with local subjects were dismissed.
This discussion began in the early part of the twentieth century and continued throughout, classifying regional writers into two different camps. By the late twentieth century the term began to be redefined or reassessed, particularly as critics such as Judith Fetterley and Marjorie Pryse made an effort to rescue many late nineteenth century women writers from their marginalized place in literature. The regional aspects of the authors’ work, in addition to the fact that many of them were women, granted them little previous attention by literary scholars and critics. Fetterley and Pryse encourage a shift in definition in the introduction to their anthology *American Women Regionalists, 1850-1910*, as they describe that “in practice the regionalists did differentiate themselves from the ‘local colorists,’ primarily in their desire not to hold up regional characteristics to potential ridicule by eastern urban readers but rather to present regional experience from within, so as to engage the reader’s sympathy and identification” (xii). Their research did help the awareness and recognition of women and minority writers, but Pryse and Fetterley’s distinction does not entirely address the definitional problem with local color and regional writing. As many of the writers in their anthology were deemed local color writers, simply reclassifying them as regionalists does not completely address a sense of difference. Pryse and Fetterley, while not necessarily clarifying the classification between local color and regional writing, encourage a reassessment of regional authors that looks deeper into their work than the superficially local to see what other themes and ideas are addressing region and place.

Around 1950, the process of historicizing regional literature began to take place in criticism. While movements like New Criticism guided literature and criticism away
from a strong regional focus and the aftermath of World War II also established a new literary and political climate in the country, critics began to see regionalism as a component of American literary history. While not necessarily influencing immediate literary values, the influence of the regional was becoming something inherent in the nation’s evolution. American history and culture was absorbing the regional elements of the nation’s identity as well. A collection published in 1951 titled *Regionalism in America*, edited by Merrill Jensen, looked at elements of regionalism in all aspects of national life, including a chapter tracing the influence in American literature. Journal articles were still published commenting on the state of regionalism and American literature; rather than arguing for its existence, however, they instead treated the subject as a common subject of literary discussion. Discussions of regionalism in literature, perhaps due to this complacency, were not nearly as prolific as they were in prior decades. By 1968 the critical discussion had diminished to the point that Marshall Fishwick published an article titled “What Ever Happened to Regionalism?” He noted the evolution of regional focus in literary and academic subjects and polled several scholars and critics to note their current opinion on the subject. He concluded that “While few would judge regionalism at home and abroad as defunct, many would insist that it is waning in 1968. I am not so sure; perhaps it is merely suffering a sea-change” (Fishwick 400-1). The quieter debate on regionalism in American writing was indeed far from over and undergoing a type of evolution; however, Fishwick’s predicted transformation would not completely come to light for almost an entire decade.
By the late 1970s and early 1980s developments in American literature once again inspired an interest in regionalism. Particularly, the increased attention paid to minority and women writers as a result of the changing political and social climate in the United States and in literary studies brought greater attention to many writers who had previously been dismissed as marginally regional or classified diminutively as local color. By the 1990s this renewed study was fueling more exploration into regionalism, as evidenced by the introduction to Judith Fetterley and Marjorie Pryse’s anthology, *American Woman Regionalists: 1950-1910* (1992), where they comment that in choosing their selections, “We began to observe that white men did not write the same kinds of regional texts that some white women or some members of minority groups did” (xi). Their comment demonstrates the wider contemporary perspective of scholarship due to increased interest and development in feminist and ethnic criticism. Charles Reagan Wilson notes some of this evolving focus as well in his introduction to *The New Regionalism* (1998), stating

Scholars working in the area [regionalism] demonstrate considerable continuity with earlier regionalists. A concern for cultural pluralism and an awareness of dramatic social change threatening to erode regional identities characterized the work of regionalists in the 1930s and 1940s and those working more recently as well. The intersection of geographical place and the people who live there has always defined regionalism. The new regionalism shows special interest in the environmental context of
regions, cultural diversity, socially constructed identities, and the ways social relationships shape the exercise of and resistance to power (xxiii).

The work of Reagan, in conjunction with that of Pryse, Fetterley, and others, showed a more complex approach to studying regionalism than had previously been established. The regional was no longer marginal and in fact had important implications, as shown by scholars involved in this reassessment, in understanding American literature and culture.

Regionalism was gaining a solidified place in literary history and literary studies as a whole. While earlier literary histories had given regionalism passing attention buried in articles with broader goals like an analysis of realism or naturalism, the *Columbia Literary History of the United States* (1988) contained two articles related to regionalism. In “Realism and Regionalism,” Eric J. Sundquist highlighted the contrasts and similarities between the two movements in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, finding value in the synchronous veins of thought: “The small towns or farms left behind by the protagonists of Garland, [William Dean] Howells, [Robert] Herrick, [David Graham] Phillips, or [Theodore] Dreiser when they come to the new cities of iron and glass live as flickering memories, signs of seemingly vanished order. In the journey between the regions of rural and urban life, most of all in the tension that binds them together, lies the substance and spirit of American realism” (523). James Cox, in “Regionalism: A Diminished Thing,” looks at the evolution of literary regionalism, examining from a negative perspective the fact that region has been embraced and yet abandoned in literature, particularly in the early twentieth century. While the discussions themselves look at particular periods or aspects of regionalism, the fact that sections of
the history overall are dedicated to the topic calls attention to a greater acceptance of the subject. *The Columbia History of the American Novel* (1991) also devotes space to a discussion of regionalism in Amy Kaplan’s “Nation, Region, and Empire” which analyzes the construction of American identity through the efforts made by writers to define a sense of region or nation. With the appearance of encyclopedic texts like these in addition to the plethora of publications that strove to redefine, reconsider, or reinvent regionalism during the late twentieth and early twenty-first century, regional literature and the theories surrounding it appealed to a sense of popularity in literary studies at the time. These texts also further contributed to movements already taking place in scholarship to recapture or rediscover lost or ill-defined authors and texts to compile a more nuanced understanding of American identity and culture.

For many years, the value ascribed to the creation and study of regional writing was due to universal aspects of the literature that transcended their specific locale. In essence, readers and scholars believed that the benefit of reading a novel like Lewis’s *Main Street* (1920) was that the problems of the small town he focused on spoke to issues and ideas that affected people across the nation. Lewis himself encouraged this point of view, prefacing his novel with the comment “The town is, in our tale, called ‘Gopher Prairie, Minnesota.’ But its Main Street is the continuation of Main Streets everywhere. The story would be the same in Ohio or Montana, in Kansas or Kentucky or Illinois, and not very differently would it be told Up York State or in the Carolina hills.” (vi). The critical climate of the early twentieth century required much of this emphasis, as the only way for writers to achieve recognition and have their work taken seriously was to appeal
to a sense of literary and artistic value based on criteria other than region. B.A. Botkin, noted folklorist and early advocate of regional writing, cites some of this belief in local literature’s defense, stating that the value is “In the common stock of speech, custom, and belief, from which derives a native imagery and symbolism, it is finding the universality and simplicity without which art degenerates into mere journalism or technique” (16). This point of view lingered for many years, as the regional writers who were able to maintain longevity and recognition in literary study did so precisely because individuals were making a case for their value outside the regional location or orientation of their writing. Willa Cather was one of the few writers of this early period to make this transition in a lasting way. Not always accepted without some caveat commenting on the local, Cather’s work was often viewed as addressing larger concerns that transcended the Midwest, particularly as much of her work was set outside the Midwest as well. She is one of the few more regionally oriented writers from the early twentieth century to hold her own in criticism in comparison or inclusion with many of the canonical realist or modernist American writers.

The flaw in focusing purely on universal values of regional writing is that it not only relegates the regional to a position of insignificance, but it also suggests a universal American identity that does not really exist. As much as the country was founded on a set of basic principles that applied to all citizens, the individual experiences of its inhabitants did not live up to this picture of wholeness. As the country was settled almost entirely by immigration, the United States was already a country of individual stories and regional communities. Therefore regional writing was far from universal, but could
contribute to compiling a truer picture of America. The local informs the national, for what creates regional distinctiveness in all its areas and incarnations combines to form a pluralistic image of American identity and culture that is more detailed and more accurate than most of the myths and stereotypes commonly endorsed. The homogenizing wholeness implied by advocating “universal” aspects of regional texts denies the diversity inherent in the very makeup of the country itself. In many ways, the confusion and confrontation between author and region among many authors in the 1920s and 1930s (in the Midwest and elsewhere) lies in this enforced homogeneity. Authors such as Bess Streeter Aldrich, Ernest Hemingway, and Meridel Le Sueur were trying to reconcile their own experiences and identities with preconceived notions of themselves and their surroundings based on stereotypes and definitions that, while containing elements of truth, were imposed in an often rigid way that did not allow for vast variations or difference.

Regionalism’s real value has only recently been appreciated by scholars. As regional writing has achieved greater acceptance and previously ignored or underappreciated writers have risen in stature, the complexity of regionalism has also been observed. Focusing on the local preserves cultural and historical elements of American life that are important to recording the past, but local individuals and situations can also reveal a great deal about the nature of difference, particularly in how minorities and other cultures interrelated. Larry McClain evidences this contemporary turn in scholarship through his comments that
“Regional” texts are often not “good” precisely because they do not fulfill the kinds of narrowly defined (and yet frequently unspecified) canonical expectations critics and readers cling to when assessing a work classified as “American.” Their “value” lies elsewhere. It lies, in part, in the way that regional writing poses a threat to the cultural status quo, in the way that it implicitly challenges a purported “national” culture. Much of “regional” fiction is a chronicle of the effects of marginalization and exile. What many regional writers share with members of other even more sternly marginalized cultural groups is a similarly imperfect acculturation to national ideology and the oppositional power that springs from this peripheral identity. (243)

These statements are indicative of the turn scholars and readers have taken in better appreciating and understanding regional literature. Unlike the early years of its development, regionalism is seen as containing much more complexity as an inherent and important part of American cultural identity. The plethora of articles and critical texts devoted to American literary regionalism in the last two decades affirms this new direction in scholarship.

Within all of this discussion, a clear definition of regionalism has yet to really emerge. While contemporary scholarship has made ground in redefining the term and making it more encompassing, many critics and readers still cling to the older stereotypes and limited viewpoints associated with regional writing. Consequently critics seem to use the definition they most agree with or that fits their contentions. Many of the
definitions that seem to capture the truth of regionalism stem from its inception. Hamlin Garland, in one of the earliest to attempt to define local writing, stated

*Local color in a novel means that it has such quality of texture and background that it could not have been written in any other place or by any one else than a native.* It means a statement of life as indigenous as the plant growth. It means that the picturesque shall not be seen by the author,—that every tree and bird and mountain shall be dear and companionable and necessary, not picturesque; the tourist cannot write the local novel. (53-54, ital. in original)

Garland’s statement is supported by the comments of many other regional writers and scholars. Mary Austin echoes his sentiments when she speaks of regional writing providing more than an automobile’s eye view of the country or area. She states that the region must “enter constructively into the story, as another character, as the instigator of the plot” (Austin 105). George Stewart, in the mid-twentieth century, puts this point of view into a more sophisticated definition:

A closer definition of regionalism would require the work of art not only to be nominally located in the region but also to derive actual substance from that location. This substance would be derived from two sources. In the first place, it will come from the natural background—the climate, topography, flora, fauna, etc.—as it affects human life in the region. In the second place, it will come from the particular modes of human society
which happen to have been established in the region and have made it
distinctive. (371)
Stewart’s assessment is perhaps as close as one can get to defining the regional in
literature, despite the fact that it leaves room for interpretation in what makes a region
“distinctive.” This ambiguity has never been fully reconciled, which is what creates such
disparity in the historical and critical treatment of regionalism. When contemporary
critics argue for regionalism’s value, they tend to work from the premises of these earlier
critics, arguing that regional writing not only stems from a particular location but from
things endemic to that location.

Modernism
This broadening of literary definitions and distinctions to incorporate more
women and minority writers and grant a larger acceptance of regionalism also assisted a
redefinition of genres like literary modernism, particularly in its American context.
Modernism began as a fledgling movement as well, similar to regionalism. The effort of
many writers to experiment with form and subject in order to try and make literature new
during the early twentieth century began as a tangential, almost underground, movement
in American culture. The audience for many modernists was initially quite small, limited
to their artistic circles and the little magazines and pamphlets where they found
acceptance and publication. While it is hard to imagine a world today where names like
T.S. Eliot and James Joyce are not noted as grand figures of literature, at the time their
work was emerging the publication circles and literary tastes of the time did not aid in
gaining them immediate acceptance. The work of mainstream modernist writers was more common in journals and publication in limited volumes by mostly independent publishing houses. In the most extreme examples, the experimentation and risqué subjects of many modernist books like Joyce’s *Ulysses*, among others, led to them being burned or destroyed upon arrival when shipped to the United States. While most of the modernist movement was taking place overseas and transported itself piecemeal to the United States, there were ways that the experimentalism and abstraction emerging in places like Paris influenced American cultural development. Ezra Pound functioned as the overseas editor of *Poetry*, scouting new talent among the new artists of Europe to transmit back to the fledgling Chicago magazine. Artistic centers like Greenwich Village were places where American and European authors could converge, allowing many of those transcontinental travelers to expand their experiences and art in their interaction with other artists and writers.

Definitions are generally perceived as clearer and more established when addressing modernism. High modernism tends to be what most readers and critics are referring to when talking about the modernist movement. This is embodied by the most common definition of literary modernism used in classrooms and as the criteria for early twentieth century literature, addressing authors who

sought to break away from traditions and conventions through experimentation with new literary forms, devices, and styles. They incorporated the new psychoanalytic theories of Sigmund Freud and Carl Jung into their works and paid particular attention to language—both how
it is used and how they believed it could or ought to be used. Their works reflected the pervasive sense of loss, disillusionment, and even despair in the wake of the Great War, hence their emphasis on historical discontinuity and the alienation of humanity. (“Modernism”)

This description does apply to the work of major modernist writers during the beginning of the twentieth century. Most of the writers who evolved within this framework were European or American writers who essentially became European (most notably Ezra Pound and Gertrude Stein). Other American writers who spent time as expatriates but returned or writers who stayed within the United States during their entire careers incorporated many of these concepts, but not with the same loyalty or to the same extremes. Many of them had difficulty reconciling their Americanness with the artistic and social changes that modernism addressed. Regionalism contributed to creating and explaining some of that difficulty, as the following chapters will show.

Within this canonical definition of modernism, however, are nuanced aspects of the artistic climate and the response to early twentieth century social, political, and economic changes that high modernist study tends to overlook. As scholarship has shown, there are other aspects of modernist culture that are addressed in literature of the time, often by writers outside of the commonly accepted group. Peter Nicholls, in his book Modernisms: A Literary Guide (1995), tries to define some of the larger perspectives this narrow version of modernism overlooks:

My aim in the book was mainly to show that such a modernism, caricatured as it now frequently was, could be seen to constitute only one
strand of a highly complex set of cultural development at the beginning of the twentieth century. Furthermore, as “modernism” came to be presented as a sort of monolithic ideological formation, it seemed increasingly necessary to explore the interactions between politics and literary style during this intensive period of experimentation. (vii, ital. in original)

The common definition of modernism does characterize much of what is going on during the early twentieth century, but to see the movement as only encompassing specific forms of experimentation or abstraction and limiting that examination to a narrow segment of authors ignores many other modernist experiments or influences that were taking place at the time. While Nicholls is not the only scholar to note that there are other ways of perceiving modernism, his comments capture the essence of why it is important to look both at the center of the movement and the periphery. A definition of modernism needs to allow for these larger possibilities. The interaction between regionalism and modernism is one example of this necessary larger examination, as the two terms are not often combined together and yet in their synonymous history were indeed affected by each other.

While European modernism tends to be the focus when defining experimentalism and abstraction, there were aspects of American literature and culture that were contributing to new artistic ideas and forms. The emergence of jazz as a musical form encouraged much greater abstraction and mixing of musical influences than had been commonly seen in previous music. Writers such as William Faulkner were redefining history in a modern fashion, looking at aspects of the past through the lens of a modern
present and doing so through a unique stylistic and organizational form. Writers, artists, and cultural critics in the United States were adapting and critiquing the ongoing shift from ways of the past to a new modern present and addressing many “American” issues in the process, such as the promise of the American dream and the pioneer past that founded the country and encouraged many of its democratic ideals. Where World War I was a disillusioning force for many European modernists, it also affected American writers and artists in much the same way, making them question their role in a world that appeared governed by the horrors of war and more alienated by increasing population, greater disparity in wealth, and the effects of industrialization. As Robert Crunden notes in his study, “American modernism was essentially a language that outsiders developed as a way of expressing their inability to find psychologically satisfying places in the larger society” (2). The literature and art produced during this time was an effort for many Americans to reconcile the strangeness of their modern surroundings.

A Combined “ism”: The Modern and the Regional

Regionalism contributes a great deal to an understanding of how modernism and American identity interacted within the early twentieth century. Place is a significant characteristic in many modernist novels, whether it be dislocation from place, disorientation of place, a break with a sense of place or other disharmonies. A sense of comfort in ones’ surroundings and ones’ space is rare in modernist texts, though many characters seem to be searching for that feeling without ever quite knowing what they are searching for. In that regard, location takes on deeper connotations than simply being
scenery or set dressing for the characters and plot. As realistic as the background can be, modernism breaks with realism in this sense of place precisely in the sense of dislocation. In a regional sense, particularly in American literature, this focuses literature into more specific observations of smaller, more individual parameters rather than by observing ideas through the lens of American concerns as a whole. Critic John N. Duvall in his “Regionalism in American Modernism” notes the intricacies of looking at regionally oriented texts from the early twentieth century in comparison to the modernist climate of the time, ultimately revealing a broader understanding of both areas, stating that in the future “what we mean by the regional will be more fully part of the modern, and our modernity will be unknowable apart from the various regions of identity represented by American literature” (259). Duvall’s article, while focused more on highlighting the evolution of acceptance of regionalism and how it has increased awareness and acceptance of various formerly undervalued or underappreciated writers, demonstrates that American authors were far more influenced by the modernist movement than is often credited. Recent critics have also encouraged a more expansive view of modernism, particularly in regard to place or location, such as Laura Doyle and Laura Winkiel’s collection Geomodernisms (2005). Doyle and Winkiel describe their intent to rethink modernism on a global scale, stating that as a result, “the term modernism breaks open, into something we call geomodernisms, which signals a locational approach to modernisms’ engagement with cultural and political discourses of global modernity. The revelation of such an approach is double. It unveils both unsuspected ‘modernist’ experiments in ‘marginal’ texts and unsuspected correlations between those texts and
others that appear more conventional or more postmodern” (3). While place has always been significant to modernism, reassessing the movement with an emphasis on place and region can provide a more nuanced examination of both modernist art and regional culture.

As Larry McClain commented earlier, much of regionalism’s value comes from its ability to challenge the status quo, a feature that compliments modernisms goals of doing much the same thing. According to McClain, regionalism challenges ideas of a national culture due to its sense of plurality in terms of regional ethnicity and culture. Regional writing is also rebellious in additional ways, particularly in how it proposes counter-solutions to the nation’s problems, either through the redemption of staying within the region itself or as a location that individuals should revolt against. Modernism addresses the cultural status quo in similar ways. While modernist texts do not issue challenges through their subject matter, like the regionalists, they do propose different ways of interacting with and reacting to the world around them. Modernism, similarly to regionalism, was also concerned less with nationalism and more with looking at issues of identity and humanity on either a larger universal scale or a particularly localized one. Both regionalism and modernism are more complimentary than commonly given credit and through looking at the evolution and impact of each, both individually and in their interaction, scholars and readers can learn a great deal more about American literature and culture.

When looked at comparatively to movements synchronous to the dominant periods of regionalism, such as realism and modernism, regional writing augments the
themes and issues at work in those texts and those texts in return deepen an understanding of regional issues and concerns. While regionalism has value in its own right, it also can help expand understanding of American history and culture in many aspects of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. Andrew R.L. Cayton, in his essay “The Anti-Region: Place and Identity in the History of the American Midwest,” draws attention to this distinction:

The challenge for regional scholars is not to suggest that what happens to people differs in different places but rather to insist that they construct their understandings of their relationships with other peoples and their environments in different ways. If nothing else, regionality, or identification with a region, is about communities of human beings who decide that their sense of place unites them more than questions of religion, race, gender, class, or any other way of constructing identity. (143)

Analysis of regional literature and culture is not solely about noting difference or trying to classify similarity; regional studies are also about how those identities or places are constructed, in essence how we attempt to define who were are and the ways we construct that knowledge. Modernism is also concerned with this sense of identity, in particular how identity is affected by the changes taking place in the world.

Characters like F. Scott Fitzgerald’s Jay Gatsby and Jack Conroy’s Larry Donovan are trying to define their place in a region and also in a larger world, both places at the mercy of complicated histories and changing times. These characters demonstrate
how a region like the Midwest is important in studying the interaction of regionalism and modernism, for R. Douglas Hurt notes that “Regionalism, however, is a dynamic, not static, concept. Regional identities and attitudes change over time, and they are dependent on the cultural groups and the interaction of social, economic, and political forces. Change, not constancy, wears at regional identity, creating many ‘midwests’ within the Midwest” (178). Modernism is fraught with reaction to change, particularly in the way texts alternately fragment and stream together in reaction to experiences or conditions the characters face. The Midwest is not all that different, providing a different regional experience or identity for every individual that interacts within it based on their perspectives. As Midwestern history and literature, the region never functioned in the same capacity for any of the writers or scholars who addressed it. Every region presented itself differently to its inhabitants; every modernist writer chose a different form of style or subject to address their own experiences with war or culture. Only by studying these different responses to both place and society can an understanding be reached as to what was really influencing writers during the early twentieth century.

The Midwest and its Literature

Considering the considerable amount of scholarship regarding other regions of the country, particularly the South, one might ask why focus on the Midwest, particularly in relation to such an internationally oriented phenomenon as modernism? The stereotypes of blandness and provincialism that tend to overshadow other aspects of the region make it seem like an unlikely place for avant garde writing and international influences.
However, at the beginning of the twentieth century, the Midwest was undergoing a renaissance of literature, art, and culture. The Chicago Renaissance, just prior to 1920, raised the stature of the city and surrounding region, building an artistic community and climate. Due to much of this increased artistic influence, little magazines like *Poetry*, founded in 1912, were able to establish themselves and flourish in the city during their early years. As the century progressed, most of the American expatriate writers who became such critical favorites to scholars, such as Ernest Hemingway, F. Scott Fitzgerald, and even T.S. Eliot, were Midwesterners. The region became known as the “heartland” and functioned as the status quo by which American history and culture was measured, and while it never always lived up to these ideals, the fact that it was placed in this position is significant in understanding the Midwest’s function in regard to national definition. The region itself went through an identity struggle, similar to that experienced by many of the modernist writers themselves, in which it was unsure what parts of the past to carry on and uphold and what aspects of Midwestern culture should give way or adapt to modern times. The Midwest was far from an insignificant place in determining American history and culture in the beginning of the twentieth century.

While Faulkner and his treatment of the South make a strong example for examining regionalism and modernism, the Midwest is a region with a literary tradition in its own right and generated writers who struggled with regional and national traditions and cultural influences that were extremely complicated by the increasing influences of modernism. One significant example of this struggle was the search for a definition of the Midwest in the literature and culture of the region. Initially, the Midwest was simply
the West, a site of exploration and the unknown, a pioneer frontier. The first signs of a common literature were seen in the mid-1800s, as the region became self-aware enough to generate anthologies like William Gallagher’s *Selections from the Poetical Literature of the West* (1841) and William T. Coggeshall’s *The Poets and Poetry of the West* (1860).

By the late nineteenth century the region had survived the evolution from West to Northwest to Old Northwest to eventual labeling as the Middle West or Midwest. James Shortridge notes that by 1912 the term Middle West was fully accepted as a dominant regional label and that the early years of the twentieth century also solidified the definition of the region as a place of pastoralism and maturity, that “The Middle West came to symbolize the nation, to be seen as the most American part of America” (216). Terms like the “heartland” came to characterize the region, as its role as the center of the United States made it take on more symbolic importance. Besides this burden of representing the national heart of the country, land that had once been frontier was now becoming civilized and the region was developing an artistic culture of its own in opposition to the usual dominance of American culture from the East. The Midwest was developing its own identity in light of the region’s history and the changes taking place due to modernization.

By the late nineteenth century, novels, poems, and essays were appearing by Midwestern authors that were establishing a literary culture in the region and assisting in constructing a regional sense of identity. While many late nineteenth century writers who focused on local concerns were dismissed for dealing with rural issues, the sense of culture and history that many of those writers recorded gave support and credence to
many of the myths and stereotypes that would later develop about the region. Not always portraying the region as idyllic, early Midwestern writers nonetheless began recording or creating stories that called attention to the struggles of the early pioneers, the hard work ethic that many rural communities were founded upon, and the sense of evolving culture and community that was developing as new generations of families came to be born and raised there. These ideals, founded in fact but often exaggerated or disparaged in the assorted ways they were communicated, became the foundation for a sense of regional definition. They also helped to endorse the idea of “the American dream” by becoming a touchstone by which to evaluate “typical” or ideal American life (supporting the evolution of the Midwest as America’s “heartland) and affirmed the conviction that by hard work and a wholesome life one can get ahead in the world and succeed. By the 1920s, due to modernization and its effects, these were also the very ideals that many writers rallied to or revolted against. These ideals formed a foundation for the ambivalence that would underlie Midwestern writing throughout the modernist era and in much of the literature that followed.

Compounded with this problem of regional definition was ambivalent recognition for Midwestern writing. As was characteristic of the attitude toward regional writing as a whole, some acknowledged the Midwest as an artistic region and others dismissed it as merely being on the cultural periphery. The Chicago Renaissance and other elements of literature from the region were granted some recognition, particularly in the mid-twentieth century. Other Midwestern writers and movements, such as any radically oriented writers from the 1930s, were treated in a more dismissive manner. By the
1960s, concurrent with movements that elevated the status of women and minority writers, Midwestern literature received renewed interest. However, one of the developments that both helped and hindered this larger acceptance was that literature and criticism from or about the Midwest apologized for its regional orientation as much as it highlighted that perspective. Many authors and critics attempted to champion the area and yet were continually forced to address many of the negative opinions regarding regional literature and the Midwest in particular. For example, John T. Flanagan, noted Midwestern literary scholar, made allowances for lesser aspects of regional writing, stating “To a sensitive reader perhaps the greatest single limitation of midwestern writing is its style. By actual count the novelist and poets who lived in and wrote about the Midwest have been singularly immune to the niceties of language, to the richness and variety and nuances of expression” (88). Statements like this do little to make a persuasive case for Midwestern writing as being as artistic or as equal to other literature. Flanagan, as one of the most outspoken advocates of Midwestern writing in the twentieth century, diminishes, through comments like these, the importance of the very literature he is trying to endorse. Midwestern literature, like all literature, has its degree of flaws; however, in many cases writing from this region apologizes more for its substance and style than many other areas of American literature. Never achieving readily accepted status (even today) and constantly having to justify and even apologize for the culture and characteristics of the Midwest made fitting into American literature as a whole a problematic distinction for authors and critics to make. Midwestern literature, for both the conflicts it contains as well as the national ideals it represents, is an important area of
American cultural study. Assessing the shifting status of these conflicts and ideals in the midst of a tumultuous social, cultural, and economic period also addressed by the perspectives of literary modernism, demonstrates that the two subjects have much to contribute toward a greater sense of common and comparative understanding.

As the evolving discussions and definitions discussed here show, progress is being made in reassessing regionalism and realizing the value it brings to discussions of other genres and to the study of American literature as a whole. In particular, studying the region of the Midwest and the literature stemming from that region helps to further detail a more complete image of American identity and culture, particularly due to the role the region plays as a metaphorical center for the nation. We are more often comfortable with our individual microcosms than with the world at large, or at least deal more intimately with the immediate world around us, and regional study helps to focus more on those detailed interactions and provide insight into how they inform a larger worldview. In the chapters that follow, the interaction between regionalism and modernism will be examined through three groups of Midwestern writers: those who stayed within the region and wrote from that orientation, those who left the region behind, and those who represented the regional proletariat. Through each of these discussions, it will become clear that regionalism was a response to modern conditions in much the same way that modernism was responding to those same changes and developments. The two movements, particularly in how they drew on the Midwest for material and inspiration, worked in combination to provide writers from the region with a
way to work out their own issues with identity and also provide insight on larger national culture and identity as well.
CHAPTER 1 NOTES

1 Richard Brodhead, in his article “Regionalism and the Upper Class,” discusses how late nineteenth century regionalism functioned in many ways as travel narratives, particularly when the journal and magazines where the regional works were published often paired or contrasted that literature with articles on international vacation destinations or places of interest. (Rethinking Class: Literary Studies and Social Formations. Ed. Wai Chee Dimock and Michael T. Gilmore. New York: Columbia UP, 1994. 150-74.)

2 Garland states in “The Local Novel” that “The American novel will continue to grow in truth to American life without regard to the form and spirit of the novel or drama of the past. Consciously or unconsciously, the point of view of the modern writer is that of the veritist, or truth stater,” to whom “the present is the vital theme. The past is dead, and the future can be trusted to look after itself” (64-65).

3 The Fugitive (1922-25) was a poetry journal published out of Nashville, Tennessee. Many of the poets associated with founding or publishing within the journal went on to become substantial names in twentieth century literature and criticism, such as Allen Tate, Donald Davidson, John Crowe Ransome, and Robert Penn Warren. Affiliated with many individuals from Vanderbilt University as well as the surrounding community, the journal focused on publishing the work of its own literary circle and extended community, occasionally incorporating poets with a more prominent or national focus.
Midwestern writers producing their art from within the Midwest were strong regional advocates. Their work recorded the pioneer history of the region, the details of the small towns they knew and inhabited, and the traditions and morals that stemmed from the Midwest’s evolution. While these qualities were recognized both during their careers and afterward for this strong connection to place, often as a way to categorize or marginalize them, the larger implications and resonance of their work is often overlooked. Even though literature from the Midwest and the region in general was not always recognized for contributing much substance to American literature and culture, the landscape of the Midwest represented an important site of historical and modern cultural intersection. As these writers viewed conditions in the larger world and in their own communities, they felt compelled to address the changes taking place in their literature, particularly how those changes contrasted with the region’s history. An important distinction is that Midwestern writers within the region were contributing to and driving the regionalist movement in American writing while also functioning as modernists. The Midwest was undergoing a modernist struggle similar to that taking place all over the world and the work of these regionally based writers reflected many of the concerns and sympathies that link the movement together as a whole. While their subject matter at times was different or even more provincial than the modern ideal
tended to call for, Midwestern writers were reacting to the same social, economic, and intellectual forces that were shaping history of the time. Only by acknowledging that regional writing and modernism complement and inform each other can literary study accurately reflect the significance of the Midwest and regions as a whole on the development of modern American literature and culture.

Perceptions of the Midwest

The writing of many Midwestern authors was very much a social commentary reacting to the prevalent attitudes of the Midwest. Critics most often characterized the region as being the target of a revolt, most notably through Carl Van Doren’s comments in *The Nation* in 1920 characterizing recent literature as participating in a “revolt from the village.” Books like Sinclair Lewis’ *Main Street* (1920) and later works such as Edgar Lee Masters’ *Spoon River Anthology* (1925) highlighted the region’s more negative attributes or were based on strong feelings toward the region on the part of the authors. These perspectives became common criteria for evaluating Midwestern writers. Herbert Asbury, writing in the *New York Herald Tribune* and reviewing Ruth Suckow’s*1* short story collection *Iowa Interiors* (1926), commented of her work that “I know of no other writer who can portray so clearly the hideous drabness of existence on the farms and in the hamlets of the American interior, or who can so faithfully set down the petty selfishness and dominate human intercourse in the corn country” (6). A review in the *Saturday Review of Literature* described the characters in Bess Streeter Aldrich’s*2* *The Cutters* (1926) as “a tiresome commonplace, uninviting lot, in spite of their twittering
affection with which the author presents them,” and then concluded that “Anyone who has dwelt with a degree of permanence in the woods knows that they are peopled by yokels exactly like these, but it seems to us time to cease writing third-rate, falsely optimistic novels in praise of them” (91). The stories of Midwestern writers, despite being brought out by major New York publishers and often having good sales, were not taken as seriously by the literary critics of the time, particularly if they were publishing before 1930.³

Midwestern literature was of such prevalence in the 1920s and yet disdained so much by the critical establishment that people actually wrote and published parodies of the perceived literary style. *Vanity Fair* published two different parodies of the Midwest, one in 1924 and one in 1929. The first piece mocked the style of the “Middle Western novel,” particularly those being written by Sherwood Anderson. While writing the story of Aesop Leek, from Lettuce, Ohio, and the complexes he develops and problems he faces, Samuel Hoffenstein makes many observations about the nature of Midwestern writing, commenting that “That’s the trouble with the Middle Western novel. The minute you’ve got a complex going you have to digress here and digress there, until, by the time you get back to it, you’re lucky if you have a two-cent repression left” (52). The other parody, an article for the “J. Riddell Memorial Award Short Best Stories,” chooses the best “Gloomy MidWest Story,” the tale of a woman named Minnie Timkins looking “across the desolate prairie, drab and flat and hopeless.” Her life is so dull that at the end of the short piece, she is too apathetic to cross the room and get a revolver to kill herself. Therefore, to combat the monotony, Minnie “broke her arm at the elbow, just to hear it
snap” (Riddell 95). Depictions such as these only encouraged stereotypes of Midwestern writing. These perspectives demonstrate the rather narrow view much of the literary establishment and the country as a whole tended to have of the writers and writing from the region.

Midwestern writers in the region were aware of the criticism and were not taking the comments lightly. Their writing is often purposely oriented in favor of the Midwest, addressing the criticism in their writing. In many of Bess Streeter Aldrich’s early stories and novels, there is an outright defense of the Midwest built into almost all of her narratives. Aldrich begins *Mother Mason* (1924) with a situation where the daughter, Katherine, is panicking over the impending visit of a very refined gentleman she wishes to marry and concerned with what he will think of her family. In particular, Katherine is worried about the presence of her grandfather, a rather rustic character who likes to tell stories of the early days in the region. After a family dinner where the grandfather dominates conversation with tales of his pioneer experiences, the gentleman Katherine wants to marry replies that he was fascinated by the stories, explaining, “I’m a little cracked on the subject of these old pioneers. To me they were the bravest, the most wonderful people in the world” (69). Characters like Katherine allow Aldrich to argue for a broader, more inclusive definition of the Midwest. Through Katherine’s fear and concern, Aldrich demonstrates stereotypes applied to the region and also argues against them by demonstrating that not everyone believes in those ideas.

*The Rim of the Prairie* (1925), Aldrich’s next novel, continues to defend and redefine the Midwest. While there was a modern tendency to break away from the
conventionality of the past in order to find more cosmopolitan places of greater excitement, Aldrich argues that Midwestern towns are not entirely without merit. She directly addresses some of the prevalent views of the time with a passage that prefaces the novel:

Small and midwestern is Maple City, which in the eyes of many modernists is synonymous for all that is hideous and cramping. A handful of people, they say we are, knotted all together like roots in the darkness. Blind souls, they call us—struggling spirits who can never find deliverance from sordid surroundings. Poor thinkers! Not to know that from tangled roots shimmering growth may spring to the light in beautiful winged release. (iv)

The rest of the novel serves as a refutation of the idea that life in the Midwest is so restricting and advocates that it can be a place of growth and beauty. In fact, Nancy Moore and Warner Field, through their experiences in Maple City, slowly stop looking at the town and the rest of the rural Midwest with such distaste. By the end of the novel, a passage very similar to the epigraph appears in the text itself, this time a commentary on the perceptions of Warner Field as he takes up fiction writing:

Warner Field writes of the mid-west. He does not credit it with having in its air either the crispness of the mountains or the salt tang of the sea . . . nor will he discredit the sorcery of the odors of loam and sod and subsoil, of dewy clover, and ripening corn and the honey-sweetness of lavender alfalfa. He does not pretend that it is idyllic . . . nor will he speak of it as
bleak and uninteresting. He does not assert that it has attained to great heights of culture and art . . . nor will he sell it for thirty pieces of silver. But in some way Warner Field catches in his writings the gleam of the soul of the wide prairie, dim and deep and mysterious. For here, as everywhere, drama ebbs and flows like the billowing of the seas of yellow wheat. (351-52)

Formerly Warner had been a critic of the Midwest, even writing an article that his former boss referred to as being overly harsh of the region. Due to the presence of Nancy and also due to his own experiences, he begins to see the world in a different way. Both Warner Field and Aldrich herself find things within the Midwestern setting that are valuable and worth recording, rather than strictly disparaging it as many other writers and critics of the time did. Both recognized that the region is not perfect, but within that reality is a drama that deserves preservation and exploration.

Aldrich’s *A White Bird Flying* (1931), her bestselling follow-up to *A Lantern in Her Hand*, continues to address modern perceptions of the Midwest. The granddaughter of the pioneer protagonist in *Lantern*, Laura Deal is torn between wanting new modern experiences and seeing the beauty of the Nebraska surroundings where she was born and raised. Through Laura’s eyes, Aldrich contemplates the historical evolution of Nebraska and the Midwest and documents many of the changes taking place. Like the contrast between the Midwest and the rest of the nation or world she discussed in earlier novels, she continues some of those distinctions here, showing that the Midwest has more value than is often granted. A conversation between Laura and her sorority sisters takes up
several pages near the middle of the novel, as they swap stories about the misconceptions of the Midwest. One girl states, “The Midwest,—what does it mean to people who’ve never been here? They’ve the craziest notions. My cousin . . . a kid in his teens . . . was visiting in one of the New England states, and something was said about a story he’d read in the *Saturday Evening Post*. The dumb-bell he was visiting said, “Oh, do they have *Saturday Evening Posts* in Nebraska?” Can you beat it?” (130). Later, another reply attempts to explain the cause,

> “It’s the writers,” the Red-Head said. “They’re to blame. Nobody writes anything about Nebraska as it is now. And of course everybody thinks it’s just like it used to be when the Indians jazzed around and played ‘You’re it’ with arrows. Say ‘Nebraska’ to the average easterner who has never been here, and what does he think of? Pardon!—of what does he think? He sees a picture of Pa out picking up buffalo bones, while Ma’s unpacking the barrel of old clothes and seed corn and dried apples somebody sent them, and Lizzie is standing at the door of the soddie shading her eyes with her hand to see if she can see a tree sprouting on the horizon.” (131)

These comments demonstrate the growing disparity between the reality of the Midwest and the stereotypes and perceptions that linger elsewhere. The history of the Midwest assisted in forming expectations of the region, causing the past to color the way many people perceived the region in the present. While that past was often valuable in helping anchor and steady residents of the Midwest in light of the tumultuous present, they were
also aware of the disparity between those perceptions and the reality of their modern lives.

While Laura Deal is aware of the unfair regional critiques, it is strange that she has aspirations to be a writer and yet fails to see what in her own region is worth writing about. Aldrich uses her as a symbol of the problematic merge of past and present. Laura’s grandmother had always wanted to record the significance of her experiences as a pioneer and tell her stories on paper but never was able to quite find the words. She showed talent for writing at an early age and her grandmother had believed that she would be the one to tell stories and capture aspects of life on paper. While aware of this desire on her grandmother’s part, Laura questions its usefulness, quoting one of her professors, “He says there’s no great beauty here,—that without mountains and seas, the monotony of the landscape brings out in Midwesterners a pessimism of the spirit and a depression of the soul,—and that it’s reflected in our writings” (166). She feels she has to go east or to great cities in order to write great things, an idea those around her find untrue. Eventually, Laura is able to move away from her fixed ideas about literature and the value of the Midwest and gives up her desire to leave it behind. Choosing to be a wife and mother, Laura finds that there is time for writing too within that life and that the two are not as separate as she initially believed. While Laura is in some ways a fictional representation of the type of person Aldrich herself was, balancing family and writing, she is also a reaction to many of the stereotypes facing the Midwest both in the criticism and literature of the time. Like many of the modernist writers or expatriate Midwesterners, Laura is enticed by the world outside of the Midwest and reflects on the
possibilities in the region as compared to the rest of the world. However, unlike many of
the writers or individuals who leave, she chooses to stay and embrace her past and her
present, bridging them together through her family and her writing in a way that
demonstrates that life in the Midwest does not stagnate but continues to adapt and evolve.

Ruth Suckow was not as outspoken as Aldrich in defense of the Midwest, yet she
still addressed popular perceptions and the errors inherent within them in her writing.
One of the few places that Suckow makes a commentary on the perception of the
Midwest is in her novel *The Kramer Girls* (1930), in which she not only contrasts small
town life with that found outside through the character of Ruth, but also uses the
character to ultimately represent a defense of the small Iowa town and an example of the
type of person who had the opportunity to escape that life and yet returned. Contrasting
her own perceptions of Valley Junction with the views expressed by her college friend
Jane, Ruth expresses the value in small town life,

> How could Jane say that little towns were all dreadful? Not European
villages, of course—Jane was crazy to see those, to spend a summer in a
fishing village on the coast of Brittany, she wanted Rose to go with her—
nor even New England villages . . . just towns at home. Well, whether this
was commonplace or not, Rose loved it. She felt her mind drawn away
from Jane’s and settle stubbornly by itself. [. . .]

> She could enjoy having everybody she met on the street speak to
her; knowing people by their names instead of just as—the laundress, the
ice man, the paper boy, the janitor, the fruit stand man. Here at home,
they were people to her, not just factors. But she hid away her enjoyment in that secret and silent stubbornness, because she supposed it must prove that she was very inferior—inferior because she wasn’t unhappy in Valley Junction, didn’t hate it, and want to get back to the city. Wasn’t air anything?—lovely, open, measureless air, and trees that were scattered as they grew, instead of being set out to a plan . . . Jane said you could find all the nature you needed in parks. All the time now, Rose felt herself mentally criticizing Jane. Weren’t there other things to talk about besides plays and art and music and books and talk? Sometimes it seemed to her that Jane had no understanding of what just living was, in and for itself. Rose had been away from Valley Junction for so long now that she could see things for just what they were, with all the freshness of return. She loved the town all the more because she was defending it against Jane.

(124-25)

Ruth is the strongest defender of Iowa small towns that appears in Suckow’s novels by this point. Ruth’s own struggle with whether she belongs in a small town or in a city is the same struggle that characterized much Midwestern literature of the time and this is the first time that Suckow takes up that debate in her prose. Ultimately, because Ruth believes the small town way of life to be so valuable, she gives up her life in Chicago to marry a man from Valley Junction. The marriage never quite turns out to be the success Ruth hopes for, because like many of Suckow’s other characters, even though marriage is a way for her to reconnect with a way of life that was in danger of slipping away, it still
leaves her discontented. By the end of the novel, Ruth’s marriage will provide her with happiness and stability, but it comes at the cost of much of her hope and idealism. It requires her to give up some of the idealistic notions of the small town where she grew up, as she grows away from such innocent perspectives on the world and realizes that reality is not as perfect as her dreams.

*Children and Older People* (1931), Suckow’s second short story collection, contains a variety of short stories focusing on children and elderly people whose lives are wrapped up in the small towns where they live. While not demonstrating radical change in terms of individual growth, Suckow’s focus is more on the quality of lives as they are lived. The story “Midwestern Primitive” is notable in this collection, for while it speaks to shifting generations and small town life, it also comments on attitudes toward the Midwest. Bert Statzer turns her house into a small town restaurant, desperately wanting to make it as good as restaurants in the East by copying interior design ideas from magazines and even naming it the “Hillside Inn,” thinking that more quaint despite the discrepancy between the name and the surrounding landscape. When a party of people arrives from Dubuque, she is confused when they fail to seem impressed by all the work she has put into making her restaurant as refined as those in cities. Comments the guests make, such as “Well, this is familiar” and “Standardization, I tell you. It gets into all corners,” are lost on Bert (241). She becomes scandalized when her elderly mother, a descendent of German immigrants who still bears some of their mannerisms, begins to interact with the guests, intending to help entertain them. While Bert is mortified, her guests begin to liven up, enjoying the older woman’s stories and the tour of her flower
garden. They leave both delighted and impressed with the experiences they have due to the older woman’s influence. In the end, Bert never does quite understand what has taken place, “Bert stood looking after the car. She didn’t know just what she had expected this dinner to mean to her. Anyway, she hadn’t thought that everything would be just as it was before, that mother would be the one they got on with (mother, who hadn’t really lifted her hand!), that she would just go back into the house with a lot of dirty dishes to wash. She didn’t yet see what their idea was” (255). The story creates an effective contrast between representations of the rural Midwest as primitive and uncultured and the notion that the rural Midwest contains value precisely for being different. The Midwest was often seen as a region devoid of creativity or interesting history, and Suckow’s story shows that the reality is quite the contrary if people are willing to be open-minded and look beyond the common expectations. Modernization did not always produce the most sustaining or fulfilling experiences; sometimes the past had lessons to teach the present.

These authors are both representing the Midwest in light of modern concerns and also, through that process, defining a modern Midwest. Authors from the region were facing many of the same issues as authors elsewhere, particularly modernist writers, as they tried to address the fragmented sense of self and search for identity that was common at the time. As the comments and parodies of the time show, the Midwest was seen as a place of blandness, sentimentalism, moral restrictiveness, and lack of imagination. The West was still a place of exploration and interest and environmental beauty (even though the frontier was closed); the East was seen as the center of culture,
with the idea that things were more exciting or eventful in cities such as New York City (which is what lured many Midwesterners away). The Midwest was viewed by outsiders as simply the flat land in between. Writers like Aldrich, Suckow, and others wrote in defiance of those beliefs. To them, the Midwest was a place of beauty, culture, and history that deserved to tell its story and be represented just as much as any other part of the country. While modernist writers were advocating a move away from the past, particularly the immediate past, Midwestern writers were finding solutions to many of the problems of the present in that past. While the past could not be regained, the history of the Midwest presented ideals and examples that could combat much of the fragmentation and alienation of modern life by reminding readers of the way that other generations or cultures bridged those problems. By recording and retelling the history of the region and also by describing contemporary life, Midwestern writers were arguing for a reassessment of the region and, in essence, greater representation as part of the overall modern culture of the United States.

When Midwestern writers did get positive attention, it was generally for having somehow transcended the Midwest in their work or by attempting styles that were similar to other mainstream writers of the time. Most often this praise was granted to writers who either wrote works that reified Midwestern stereotypes or whose writing could appeal to more general concerns instead of something inherently regional. Zona Gale was reviewed much more favorably with the publication of her novel *Birth* (1918), as compared to her earlier, more provincially characterized Friendship Village stories. The Friendship Village stories explained small town life from a variety of points of view.
(depending on the collection), mostly through an insider to the town, Calliope Marsh. With *Birth*, Gale detailed a small town in a less flattering fashion. The characters of the novel lead hard lives, particularly the main character, Marshall Pitt, who has the best of intentions in life but always seems to encounter hardship instead of success. Because this novel was less celebratory toward small town life and the Midwest, many critics reviewed it more favorably and called it a positive turning point in Gale’s career. Ruth Suckow, despite being harshly treated by many critics, gained some of her success through being a favorite of H.L. Mencken, who wrote about her favorably in some of his *American Mercury* reviews. In an early example, he commented that *Country People* (1924) “manages to produce a powerful and brilliant effect of reality. You may not be interested in such folks, but you will find it hard to resist the fascination of this austere account of them. They begin to live on the first few pages, and before the first chapter is ended they seem almost more real than reality itself” (382). Mencken’s comment attributes value to Suckow’s realism and draws attention to that over the other qualities of her work. She is being praised for her technique more than her subject matter. While these were ways that critics found to bridge contemporary writing being produced elsewhere in the United States with that being produced from the region, they were overlooking far more significant similarities and statements in Midwestern stories and novels that were a result of the changes in literature and culture taking place across the country.

For these Midwestern writers, the small town may have often been their canvas, but the palette of ideas they brought to it was large. Their style could be more easily
classified as realistic, but within that realism they were integrating aspects of modernist techniques and adapting to the changes taking place in literature. These writers also incorporated distinctly modernist themes in their writing. Describing Midwestern life and the history of the region was a way for many Midwestern writers to respond to the changes of modern society. As the world became increasingly urban as more people sought jobs in cities, many Midwestern writers wrote about life in small towns or cities as a way of remembering the ideals that people used to live by that were being lost or changed. In fact, many Midwestern writers wrote novels large in scope or multiple novels that traced this modern evolution, similar in many ways to the epic nature of works such as John Dos Passos’ USA trilogy. The closing of the frontier at the turn of the twentieth century marked a change in American culture and identity which is also reflected in many of these novels. No longer able to define the country and the region by its exploration or pioneering, contending with a sense of community that was different in light of modern innovations, and trying to realize a national identity in an increasingly globalized world were all forces that American writers were adapting to and these effects impacted Midwestern writers significantly for how they changed their regional identity as well. In light of these changes they needed new ways to reconcile their selves and their surroundings. Modernism is what rose out of the cultural and social crisis that individuals were contending with and examining Midwestern writers for the impact and influence of this modernism is important in helping to understand this evolving moment in American culture. Midwestern writers turned to the past but also to the way that past
affected and shaped the modern present to examine how they grew from their generational roots and could continue to grow in the future.

Defining the Midwest Locally

In becoming a modernized part of the country with a predominantly agrarian economy, as opposed to the place of wilderness and exploration it once was, the Midwest went through an identity crisis, particularly in regard to how the land and regional history was perceived. Midwesterners were often raised on the stories of their ancestors or family members taming the frontier or forming a life and livelihood out of a few meager possessions and their interaction with the land. These stories led to a tradition and history of rootedness to the land and place, a sense of loyalty and commitment that fails to continue as modern times develop. The land was something to be valued and to be earned with the hopes of passing it on from generation to generation. Modern social and economic concerns made that goal hard to maintain. This conflict between where one is from, particularly these Midwestern locations, and where the modern tide takes people is always at work in Midwestern writing. This situation is further complicated by a sense of modern revulsion (such as in Lewis’s *Main Street*) for what are seen as antiquated morals stemming from the old ways of the past and also a tremendous sense of loss in not being able to live up to the pioneer spirit of their ancestors and strike out for new lands. The American landscape had been conquered and Midwesterners were caught precariously in the middle. The west was in effect closed. While one could still venture out there, it was not with the same sense of adventure that could once be had. The east represented a
polished civilization that had little interest in frontier history and Midwestern provincialism. Midwesterners (and the fictional characters based on them) were caught trying to mediate between these polarities and in a search to identify their sense of self and surroundings.

Bess Streeter Aldrich provides an example of this Midwestern struggle to define itself between the coasts in the initial description of the town in *A Lantern in Her Hand* (1928), tracing the evolution of pioneers from their early days on the Nebraska prairie to their experiences in a modern town:

Cedartown sits beside a great highway which was once a buffalo trail. If you start in one direction on the highway—and travel far enough—you will come to the effete east. If you start in the opposite direction—and travel a few hundred miles farther—you will come to the distinctive west. Cedartown is neither effete nor distinctive, nor is it even particularly pleasing to the passing tourist. It is beautiful only in the eyes who live here and in the memories of the Nebraskan-born whose dwelling in far places has given them moments of homesickness for the low rolling hills, the swell and dip of the ripening wheat, the fields of sinuously waving corn and the elusively fragrant odor of alfalfa.

There are weeks when drifting snow and sullen sleet hold the Cedartown community in their bitter grasp. There are times when the hot winds come out of the southwest and parch it with their feverish breath. There are periods of monotonous drouth and periods of heavy rain; but
between these onslaughts there are days so perfect, so filled with clover odors and the rich, pungent smell of newly turned loam, so sumac-laden and apple-burdened, that to the prairie-born there are no others as lovely by mountain or lake or sea. (1)

*A Lantern in Her Hand*, like many of Aldrich’s other novels and stories, explores life in this American middle ground, caught between east and west. Her characters, at times, contemplate moving away, but their connection to the land always seems to hold them back, the desire to stay stronger than the desire to strike out elsewhere and explore.

Many Midwesterners tried to reconcile their own regional ambivalence by leaving the Midwest, and many, like the characters in Aldrich’s novels, found more purpose in staying loyal to their locality and trying to negotiate the changes to the small town and surrounding land firsthand. This was not due to a lack of travel opportunities or a lack of awareness about what existed outside Midwestern borders. Midwestern writers like Aldrich, Suckow and others stayed in their hometown or local area because they saw value in the people and culture of that area. Their writing demonstrates these convictions through the themes they returned to again and again in their fiction, themes such as the evolution of generations, the change in industry and its effect on local economies, the increased presence of women in jobs outside of the home, the changing national political climate, and the insidious effects of twentieth century global politics. These writers were loyal to their sense of place, wanting to portray it as it really was, but they did not always depict these towns as without flaws. There are elements of the town that are usually applauded or found redeeming in many Midwestern stories, but there are also characters
and situations within that location that are not as perfect. Even when examining the flawed reality instead of idealistic perfection, Midwestern writers found their town or their region to either be a source of reflection for outside readers or an example of the changes taking place in the world at large. Aldrich, in an essay in *Ladies Home Journal* in 1933, defended her chosen Nebraskan small town life and its relationship to her fiction. She began by addressing the stereotype of small towns: “There are fiction writers who would have us believe that just three types of people inhabit small Midwestern towns. There are those who are discontented, wanting to get away; there are those who are too dumb to know enough to get away; and the rest are half-wits” (Aldrich, “Why I Live” 21). Aldrich continues to talk about how she does not fit into any of the categories, and she describes how very few people in her town do as well. She had no ties that compelled her to stay in her town, but she stayed because of the “warm-hearted hospitality, loyal friendship, and deep sympathy of the small town” (Aldrich, “Why I Live” 21). It was a choice that kept her there, not any forced or constricting circumstances. The benefits she found in that lifestyle and location were the same benefits or ideals Aldrich transmitted to others through her literature.

The Midwest and the Changing World

The Midwest is directly or indirectly contrasted with the modern world by all the authors who are writing and publishing from the region. They address the stereotypes and compare the differences between associating with the land and leaving it behind. In many cases, even in novels by Midwestern writers who stayed in the Midwest, the main
character of the novel has to leave home and region before they come to the conclusion that what they left was actually something of value. Few of the main characters decide to stay permanently in the region without some sort of outside experience they can use to weigh the benefits and significance. In Aldrich’s novels, many of the characters have experiences of cities or other places to contrast with their life in a small town. In *Mother Mason*, the Mason family knows life outside of their town but because of that, values the experiences they have at home that much more. In *A White Bird Flying*, Laura Deal has experienced life outside of her town while attending college and is even pushed by her mother to have experiences in a city, but chooses in the end to stay with the town where she has grown up. Suckow’s characters often throw off their small town constraints, but the results are never entirely positive. Marjorie Schoessel, in *Odyssey of a Nice Girl* (1925), thinks that life outside her small town is more interesting and pursues that interest through working in Chicago and schooling in Boston. Ultimately drawn back to her small Iowa town time and time again due to family problems, Marjorie sees the value in that area but also the problems inherent within it. In *The Folks* (1934), Suckow shows how modernization affects the generations and ultimately pulls apart close knit ideas of family and community. Fred and Annie Ferguson, the couple at the center of the novel, are rather comfortable in their small Iowa town, having easier lives than those of their parents (due to the increase of other industries and opportunities than farming) and taking comfort and feeling prosperous in that progress. While their parents do not comprehend what life is quite like for them, Fred and Annie face that same dilemma with their own children. As their three children go out into the world, attend college, and take up jobs or
pursue dreams, Fred and Annie are bewildered by many of the situations the children face. One of the biggest changes is that the children pursue lives away from the small town where they have grown up. The ties to the land and town are strong, as shown by the Ferguson’s own commitment to their small town and their desire to return there even after a long vacation away. Ultimately, in most of these novels, characters are happier and feel more complete when still associated with the region or area they grew up in or that they call home.

Other writers, such as Zona Gale,\(^4\) contrast the outside world not by invoking the experiences of it with their characters directly, but by showing how the outside world has changed the dynamics of the land and small town just through awareness of a world outside. In *Miss Lulu Bett*, the Deacon family that forms the core of the novel are rather shallow individuals, concerned more with how they appear in their small town community than with how well intentioned their actions are or the reality of their situation. Mrs. Deacon is always deferential to her husband. The family goes out of its way to treat the old woman next door, an invalid, with various acts of kindness. Their actions are the perfect image of what society would expect of a family of their social status. At one point in the story the Deacons are in a conversation regarding travel and in making themselves sound important speak of having considered a trip to Europe and going to “the other side.” The text explains, “The words give no conception of their effect, spoken thus. For there in Warbleton these words were not commonplace. In Warbleton, Europe is never so casually spoken. ‘Take a trip abroad’ is the phrase, or ‘Go to Europe’ at the very least, and both with empressment. Dwight had somewhere noted
and deliberately picked up that ‘other side’ effect and his Ina knew this, and was proud” (58). The affectations that the Deacons pick up are a result of trying to not only fit in with their surrounding town but also trying to flourish and become enviable citizens as well. They act the way they believe that people in the greater, more refined world should act, and playing that role does not insulate them from many of the larger problems of the novel, such as their harsh treatment of Lulu or their daughter Diana’s desire to run off with a local boy to escape a confining environment at home. The Deacons act as they believe the modern world wants them to act and therefore they lose a more emotional or social connection to the town and people around them.

The stories in Suckow’s Iowa Interiors also contrast older perceptions of the Midwest or local towns with the changes that modernization has brought to them. The people in these short stories are very much shaped by the places they inhabit and are as a result shaped by the evolution of these town and locales as well. In “A Homecoming,” Laura Haviland returns to a small town where her family has lived for many years. The town of Spring Valley is described as “One of those slow, pretty, leafy towns beside a quiet river, that seemed never to move at all” and yet progress has changed the town, “In the last ten years it had been growing from a country town to a very small city. People had bridge parties instead of great suppers at the Grange. There was a new bank building with a Rest Room, a new Hotel, electroliers down Main Street; and gradually the two blocks of paving in the ‘business part’ had lengthened out down East Street” (18).

Change is at the heart of most of the stories within Iowa Interiors. As the town and environment change, so do the people within it. Young people face changes as they get
older and older people face changes as the world becomes more modern. All the stories seem to embody a sense of truth and reality, that the world is inevitably changing and that melancholy often accompanies those changes. These changes are disorienting and affect the traditional ways that people in the Midwest interacted with their surroundings. Stories like these demonstrate the shift taking place between past and present and often argue, albeit a bit nostalgically, that the past is not irrelevant despite modern innovation and progress.

The characters found in Midwestern novels and stories have a complex relationship with place, a complicated relationship mirrored by the experiences of the authors themselves. Many of the Midwestern writers seen as more typically “regional,” rather than national, authors were citizens of the world and not just locked inside their region or small town. Most of them were born and raised in the Midwest. A few were born elsewhere but became Midwesterners by spending a significant part of their childhood or other parts of their life in the Midwest. All of them felt a clear connection to the Midwestern landscape that shaped who they were and the fiction they wrote. The land represented the freedom that once existed on the frontier, as well as the lineage of family, as many of the literary characters they wrote about represent the generations that founded a life in the Midwest and then evolved from that life, often living in the same town or on the same piece of property. Farms are passed from generation to generation and the gossip of small towns revolves around the idea of knowing someone’s grandparents and parents and the family dynamics inherent in each household. These Midwestern locations are also where people are born and buried, and that brings a literal
connection to the soil, as graves mark yet another connection to the land. History deepens this connection by tracing the record of how people interacted with place. All of these factors make landscape an important part of not only recording the specifics of the region itself, but also make the landscape an important character itself in the traditions, cultures, and histories tied to those locations that narrate and define the identity of individuals and the nation as a whole.

Modernism is a genre concerned significantly with place. Whether from an American or European perspective early twentieth century writers dealing with the disorienting characteristics and effects of modernization were quite concerned with how individuals defined who they were locally, nationally, or internationally. James Joyce’s Dublin, William Faulkner’s Yoknapatawpha County, or even T.S. Eliot’s waste land are all modernist conceptions of place that are significant to the larger issues and ideas the authors are addressing. Midwestern writers who stayed in the region did so partly because the land functioned as a magnet, either keeping them there or drawing them back when they attempted to get away. The writers who stayed felt a greater obligation and commitment to helping shape the region they were from, in whatever way they could. Most often, this shaping and influence came from the fiction they wrote. The Midwestern landscape became a way to reflect their past and project possibilities for the future. The past faded as they observed a change in institutions and ideas, the increasing effects of globalization, and a considerable change in family dynamics. As these social and cultural changes took place, the landscape around them became a way for Midwestern writers and modernist writers to ground themselves in a past while at the
same time venturing into an unknown future. Both regionalists and modernists knew that
the past was something never to be regained, but place functioned as a touchstone to note
what that past was and how far society had moved from it.

Pioneer Past and Modern Present

Midwestern literature is drawn together by a tension that connects people and
place and history. The history of the region is based very much in the evolution of the
landscape but also in the dreams and ideals of the individuals who explored and settled
the land. These ideas evolved as the region evolved and also lingered in the minds of the
generations that followed, who were raised on the stories of those early explorers and
pioneers. As a result, the changes brought about by urbanization and innovation seemed
a violation to the older generation of those very goals and ideals and further confused and
clouded the perceptions of the younger generation in terms of how their identity and
accomplishments compared with those of their ancestors. At a time when individuals
were searching for something to ground them when things seemed confusing and chaotic,
a sense of history complicated distinctions and also left many yearning for a time that
seemed simpler or more easily defined. While a region like the South is often granted
more recognition for its complicated history, particularly in regard to the lingering effects
of that history, the Midwest has its own cultural and historical baggage that was at its
most influential during the early twentieth century.

Going back in time helped provide structure and definition to Midwestern writers
in the 1920s and 1930s. By detailing the settling of the Midwest and the experiences of
the early explorers and pioneers in the region, they were evoking an alternate history to the way society and the world was currently unfolding. Paul L. Jay, in a discussion of how American modernism reflects history, comments that what connects many American modernist poets “is their shared insistence that history somehow constitutes, the origin of the present, that the past exists in the present, that our only defense against the degradation of the contemporary social and cultural fabric is to ‘expose’ the ‘truth’ of that past, a truth that can reveal both the ground of our trouble and the source of our recovery from it” (124-25). While Jay continues on to discuss how fragmentation and other modernist elements work in trying to seek or establish that historical truth, particularly in the work of William Carlos Williams, his comments about the role history could play in a modernist context resonates with many Midwestern writers. Midwestern writers found strength in the stories from the past and a sense of continuity that they used to help counter modern times. Since a frontier was no longer open for exploration, these writers moved backward in time to try and capture some of the emotions and experiences that created the Midwest and also modern American culture. Many writers who left the Midwest reflect nostalgically back on this era in their writing about the region, and the writers who stayed behind reflect just as nostalgically. Writers who stayed within the Midwest were not trying to prolong a way of life, but to mark its passing with sadness, particularly the values and temerity of spirit that went with it.

In light of the way that modern society was developing, the pioneers were the “founding fathers” and many Midwestern writers believed the world would be a better place if their legacy lived on. Aldrich, in *A Lantern in Her Hand*, set out to tell the story
of the pioneers in Iowa and Nebraska as she knew them, feeling they had often been inadequately portrayed in print. In an article written long after the novel was published, Aldrich reflects on the novel’s creation, commenting that the book was influenced by a number of things, one of the most significant being the pioneering stories of her mother told to her from the time she was a child. Aldrich explained her drive to create a story representing those strong pioneer women: “Other writers had depicted the Midwest’s early days, but so often they had pictured their women as gaunt, browbeaten creatures, despairing women whom life seemed to defeat. That was not my mother. Not with her courage, her humor, her nature that would cause her to say at the end of her long life: ‘We had the best time in the world.’” (“The Story” 240). Abbie Deal, the protagonist of A Lantern in Her Hand, fulfills Aldrich’s desire for a more realistic representation.

Again, Aldrich has crafted a strong female character who realizes that life is what one makes of it and is proud of her accomplishments as a mother and pioneer. Abbie Deal desires to be an opera singer when she is younger, but when she falls in love with Will Deal she gives up her dreams for life as a farm wife and a mother instead. The couple move from Iowa to Nebraska shortly after the area achieves statehood, choosing to leave the safety of their family and community in favor of new opportunities to prosper. After a decade or so of hard times establishing their farm and helping to develop the community of Cedartown, finally the family begins to achieve stability and self-sufficiency. Abbie’s husband dies shortly after they reach that point and she is forced to find ways to continue to support her children and keep the farm going. Later in her life, with her children all grown up and living successful lives, Abbie reflects back on the
earlier dreams she gave up in order to marry and realizes that she has missed nothing in
the process. As she looks at her children and thinks over what she accomplished over the
years, she realizes that being a wife and mother and pioneer were accomplishments just
as important as being famous or successful as a singer.

This pioneer spirit is taken up and analyzed further in Aldrich’s next novel, *A
White Bird Flying*, as the children and grandchildren of Abbie Deal reflect on the
importance of her life and the things that she and the others of that time period
accomplished. The novel contrasts the past with the present, drawing comparisons
between those early pioneer days and the life of the modern generation. Aldrich depicts
the journey of the later generations as not all that different than that of their ancestors,

Life was like the old plains before the trails were made. It took initiative
and foresight to find one’s way through it. The old plainsmen moved
through an uncharted region with only the sun and stars for guidance.
Their children and their children’s children moved now through just as
uncharted a wilderness. If only the stars and sun could guide them too.

(84)

While some members of the family find those old stories and old ways of life antiquated,
some members of the family believe that there was something to the values and ideas
held by the pioneers. This struggle is internalized particularly in Abbie’s granddaughter
Laura, who is faced with the choice of living outside of the small town where she grew
up (and that her grandmother helped to found) and staying there to live her life married to
a local man. In having Laura choose to stay, Aldrich is sending the message that people
can do worse things in life than emulate lives like Abbie Deal’s. She emphasizes that the ways of the past can inform and support life in the present.

Ruth Suckow’s *Country People* and its examination of German immigrants in Iowa and their development over several generations serves as another example of how pioneer lives are contrasted with the experiences of modern individuals. The Kaetterhenry’s have to contend with not only carving a life for themselves out of the land like all other pioneers, but also, as immigrants, have to face the difficulties presented in adapting to a new language and customs. Suckow shows some of these problems through situations such as August Kaetterhenry choosing to break away from the close-knit German pioneer community where he had been raised to move a bit farther away in search of good land to farm and more opportunity. She discusses how religion and religious choice played a large role in early immigrants adapting to their new homes and defining who they are, as churches formed the center of most communities. August rises above many of the issues that concern his fellow immigrants in his pursuit of a good farm and strong family. While he left behind family and many traditions in his pursuit of a new life for himself, August is bewildered as he observes his children progressing in much the same fashion. His children’s actions and goals are harder for him to adjust to or understand. He is open to innovations in farming and in making lifestyles easier, but at the same time his acceptance of modernization is more reticent than that of his children who adapt much more easily. Tracing the evolution of the family from pioneer life to being residents of a modern town, Suckow is able to highlight many of the contrasts in values and concerns that have changed with time. While she does not appear to take a
side in the argument, choosing to value the pioneers over the modern or vice versa, Suckow does seem to be calling for greater reflection on the part of her readers between past and present.

In other ways, Midwestern writers looked specifically at the history of the region, writing historical fictions of specific details and events. Some novels looked at the history over a period of one generation, such as Aldrich’s *Song of Years* (1939), the fictional account of some of Iowa’s early development. A tribute in many ways to Aldrich’s own ancestral roots and her own years in Iowa, *Song of Years* traces the lives of settlers in the small towns of Sturgis Falls and Prairie Rapids. The novel begins in 1854, with a young man named Wayne Lockwood crossing the prairie in search of land and a new future. He finds land near the two towns and encounters some of the settlers who have also staked out lives for themselves there. While not the first people to discover the spot, these individuals are part of the community when the community itself consists of nothing but a few log homes and a general store. As the novel develops, these towns grow and change, incorporating more people and more modern conveniences as time goes on. They are also at the mercy of changing historical forces as well, most often told through the experiences of Jeremiah Martin, one of the early settlers of the town who becomes involved in politics and becomes an elected representative to the state legislature. Through Jeremiah, the reader is exposed to issues such as the moving of the state capital from Iowa City to Des Moines or the change that takes places in governors and presidents. The story evolves into a love story between Wayne and Jeremiah Martin’s daughter Suzanne, but a love story told through the difficulties faced by the
settlers during the time of the Civil War. Wayne volunteers to serve in the Union army, returning to Suzanne only after the war is over. Their relationship evolves and changes much as the country around them is evolving and changing and *Song of Years* becomes a tribute to the people who had the strength and idealism to settle Iowa and see it prosper.

World War I was also a significant factor shaping contemporary history and changing perceptions of the world that had existed before it, both for regionalists and modernists. While not all Midwestern writers addressed the war in their prose, the writers that did showed how the unrest caused by the war caused unrest for the people of the Midwest as well. Gale, in her novel *Preface to a Life* (1926), details the difficult life of Bernard Mead, who is forced into decisions in his life out of a sense of obligation and guilt rather than choice. He takes over his father’s lumberyard in a rural town despite his love of city life in order to please his parents and help his family. These obligations wear away at him as he works in a job he never really wanted to take on, even though he is quite successful at it and builds a loving family that never quite gives him the fulfillment he seeks. When he finds happiness and more fulfilling companionship in a woman he meets, Alla Locksley, Bernard desires to finally be free and able to express himself. Unfortunately, due to his marriage and that of Alla, along with many other near misses and miscommunications throughout the time they know each other, this desire is never fully realized. In pursuit of it, however, Bernard volunteers to be an ambulance driver during World War I, hoping that his experiences will provide his life with more meaning. Gale never fully describes what happens to Bernard, but the reader is left with the sense that his experiences in the war did not solve his problems or provide him with any greater
insights. Bernard joins the war because of the same motivating dissatisfaction with the world around him that drove other authors and individuals into the war as well. Bernard feels alienated from the world around him, except in the presence of Alla Locksley, and the war only further fragments his connections with the world rather than providing him with a more coherent perspective. Upon his return he is no better connected to his region and the individuals around him than he was before he left.

Ruth Suckow addresses the war in two of her novels. In *Country People*, as August prospers due to his hard work, his children subsequently prosper by being instilled with some of the same values but also through being members of an evolving modern society. At one point in the book, when World War I breaks out, August is faced with the difficulties of being an American-born citizen with a German background. When he and his fellow German-American neighbors are often called names and treated badly by members of his community, August has a difficult time reconciling his love for the United States with his love for his heritage. He finds some comfort in the fact that two of his sons are serving the country overseas, but still cannot understand how people in the community that he has been so much a part of can turn against him. One of his sons returns from the war more detached from family and friends than he was before he left, yet another hardship the Kaetterhenry family has to adapt to as a result of the war. While in some ways the family manages to return to normal after the war, the detachment of one of his sons is something August never quite manages to understand. *The Bonney Family* (1928), Suckow’s other novel to address the war, describes the troubles that face another family who sends their son off to war. While the family faces a variety of
difficulties due to the changes of modern times, the loss of one of the sons in World War I becomes a scar that lingers as the family tries to maintain some semblance of structure and connection. The family is becoming increasingly more fragmented due to tragic events, changes in society, and also global conflicts like the war.

Other Midwestern writers took a more epic approach to detailing the history of the Midwest. Ole Rölvaag, in his prairie trilogy, set out to tell the story of Norwegian immigrants settling the Midwest. Rölvaag, a Norwegian immigrant to the Midwest himself, drew on his own experiences and those that surrounded him in the Norwegian-American community. Starting with the tale of Per Hansa and his family establishing a farm on blank prairie land in South Dakota in *Giants in the Earth* (1927), through the experiences of his American-born youngest son, Peder, in *Peder Victorious* (1929) and *Their Father's God* (1931), Rölvaag covers in great detail the struggles of the pioneers in establishing a new way of life and trying to adapt to a new culture at the same time. He also discusses the impact those struggles have on the generations that follow them, the children that bear the burden of growing up between two worlds, those of past traditions carried with the immigrants from their homelands and the attitudes and changes that come with existing in a new American life. The bridge between this immigrant past and new American present is best illustrated through Per Hansa and his wife Beret themselves. Per Hansa is filled with optimism and promise for this new world, beliefs passed to his sons, while his wife Beret finds her new surroundings foreign and fails to ever let go of the old traditions and beliefs she knew in Norway. Her superstitions and preoccupations haunt her children as they grow and assimilate into American culture.
Through this extended tale, Rölvaag is explaining and preserving history, particularly the struggles of Norwegian immigrants. He is also explaining and seeking to understand the structure of American culture, as his trilogy also speaks to the mixing of ethnicities on the American frontier and the struggles of an evolving government and social landscape. Norwegians, Irish, and other ethnicities intermix on the prairie, with various types of results, and as they struggle to find ways to coexist peacefully, they are also faced with larger decisions in regard to how they should be governed and how the Dakota territory should be turned in to proper American states. Rölvaag’s novels record this history and also serve as a point to begin examining the way that social, ethnic, and political ideas evolved into the structure of current American society.

August Derleth also examines the changes that take place over generations and his series of books covers a greater span of time than a writer like Rölvaag, even though the novels tend to focus almost exclusively on his home area of Sac Prairie. In the 1930s, Derleth began publishing novels and stories that would become part of a large body of work known as his “Sac Prairie saga.” The saga was to span the years of development of Wisconsin and the Sac Prairie region from the 1830s until the mid-twentieth century. Tracing immigrants to the region, the lives of the later farmers and settlers who made of up the towns, and the changes that the people underwent as the passing of time changed the landscape and the customs of the area, each novel or story in his saga constructs past history for a present day audience. Many of these books fall under the definition of historical fiction, a creative retelling by Derleth of events that actually happened filled with references to people who actually lived and shaped that history. Wind Over
Wisconsin (1938) looks at aspects of the Black Hawk War, starting to describe events starting in the fall of 1831 and continuing into the summer of 1838. Restless is the River (1939) takes place a year after Wind, dealing with many of the settlers who actually shaped the wilderness area into a prosperous town. Derleth’s view of history was sentimental at times, and, as many critics and even his editor have noted, his stories could have been stronger if more time and revision was spent on them; however, like other Midwestern writers, he was reshaping the history of the region, particularly Wisconsin, in a way that contrasted modern times and provoked reflection and reassessment of modern changes.

The history infused into these stories by Midwestern writers, in particular the adherence by many to writing elements of historical fiction, contrasts the past with the present in a way that informs both. The stories of the past, while at times romanticized, illustrate a desire on the part of authors and readers to try and realize days of exploration that are no longer possible for them. These authors reflect on the region’s history out of a desire to recognize and reconstruct a past that had more continuity and purpose than much of what was being seen in the present. The past in many ways represented ideas and suggested alternatives that could perhaps untangle contemporary issues and provide a greater sense of unity. The past also substantiates some of the problems inherent with contemporary life, as many Midwestern writers note the restless nature of Midwesterners as they are caught in between worlds, often on multiple levels (between past and present, east and west). Finding value in the past and yet not entirely being able to reconcile it with the present led many Midwesterners, both in reality and in fiction, to have difficulty
defining their identity, both individually and regionally. A historical point of view in fiction was a way to record the past for posterity or escape nostalgically to find a greater sense of completeness, but also a way to introduce yet another perspective into an already complicated modern world. It is simplistic to say that the desire on the part of many Midwestern writers to write about the past was only to glorify it or recapture what was lost or to stay grounded in nostalgia. The stories passed down by generations and the history of the region itself did represent a better way of life for some authors or in some situations. The history of the region provided expectations, traditions, and a progression of social evolution that clarified the past and informed the present, providing guidance and grounding to a world searching for a centering force amid all the modern shifting taking place.

A Fragmented Midwest

Problems reconciling with place and understanding the generational and historical shift only encouraged the fragmentation of self image and society that is so indicative of modernist literature and art in the early twentieth century. Therefore, while Midwesterners did not take this fragmentation to the stylistic extremes as many modernists, they were addressing the same concerns and responding to many of the same social and historical forces. This implies similarity between two segments of the literary population that were often quite segregated due to differences in defining artistic value. The Midwesterners were more conservative with their characters and stories and were marginalized for that conventionality and their regional location. Work coming from
New York or Paris was deemed much more cutting edge than what was emerging from Nebraska. The loss of orientation was the same for all writers during the 1920s and 1930s, however; the Midwesterners just addressed it in more subtle ways. While modernists usually walked away from the past consciously, particularly the immediate past, in the desire to cast off repressive social and moral constraints, the Midwesterners were seeing that past slip away in light of modern changes and mourning some of the implications of that passing. Midwesterners again and again raised questions about how to proceed in the present circumstances of the world, often using the past to represent a sense of wholeness or completeness by which to contrast tumultuous contemporary life. The problems facing modernist writers everywhere in the world were no less evident in the Midwest.

Examples of fragmentation or disorientation are in all Midwestern work of this time period; however, Midwestern writers were not very overt in calling attention to it. Writers in the region rarely engaged in many of the experimental techniques or stream of consciousness writing that conveyed this sense of disorientation in other modernist works. In a trilogy like Rølvaag’s, the children of the immigrants are contending less with understanding their ancestral culture and more with how to reconcile that culture in light of American identity and culture. Per Hansa’s son Peder, the main protagonist of the latter two novels of the trilogy, embodies this confusion. Peder grows up trying to understand his place in a Norwegian-American and a larger American community. Later in life, he renounces the god he has been raised to value and scorns many other traditions and beliefs that the people around him, both Norwegian and otherwise, adhere to. Peder
is ultimately caught up in antagonist conversations with the people around him regarding these issues and left alienated and alone by his family and the community at large.

Rølvaag’s early biographers, Theodore Jorgenson and Nora O. Solum, commented that the author’s own efforts toward cultural survival in the region were not motivated by an intention to maintain a little Europe among the immigrant populations on the plains between the Great Lakes and the Rockies. But he believed that this part of the country had a look of its own. Part of the larger American scene to be sure, it was nevertheless distinct in racial composition, in history, in religious mood. No good of any endearing value could come from an impotent mimicry either of New England or of English civilization at large. [. . .] More than all else, he wanted the young who grew up in this region to find their real selves, their true souls, religiously and culturally. The interplay of land, labor, blood, ideas, and aspirations must in time bring into being something personally distinct, without which the region would signify only a bread and butter existence. (254)

Peder’s character sends a message on the part of Rølvaag of what can happen when that interplay of land, labor, blood, ideas and aspirations does not find a way to successfully coexist in an individual’s life. Peder’s struggle is a difficult one, precisely because both the forces around him and his own sense of self fail to provide the support or answers he needs to reconcile the multitude of ideas and influences that have left him confused and rather lost. This confusion is a result of not only his immigrant upbringing but also his evolution into a more modern world.
The characters of Ruth Suckow’s *The Folks* provide another example of the problems that individuals face as they adjust to modernity and the unsettling effects it can have. For each of the Ferguson children, leaving their family home and venturing out into the modern world fails to bring them the fulfillment or success that they are searching or hoping for. The oldest daughter, Margaret, hopes to find excitement and success out in the world and instead finds only unhappiness. She changes her name to a more modern sounding “Margot,” believes that a more stylish life in New York is going to make her cosmopolitan and happy, but instead the closest things she finds to fulfillment and happiness is a sort of half life living as the mistress of a married man and at the mercy of only realizing that happiness when it is convenient for him. The oldest son, Carl, is seen in many ways as having the most promising future and he does all that he can to live up to those expectations. However, as his own dreams do not always coincide with those of his family and community his underlying unhappiness insidiously destroys what he does have. He has problems at his job as a high school principal as his dissatisfaction with his choice of career interferes with his success. His wife, upon learning that he is interested in another woman, attempts to kill herself, something found scandalous by the family and the community and quickly smoothed over and covered up.

The youngest daughter in Suckow’s novel, Dorothy, marries a good looking young man and is seen as having a glamorous life ahead of her in California. Yet when her parents come out to visit, they find the young couple unable to afford their beautiful glamorous house and therefore renting it out in order to make money to sustain themselves. Instead, they rent a much smaller apartment rather cramped for themselves
and their children. Her husband works only by teaching women how to play bridge all day, making little money at his easy job despite his family’s hardships. Bunny, the youngest child, marries a young unhappy Marxist woman who he does not totally understand but who he hopes to save from her unhappiness. All of the Ferguson children initially are attributed with having all the promise and opportunity that modern times can provide and yet through their experiences in those times fall short of ever achieving that success. The children struggle with negotiating the stability and idealism of their childhood and ancestral past and the unsteady world of the present in which they find themselves. Suckow never proposes a specific solution for these problems and the confusion of self that they seem to generate. In structuring her novel to move full circle from focusing solely on the parents at the beginning and at the end, Suckow does suggest that there are lessons to be learned from reflecting on the parents’ lives and the history of the family. While the Fergusons themselves note that their way of life is passing, the essential values of hard work and stability that characterized much of their lives and those of the generations before them provide a reminder and an alternative for the chaotic lives of their children. They know there is no way to preserve or recapture the past, but their lives and ideals can help to stabilize even slightly, through memory and history, the confusion their children face in trying to establish and understand the changing world they live in.

Midwestern writing demonstrates just as much confusion and fragmentation of self and society as other modernist texts. In many ways, the work of Midwestern writers attempts to propose the same sense of a solution through art that many modernist writers
appeared to seek. Their fiction becomes not only a representation of how the world is, but also a reminder of how it got that way and a reflection on the entire process in the hope that somewhere in that story or those characters wholeness or direction can be found that helps to combat that disorientation. Remembering the past or trying to apply past principles to modern times in a way to moderate or adapt them so that they embody less chaos and perhaps allow more control are solutions that can be gained from reflecting on these regional stories and characters. It may not solve the problems entirely, but the fiction provides a method of reflecting and coping that stems beyond the novels and stories themselves to draw attention to the realities the novels mimic in American society as a whole.

The Midwest Evolves

These Midwestern writers were not writing in a regional vacuum nor were they ignorant as to the literary innovations taking place elsewhere in the country and in the world. Not all of them may have been aware of the latest literary rage in Paris, but they were aware of the changing literary and artistic culture. Many of the Midwestern-based writers of the 1920s and 1930s were publishing with major New York publishing companies, having stories appear in national and international periodicals, and interesting readers on a wide scale. Even with this type of acknowledgement, many of these writers failed to ever gain long term recognition or a solid place in literary history. This may be why so many of these writers became outspoken members of the literary regionalism movement taking place in the late 1920s and 1930s. Rather than argue their art based on
its stylistic elements alone, they argued for the merits of work emerging from the region overall. In essence, Midwestern literature deserved to be recognized for its regional influences as much as, or in some cases perhaps more so, than the other literary qualities included within. Ruth Suckow made an eloquent case in her article “Middle Western Literature” (1932) when she stated,

To have a literature expressed in middle western terms leads people to see their own country, not through an alien haze that belittles and distorts it. It gives the land dignity. It brings genuine romance, not plumes, but the deep beauty of association. [. . .] Art, particularly determined by time and place, catches in a frame what might otherwise be lost. What we have here in the Middle West, the particular way, the fresh way, in which the ancient stream of life manifests itself, colored and shaped by local conditions, has never been before and will never be again. We must catch it, or its essence is eternally lost. That is the deepest reason for a middle western literature. (182)

Unfortunately the value in literature from the Midwest was never recognized quite as strongly by the larger literary establishment. The rise of literary regionalism coincided with a diminishing defense of the region in literature. The later novels of writers like Aldrich, Gale, Suckow, and others defend the Midwest much less vigorously. Where in the 1920s there was open argument within fictional texts, in the 1930s the Midwest is still portrayed as a significant and changing region, but not defended as profusely. With the rise of articles and books highlighting the value of regional literature, Midwestern writers
may have felt that their argument had been won or that, at the very least, their cause had been advanced. However, literary history does not accord the region quite that status or treat the region all that kindly.

Until the late 1960s when women and minority writers, along with other neglected voices, became an area of concentrated literary study, Midwestern literature was addressed in print, but often in isolated cases and within a narrow group of scholars. As a result, many of these Midwestern based writers, for the mixed recognition they achieved in their own time and their lack of lasting glamour and success, were relatively unexamined until the 1970s. More recently, scholarship has opened the door to a reassessment of regional writers, increasing the status and awareness of several formerly marginalized writers, particularly women, and also allowing these authors to be seen in their contemporary cultural context. For many American regional writers, this cultural comparison would be the era of literary modernism. In an essay connecting regionalism with American modernism, John Duvall examines the work of scholars like Judith Fetterley and Marjorie Pryse and the work that they have done to redefine regionalism. While Duvall finds some faults with their contentions regarding the qualities inherent in a regional work, he does agree that

What remains useful in negotiating the conceptions of regionalism and modernism is Fetterley and Pryse’s sense that regionalism is a form of critique rather than a type of geographical determinism. This recognition allows regionalist readings to cross geographical boundaries so as to
underscore resonances between writers typically contextualized within their particular region. (245)

Duvall’s comment endorses the idea that regional writers, while often more dedicated to their particular locale, can also be addressing larger issues or engaging in discussions that are comparable to those taking place elsewhere in the country and the world. Regional writers were engaged in and contributing to a larger literary discussion and defining a larger sense of American identity and that connection needs to be further explored.
CHAPTER 2 NOTES

1 Ruth Suckow (1892-1960) was born in Iowa and grew up there, leaving the state for a short period of time to attend school in Boston and Denver. After her schooling, she returned to Iowa where she lived for several more years. Her childhood and experiences in Iowa small towns were the focus of much of her fiction. She was a favorite writer of H.L. Mencken, who championed much of her writing and published several of her stories in *The American Mercury* and *The Smart Set*.

2 Bess Streeter Aldrich (1881-1954) was born and raised in Iowa, later marrying and moving to Elmwood, Nebraska where she spent the rest of her life. Her writing is dedicated to recording the history of the region and the lives of the people who live there, particularly building on the pioneer history of her own family.

3 After 1930, as more and more authors and critics took up a vocal cause in favor of regional writing and as it became debated more in literary publications and critical circles, Midwestern writers were still struggling for equality or at least recognition without stereotype but had more evidence to argue for the value of their work.

4 Zona Gale (1874-1938) was born and raised in Portage, Wisconsin and after attending the University of Wisconsin for her college degree worked as a reporter in Milwaukee and, later, New York. After achieving a degree of professional and literary success in New York, she returned to Portage where, other than occasional trips to other locations or countries, she lived for the rest of her life. The majority of her writing focuses on people in small towns like the one in which she grew up, particularly her fictional town of Friendship Village.

5 Ole Rölvaag (also known by his initials as O.E. Rölvaag, 1876-1931) was born in Norway and emigrated to the United States in 1896 and lived for a period of time in South Dakota before moving to Minnesota, where he would live for the rest of his life. He attended St. Olaf College in Northfield, Minnesota and later became a professor of Norwegian language and culture there. He is most known for his trilogy, *Giants in the Earth, Peder Victorious*, and *Their Father’s God*, about the experience of a family
emigrating from Norway to the Midwest, all of which were originally written in Norwegian before being translated into English.

August Derleth (1909-1971) was born and raised in Sauk City, Wisconsin and other than a few brief instances, lived there his entire life. He has a reputation as the most prolific writer Wisconsin ever produced. Derleth covered many genres in his writing, from science fiction, creative nonfiction, fantasy, and perhaps his best legacy, his historical fiction of the Sac Prairie area of Wisconsin, tracing the area’s settlement by immigrants and eventual evolution into various prosperous farms and towns.

This restlessness is noted by many Midwestern writers. While comments by writers like Aldrich and others highlight this tendency, other Midwestern writers like Louis Bromfield and Meridel Le Sueur try to ascribe a reason for this restlessness, looking at the lack of frontier land for exploration in Bromfield’s case or Le Sueur’s contention that Midwesterners are always looking for something better over the next horizon. Ultimately, restlessness is a common theme in Midwestern writing.
CHAPTER 3

Midwestern Expatriates and the Region They Never Left

Unlike the Midwestern writers who stayed within the region and based their writing on their experiences there, another group of Midwestern writers migrated outward from the region. They were enticed by the possibility of new opportunities and experiences and had a strong desire to break away from the repressive and conventional lives they felt confined them in the Midwest. They moved to New York and Paris becoming part of a larger artistic world. They began participating in many of the evolving and experimental literary movements, particularly interacting with or adopting aspects of literary modernism. Even in the midst of trying to assimilate into this larger, more international artistic culture, these writers had a difficult time trying to reconcile their childhood and ancestral pasts with the modern conditions and issues they faced. Despite their hopes for finding some kind of completeness or a new way of life to supplant the old, these Midwestern writers did not find the answers they sought. Instead, these authors spent much of their time outside of the Midwest reflecting on the people and places they had left behind. The Midwestern writers who left the region in the 1920s and 1930s thought they were leaving everything behind them in pursuit of a new modern identity, yet regionalism was still at the very foundation of their modernism and the Midwest provided them with more perspective and answers than the outside world ever did. While on the surface they argued that their stories and novels were more innovative
and cosmopolitan than what one would expect from the Midwest, inherently, the writing of these Midwestern authors was shaped and sustained by the very regional ties they left behind.

Seeking New Worlds

Many writers coming of age during the early twentieth century in the Midwest found the region repressive and inadequate. This dissatisfaction was exacerbated by the new alternatives they were finding available to them due to increasing modernization and change. Where extensive travel had been a once in a lifetime opportunity for most of their parents and ancestors, modern inventions and technology made it easier than ever to travel across the country and even the world in a much simpler and more economical fashion. This increased opportunity split up the country, luring many, particularly from rural areas in the Midwest, to more urban and international destinations, such as those popular with modernists and other artists. This larger worldview also brought more stories and knowledge into the Midwest, as many of these writers could see firsthand how easy it was to travel and hear tales about many different destinations. Expanding modes of transportation also brought job opportunities outside of family businesses and farms, making the world outside the region seem more prosperous and exciting than the work and jobs found within. Glenway Wescott, in *Good-bye Wisconsin* (1928), demonstrates the feeling of many Midwesterners toward the region, describing it as nowhere; an abstract nowhere. However earnestly writers proud of being natives of it may endeavor to give it form and character, it remains out of
focus, amorphous, and a mystery. [. . .] There is no Middle West. It is a certain climate, a certain landscape; and beyond that, a state of mind of people born where they do not like to live. (38-39)

Many of these Midwestern expatriates left the region behind to try and escape what they perceived as a confining, unimaginative place, finding the rest of the world filled with prospects for greater possibility and adventure.

Aware of the parodies and common opinions written and discussed by those outside the region, the Midwestern expatriates tried to craft a new identity for themselves and a new distinction for their writing independent of regional ties. While the vehemence of their revolt and indifference toward the Midwest varied, all the writers who left asserted some degree of distance between their characters and place, ultimately endorsing or further elaborating on the stereotypes so often attributed to the region. At best, the Midwest was a stable center to the universe, a place where farms stayed in families for generations and small towns were places where you knew all your neighbors. At worst, the region was a place of repression, filled with simple, small-minded people trapped in bland, routine lives. Both of these alternatives were distasteful to the Midwestern expatriates, as they constituted a type of oppressiveness, contrasting stable idealism with provincial conservatism, neither of which was appealing as it failed to embody the potential promise and excitement they perceived in the world around them. The experiences and ideas that formed the basis of their existence were out of place with the changes they were observing in the world. They felt that their writing was keeping the
region at a distance, allowing it to serve as landscape or location but trying to never appear too attached or too sentimental about the details.

One example of the disparity between the Midwestern past and the conditions of the present and future can be seen in the life of Ernest Hemingway. Michael Reynolds, in *The Young Hemingway*, establishes some of this individual and cultural confusion, stating that Hemingway’s boyhood experiences in Oak Park, Illinois occurred in a place where everyone knew each other and where church and family were the most respected institutions. People were very aware of family and local history and those stories created expectations and suggested past adventures that were becoming increasingly distant to the present generation. Reynold’s notes that upon Hemingway’s return from World War I, this landscape had changed:

he returned to find that the Village had disappeared. Landmarks remained, but the quiet moral order, the sense of absolute rightness, the safe haven of home were gone. That world had been disintegrating, barely noticed, beneath his feet since he was twelve. After the war, young Hemingway entered the new age, taking with him the values formed in his first world, the one he had lost, the one he never wrote about. (15)

Reynolds is correct in saying that Hemingway never wrote about Oak Park specifically, but much of his early writing contains that struggle between past history and values, particularly what he gained from living in the Midwest, and the disorientation of a newly evolving world where those values are both gone forever and strongly ridiculed within the new “modern” perspective even in their absence. Oak Park had not necessarily
changed that drastically, as the “landmarks remained,” but Hemingway himself had
changed significantly. Hemingway’s time away from the Midwest, his experiences
viewing war firsthand, and the subtle changes that were taking place within Oak Park
while he was gone, contributed to changing his worldview and his writing in a very short,
and rapidly paced, period of time.

One of the ways many Midwestern writers tried to establish distance between
themselves and their home region was to condemn the restrictive sense of morality they
felt governed the local culture. The Midwest was often stereotyped as a place of strong
family values and upstanding, morally acceptable citizens, a perception that often
stemmed more from seeking an idyllic way of life than from actual characteristics. In
light of the changing modern social climate, while this moralizing was still a strong part
of American society, the way that young people were perceiving the world and acting in a
more liberated fashion made the conventional perspectives seem antiquated. Therefore,
as many of these Midwestern expatriates were part of this new youthful movement in
literature and society, their writing denounced many of the old ways of doing things in
favor of the new. Robert McAlmon,² building on his own history living in various
Midwestern small towns while he was growing up, demonstrates some of these repressive
social expectations in his novel Village: As It Happened Through a Fifteen Year Period
(1924). McAlmon’s novel traces the evolution of the small town of Wentworth, South
Dakota, starting around the turn of the century as it changes and is influenced by modern
times. In discussing the lives and concerns of various individuals and families in the
town, a word that appears again and again throughout the text is “scandal.” The citizens
of Wentworth are more concerned with the business of their neighbors than with their own lives and any suggestion of impropriety is often met with town gossip and harsh judgment. A baby coming too soon after a marriage, the questioning of young ladies’ reputations in light of village gossip, or the financial situation of various families in town is deemed open to the observation and discussion of the town citizens. In many situations, McAlmon highlights how people are often unfairly judged by their peers when the town does not know all the facts. While not entirely condemning the way the town behaves, he does show the limited point of view that the town holds. This insular thinking, limiting the town gossip to individual affairs rather than being concerned with larger issues (and especially the diligence with which the town minutely examines those local affairs), makes the town look even more outdated and repressive. For writers like McAlmon, the circumstances that the town found so scandalous were elements of what they saw as simply the world around them. As subjects like sex became gradually less prohibited, younger writers like McAlmon saw no reason to morally demonize them like much of the society around them did.

Dawn Powell’s The Tenth Moon (1932) deals with similar small town simplicity, as two individuals who see themselves as artists find that they are unable to sustain their creativity in light of the environment they are in. Connie Benjamin, a failed opera singer turned housewife, has sunk into a routine life in Dell River, albeit a routine that does not include much socialization in the town, as she feels she does not fit in. She gains hope that with the arrival of Blaine Decker, a concert pianist turned schoolteacher, that she will find a kindred spirit. The two become friends, holding conversations and building a
relationship of sustaining illusions about what the two of them could have accomplished in life, which compensates for the ideas of the town around them. They see themselves as more knowledgeable about art and above the simple local musical acts that the town accepts as culture. Powell explains, “Decker liked to think of himself as someone, unlike the provincials with whom his life was cast, who was constantly at the spring of things, living a rich, full sort of life” (223-24). Inevitably, this illusion fails when countered with the reality of Connie’s illness and subsequent death, leaving Blaine back where he began, with his own failed dreams and the harshness of reality once again. In these novels, as well as in many others, Powell draws conclusions through her characters that are common to the work of many Midwestern expatriates of this time, highlighting the inadequacy of the Midwest to fulfill individuals and sustain creative souls, particularly when the region is contrasted with the possibilities that can be attained elsewhere.

The desire of these Midwestern writers to leave the region placed them in more prominent literary and artistic circles; in essence, they sought the same type of artistic influence and camaraderie that they felt missing in their home region. These Midwestern expatriates gained their reputations in literary history by playing significant social and artistic roles in the larger modernist community. The physical distance from the Midwest combined with their active participation in these artistic circles made it easier for critics and for themselves to define themselves as independent of the region. These were writers who were in Paris to see Sylvia Beach publish James Joyce’s *Ulysses* (1922) and many helped smuggle copies into the United States. In Robert McAlmon’s case, he wrote in his autobiography about helping Joyce to type sections of the
manuscript (118-19). These writers were close to many of the editors and publishers of the little magazines that were so prevalent at the time, many of which championed experimental writing. Hemingway helped Ford Madox Ford edit issues of *The Transatlantic Review*. John Herrmann worked on *transition.* McAlmon was another prominent figure in the area of publishing, having founded a little magazine in 1920 with William Carlos Williams in New York called *Contact*. His work on this little magazine would later expand into the Contact Publishing Company, which published the early work of Hemingway, Herrmann’s first novel, poems by Williams, and female modernists such as Gertrude Stein and Djuna Barnes. Small publishing companies like the one run by McAlmon were often the only way for experimental or beginning artists to gain an audience and circulation for their writing. Glenway Wescott was involved in helping with small publishing ventures in Paris as well. As individuals active in shaping the literary climate of the time, most of these writers participated in literary circles in ways that solidified their reputations as modernists and innovators more than regionalists.

Despite the efforts to distance themselves, the Midwestern expatriates never traveled quite as far as they claimed from their home territory. While many of these writers would battle against the title of being a “regional” or “provincial” writer, the critics often noted the influence of the Midwest on their work. Their memories and experiences lingered despite the physical distance. As much as these writers wanted their works to be accepted on more general or stylistic grounds instead of their Midwestern settings, the region played a strong factor in what they wrote. In “The Literary Spotlight,” an article in the March 1922 issue of *The Bookman*, Edmund Wilson
describes the important contributions to F. Scott Fitzgerald’s literary success. Wilson explains that it is important to know that Fitzgerald comes from the middle west—from St. Paul, Minnesota. Fitzgerald is as much of the middle west of large cities and country clubs as [Sinclair] Lewis is of the middle west of the prairies and little towns. What we find in him is much what we find in the prosperous strata of these cities; sensitivity and eagerness for life without a sound basis of culture and taste; a brilliant structure of hotels and exhilarating social activities built not on the eighteenth century but simply on the prairie. And it seems to me a great pity that he has not written more of the west; it is perhaps the only milieu that he thoroughly understands; when he approaches the east, he brings to it the standards of the wealthy west—the preoccupation with display, the love of magnificence and jazz, the vigorous social atmosphere of amiable flappers and youths comparatively unpoisoned as yet by the snobbery of the east. (22)

As this review was published early in Fitzgerald’s career, it speaks not only to his early publications and novels but also presciently of the rest of his body of work. While Fitzgerald did move away from the Midwest for some of his novels and stories, some of his strongest writing is based on his memories of the people and places from that region. Fitzgerald’s work was recognized and appreciated, particularly in the 1920s, for being innovative but much of that work had Midwestern undercurrents as well.
Even with Glenway Wescott’s desire to say goodbye to his past, the Midwest was a significant factor in his fiction as well. An article on Wescott in 1931 highlighted the significance of Wisconsin on his writing. Examining the breadth of Wescott’s work from his initial publication, *The Apple of the Eye* (1924) to *The Babe’s Bed* (a limited edition publication released in the fall of 1930), Dayton Kohler states in his essay, “Glenway Wescott: Legend-Maker,” that for Wescott

‘Wisconsin’ remains a heritage from which he cannot escape; a deep loyalty of the blood more powerful than his reasoning protests against a hostile environment, an ability to see in meagre and monotonous lives a depth of life that has experienced much in conflict with the reluctant soil. This inanimate contact with a vaguely possessive spirit has determined his viewpoint and his philosophy. Even when he carries his characters to remote scenes a bright impressionism broods over his pages, a regional ghost dominating the present from the darkness of the past. (145)

Despite Wescott’s desire to come to terms with and eventually separate from his past, Kohler’s comments imply that achieving that goal is a difficult one. Wescott’s ties to his home region are not so easy to sever and, in fact, form one of the strengths of his writing. The conflict he inevitably faces, like so many other Midwestern expatriates, between the future he desires and the ancestral past that informs his identity adds to the complexity of his written work.

Midwestern Modernists
Due to the influences of modernism, particularly the direct effects of observing the experimentation and stylistic changes taking place firsthand, and the lingering effects of regionalism and the Midwest, the two genres merged in the work of Midwestern expatriates making their attempts at modernism regionally influenced. While this regional influence was largely dismissed in light of the other characteristics of their work and the stigma surrounding regional writing at the time, the modernist and artistic techniques these writers adopted were infused with their Midwestern experiences and memories. Within the modernist artistic community, the Midwesterners were learning and adapting to the changes they were seeing take place in the literature produced around them. Responding to the changing social and political landscape, writers of the time sought ways to respond to a world that was different from that experienced in their childhoods or by their parents’ generation. Many of the writers who surrounded these Midwesterners took to stylistic extremes in conveying their confusion or dissatisfaction with the world. Many of the characteristics of modernist writing appeared in various texts of the time: abstract images and symbols, stream of consciousness writing, erratic juxtapositions, fragmented worldviews.

While Midwestern writers never adopted these conventions in their entirety, these elements did influence some of their work. Not always as fully experimental as many of the high modernists, the Midwestern expatriates played with nonlinear narratives, incongruous juxtapositions of genre and form, and characters and subjects that had not always been traditionally accepted. Books like Fitzgerald’s *This Side of Paradise*, which contained an eclectic collage of prose passages, poetry, and theatrical dialogue compiled
together to tell the story of a contemporary young man coming of age in the 1920s, were initially avoided by publishers. When Scribner’s published it, it was a book out of character from their conventional choices; however, the novel went on to great acclaim and sold a large number of copies. Hemingway’s composition of *In Our Time* was unconventional in that it alternated short stories with shorter vignettes, juxtaposing different images and ideas. Robert McAlmon, in composing the stories in *A Hasty Bunch*, defied conventional notions of editing, as his title implies, and tried to capture stories in an immediate and often fragmentary style. In some ways this experimentation made the Midwestern content that many of these authors used in their early work more acceptable, as the Midwesternness could be overlooked or diminished in importance in comparison to the novels’ perceived attempts at higher artistic accomplishments. By adding aspects of the higher artistry and experimentation called for by contemporary artistic circles, critics placed more value on the work of the Midwestern expatriates than the Midwestern local writers as they could critique the novels and stories for something more than their landscape or provincial characters.

While their use of modernist style may have been more hesitant, their use of modernist themes was adopted wholeheartedly. The goal of much modernist art was to play with perception in order to find a better sense of order in the universe or to undermine the false concepts and beliefs that much of society seemed to blindly embrace. The experimental styles were one way of conveying those ideas, and while Midwesterners did not become nearly as inventive in their writing they believed in trying to reach that same ultimate goal. Modernist themes helped to provide a way for
Midwestern writers to respond to the changes they saw taking place in their region and in their world at large. The stories they had been told growing up about the founding of the region and the exploration of the country were inadequate to help them come to terms with the world they were experiencing now. Influenced by writers like Sinclair Lewis, Sherwood Anderson, and other critics of the Midwest, the Midwestern expatriate writers tried to critique the region, and thereby much of the world around them, in a similar fashion. These writers saw authors like Lewis being applauded for exposing the small town in *Main Street* as being a place of repression and small-mindedness. In a similar way, George Willard, the main character of Anderson’s *Winesburg, Ohio* (1919), exposed the eccentricities of the small town but ultimately left the place behind him in pursuit of larger things. For Dawn Powell, the Midwest represented the restrictive home which so many of her characters left behind for places like New York, seeking places that provided them with unrestricted amusement. Louis Bromfield used the Midwest to show the contrasts and changes that were taking place due to industrialization and the shift that was taking place in terms of how the old generation interacted with the world in contrast to that of the young. While writers like Powell, Bromfield, Fitzgerald and most of the Midwestern expatriates stayed more conventional in their writing styles, they nonetheless had many of the same concerns as modernist authors and sought through their writing to express their thoughts about the changing world around them.

The prevalence of Midwestern writers participating in literary circles did not go unnoticed and critics speculated on the influence those writers might have on literature as a whole. The use of the region by Midwestern expatriates, particularly early on, gave the
Midwest a place of prominence in literature that was being published. Ford Madox Ford, editor of *The Transatlantic Review*, who received manuscripts from and published a variety of Midwestern writers in the 1920s, felt that literature overall was infused with a quality he termed “Middle Westishness.” In the preface to the collection *Transatlantic Stories* (1926), Ford states that all people have this quality and defines Middle Westishness as the result of the world conquering the far west and losing a sense of frontier. People are therefore caught in the middle, wanting to be free of the restrictions of the East and yet having no new places to truly explore. This universal phenomenon, according to Ford,

is in fact a world movement, the symptom of an enormous disillusionment . . . and an enormous awakening. In England it is produced by a disillusionment with regard to education and as to the past; in the United States it is produced by a disillusionment with regard, precisely, to the other Wests in the world, by a sudden conviction that the world—even the world as seen in the central western states of North America—is a humdrum affair, and bound to be a humdrum affair for all humanity. (xxi)

Ford’s statement implies that the manuscripts by Midwestern writers that he considered for *The Transatlantic Review* were not all that different than many of the manuscripts from other regions. His comments provide support for the argument that Midwestern writers deserve equal examination in comparison with the other writers who were publishing at that same time and suggest that regionalism, at least in a Midwestern context, relates to the modernist movement taking place. Something about the tone of
Midwestern writers matched many of those writing from other regions or countries, suggesting that they were speaking of common ideas and attitudes that were common to all writers, not just those from the Midwest. 

The very fact that so many of these Midwestern expatriate writers returned again and again to the region in their writing nullified the argument they thought they were making. Rather than discarding their Midwestern past and refashioning themselves in light of the modern present, these writers were merging the two perspectives together. Only by reconciling their Midwesternness with the modern were they able to truly begin to achieve something in their art and find solutions for the modern crises they were facing. Despite achieving recognition for aspects of their work that most often ignored their regionalism and their own desire to cast off those ties, these Midwestern writers were in many ways as regionally oriented as their fellow writers still in the region. They may have been more overtly active in the literary movements of the time, but they were also participating, at times perhaps subconsciously, in the regionalism movement that affecting and shaping American writing in the 1920s and 1930s.

Both modernist and regionalist writers had a troubled association with landscape and place. In the works of canonical modernist writers such as James Joyce and T.S. Eliot, place has a significant role, particularly as point of reflection. For Joyce, despite leaving Dublin behind it haunts all of his writing, serving as setting and symbol in his commentary on modern lives and society. T.S. Eliot’s image of the waste land characterized and colored perceptions of contemporary life and landscape. Regionalists often have a reputation for reflecting more favorably on a region or location than
modernists; however even in that affinity they tend to negotiate a type of love/hate dichotomy in terms of their relationship with place, trying to reconcile their own dreams and identity with their surroundings. The Midwestern expatriates, in fleeing the region physically, thought they were leaving the past behind. Their writing tells a different story. Dawn Powell continued to have Midwesterners appear in her work, even when she was more focused on writing novels about New York. Hemingway drew on the Midwest at various points in his career, mostly for short stories, but the influence continued until he died. While the Midwest was not the primary location for all of their writing, for most Midwestern expatriates it played a significant role in their early work. Some of this may be attributed to the writers writing about subjects they were more knowledgeable about or that they were closer to out of comfort and a need for focus. Yet their choice to use this subject matter and setting so early in their careers after fleeing this exact place is significant in that despite being elsewhere they decided to turn backward in their art.

Trying to understand the divide between past and present is a large focus in many Midwestern expatriate novels, particularly in regard to the relationship with the land. Many families lived in towns or on farms for several generations, a way of life that seemed common until modern innovation and ideals began to divide the generations even further. As many in the young generation left the region, they were left trying to reconcile their hopes for a new life and yet the tradition and stability they were leaving behind. In Wescott’s acclaimed novel *The Grandmothers* (1927), Alwyn Tower is looking back on his family history, tracing the lives of different family members. He recollects from the distance of several thousand miles, contrasting the lives of his
ancestors with those of the European communities where he is now an expatriate. As Alwyn looks back, he finds that all of his family members express a sense of connection to the Wisconsin landscape, whether it stems from a physical desire to be in that space or an obligatory desire to return to the land where they were born and where their family lives. His ruminations place an emphasis on the pioneer spirit that motivated Alwyn’s ancestors and settled the land. In looking at the past, Alwyn is trying to reconcile those ideas with his own present, as he enters into a more modern period of time in the early twentieth century. People no longer seem driven by the same love for the land or for a particular place. He questions at one point, “Did modern men and women in cities have any curiosity about old times, any interest in the way people lived or had lived in the country? Probably little or none. He knew that very soon he would be living in some city or another—not where his relatives had passed their uneasy lives and died, or got ready to die. He might try to write something about them . . .” (Wescott 356). Alwyn’s generation breaks the family’s link to the land and with it a link to the old way of life. The emphasis in Wescott’s text on “modern men and women” firmly establishes the generational distance from ancestral histories Alwyn had been recording. The past had an uncertain place in the modern present. Alwyn is distant from the land where he was raised and yet feels he is leaving something behind, although he is unsure of what exactly that “something” is.

A Midwestern and Modernist Search
Being torn between the urge to stay in the region and the desire to explore the world is something common to many Midwestern authors and the characters in their novels and stories. These individuals were caught in a perpetual search for a sense of completeness or seeking to satiate their sense of adventure. In the Midwest, much of this indecisiveness was attributed to a loss of the frontier. Meridel Le Sueur, a Midwestern proletarian writer, stated in one of her speeches that the drive of immigrants and pioneers to the Midwest characterized the region with a sense of restlessness: “My family for two generations have moved from place to place, something better further on, something opening up. All the itching feet, renegades, and banshees from the East came to the Middle West and we have been howling to the moon ever since, wanting something.” (135). Other Midwestern writers were also caught up in this momentum, as Michael Reynolds states that Hemingway’s life was driven by a restlessness to pursue adventure like many of his heroes, “Like Teddy Roosevelt, Hemingway was always looking for his own west, where a self-reliant man could prove himself” (51-52). Searching for new opportunity and excitement was indigenous to the region and, since it was also a search being taken up by many modernists, the authors who were both Midwestern and influenced by modernism found themselves inevitably caught up in perpetual movement. Louis Bromfield uses an epigraph to describe the situation in his novel, The Green Bay Tree (1924):

Life is hard for our children. It isn’t as simple as it was for us. Their grandfathers were pioneers and the same blood runs in their veins, only they haven’t a frontier any longer. They stand . . . these children of ours . . .
Bromfield’s comments seem most apt when applied to the movement of many Midwestern writers during the 1920s and 1930s. They looked to the East and to Europe as an alternate, and yet inadequate, new frontier or new location for exploration.

Glenway Wescott confirms this eastward trend with some of his observations in Good-bye Wisconsin:

there are already a fair number of Middle-Westerners about the world; a sort of vagrant chosen race like the Jews. It is our better luck to leave behind in our Palestine a teeming, prospering family, to fall back on in case of disaster and to save us, meanwhile, from the nervousness of vagabonds who really have no native land left. But we are more likely to call New York, that palace-hotel, home; the midland gets little glory and even less entertainment from our activities. A great maternal source of, among other things, ability and brutal ardor and ingenuity and imagination—scarcely revisited, abandoned, almost unable to profit by its fruitfulness in men. (26)

Wescott’s comment reaffirms the undeniable connection that Midwesterners have with their home region, and yet highlights the problematic relationship that results from that connection. It is a region left behind, but a place left in reserve to draw upon in memories and history. David D. Anderson notes this long history of movement among
both characters and writers in Midwestern writing, particularly during these decades, commenting that “These literal movements of people, who have left the Midwest to seek greater fulfillment in the East or beyond, provide the factual foundations for the metaphorical movement which informs much of the literature that has come out of the Midwest, just as, in many cases, the writers themselves were part of that literal migration” (133). The restlessness felt by many of these characters, literary representations of feelings the authors also had, were symbolic of a larger restlessness plaguing the region and the country at large. These Midwestern writers and their characters are searching for something of substance to help define their lives, without quite knowing what that something might look like or where it might be found. This is an aspect of the restlessness that characterizes modernism at large and that Ford speaks of as he comments on the world movement of “middlewestishness.”

Significant events of the time, most importantly World War I, further encouraged the restlessness already inherent in many Midwestern souls. Many of the men went off to fight and upon their return no longer found the Midwest to be the same place that they had left, at least in their perceptions. Ernest Hemingway demonstrates this in In Our Time (1925), as the experiences of Nick Adams in northern Michigan are contrasted with war experiences, juxtaposing the safety and security of the Midwest with the uncertainty of the rest of the world. The stories in the book progress through a period of learning, experience, and then reflection for Nick, as he grows throughout the collection. The last story, “Big Two-Hearted River,” brings him back to the same environment of his childhood and adolescence, but brings him back a changed man due to his outside
experiences. While the landscape that Nick finds in Michigan is not the same as he remembers, it still manages to function as a place of solace and rejuvenation. In contrast, Nick Carraway, in *The Great Gatsby* (1925), wanted to get away to a place where there was more distraction and excitement, finding the Midwest too stable to provide him with many opportunities to forget the war. Nick explains early in the novel that his migration eastward is inspired by his experiences, “I participated in that delayed Teutonic migration known as the Great War. I enjoyed the counter-raid so thoroughly that I came back restless. Instead of being the warm center of the world, the Middle West now seemed like the ragged edge of the universe” (3). Nick’s war experiences change his sense of self and his association with the places of his past, most notably the Midwest, in a way that leaves him searching for something to ground or comfort him.

Characters such as Nick Carraway and Nick Adams are indicative of a changed point of view in fiction, as Lewis Bromfield notes when reflecting on the changes taking place in early twentieth century novels and how that change was encouraged by the war:

> The frankness, cynicism, and bawdiness of our day is much less the product of any revolt than it is of the times. By 1914 we had already begun to tire of the special prudery and romance of our grandfathers. The War finished those things. A war makes the world frank and bawdy and terrestrial. Otherwise it would be endurable. And the young writers who emerged from the War did so with a bad attack of bitterness and disillusionment. (“Novel” 289-90)
The Midwest no longer functioned for the Midwestern expatriates in a way that fulfilled their needs, partially because many of these writers no longer knew what their needs were. Times were changing and the past was inadequate. Their characters are caught up in chronic restlessness that defied the stability of their Midwestern lives. Nick Adams and Nick Carraway are representations of this, as both characters return to the Midwest after the war and are unable to find the reassurance and stability the region formerly supplied. Leaving the Midwest seemed one way to cope with the loss and confusion brought about by the war and changing times, resulting in the writers and their characters searching for more meaning and resolution in their lives. These texts are similar to many other modernist novels and stories that show change or fragmentation as a result of the war.

The complicated relationship with region is shown further as characters in many Midwestern expatriate texts strike out for new places and yet end up returning to the Midwest. Some, like Nick Carraway, return because what they tried to find in moving away from the Midwest was not any better than what they left. However, after observing the life of Jay Gatsby and, in particular, his tragic fall, Nick no longer wants to live in the East anymore, connecting it with people who are empty and shallow, the type of people who attend Gatsby’s parties but are too busy to attend his funeral. Toward the end of the novel, when he is explaining why he chose to return to the Midwest, he draws on his memories of returning from school at Christmas time, stating,

That’s my Middle West—not the wheat or the prairies or the lost Swede towns, but the thrilling returning trains of my youth, and the street lamps
and sleigh bells in the frosty dark and the shadows of holly wreaths thrown by lighted windows on the snow. I am part of that, a little solemn with the feel of those long winters, a little complacent from growing up in the Carraway house in a city where dwellings are still called through decades by a family’s name. [. . .]

Even when the East excited me most, even when I was most keenly aware of its superiority to the bored, sprawling, swollen towns beyond the Ohio, with their interminable inquisitions which spared only the children and the very old—even then it had for me a quality of distortion. (177)

The East is perceived by Midwesterners as a place of promise and opportunity, a place that will distract them and provide fun alternatives at the expense of all real emotions. In finding only emptiness and superficiality during his time in the East, Nick’s world is further distorted and more difficult for him to understand. The Midwest may not be Nick’s ideal home, but it is a place that he understands and is part of, a place where he feels more secure. While some of the oppressiveness of that security was what caused him to leave the region in search of other things, it is also the quality that draws him back after seeing that the rest of the world has far less security or predictability. The Midwest has shaped who Nick is as a person and despite his desire to leave that behind it affects the way that he perceives the world.

As in the work produced by many regional writers, landscape and place were not all that easy to define or categorize. The Midwesterners had attachments to the region,
particularly because of its long history and customs, but they were often at a loss as to how it fit in with the changing world around them. The Midwestern expatriates were tied to their ancestors and the customs they had grown up with in the region despite all their efforts to leave them behind. Their relation to place was regional, albeit manifested differently due to their exposure to more experimental literary techniques and their reflection from a greater distance. While writers who stayed in the region were more likely to feel favorably toward the land and traditions, the writers who left were attached in a lingering love/hate relationship with the Midwest that infused and shaped much of their writing. This shows through the ambivalent reflections and nostalgic associations so many of their characters have to the Midwest in leaving the region or reflecting on it from afar.

Alternatives to the Midwest

Characters daydreaming about better places to live and having more interesting lives is certainly not new to literature, but the novels and stories being published by Midwestern expatriate writers in the 1920s and 1930s made this hope seem like an inherent regional trait. Through reading many of the texts, a reader could easily draw the conclusion that the only people who were satisfied or happy living in the Midwest were those who were simple-minded or who had given up on ever achieving anything more in their lives. Almost consistently the impulse on the part of characters from various experiences and backgrounds is to leave the Midwest as quickly as possible. In “Absolution,” Fitzgerald contrasts the image of the excitement that the world can contain
against the blandness of a small North Dakota town. Many residents of this small town are questioning their place in the world, particularly as it relates to their moral and religious identity. In a meeting between Rudolph Miller, a young local boy, and Father Schwartz, the local priest, that bookends the story (divided by a passage of narration that provides the substance of their discussion), the two individuals are caught up in their own respective struggles to come to terms with the idea of leading moral lives and yet being faced with the temptations of life. The priest, caught up in his own conflict, dispenses the cryptic advice that “when a whole lot of people get together in the best places things go glimmering all the time,” warning that if Rudolph encounters this situation he should only appreciate it from afar, otherwise, “you’ll only feel the heat and the sweat and the life” (129-30). The town where the story takes place is not at all a place that contains glimmering things, only the hope of glimmering things that causes the conflict between living the upright life suggested by most of the town’s actions and the sins that occur when the sun goes down or that people admit to in confession. In this small town, certain more rigid expectations are held. In the rest of the world, like the amusement park that Father Schwartz uses as an example of a place that glimmers, more exciting things occur. The hopes and dreams of the characters feed this desire for excitement and the unknown world outside the Midwest, with its capacity for greater excitement and adventure, causes the Midwestern expatriates and their characters to see life elsewhere as a better alternative to their choices at home.

Most of these writers emphasize that rural or small town Midwestern life cannot possibly compare to that of the city or of life in the East or of Europe. Their characters
often start in small towns or Midwestern cities, but seek fortune and success anywhere
but in the region. Fitzgerald’s characters often appear drawn from some of his own life
experiences, being Midwesterners by birth who leave the region to find more exciting
lives elsewhere. The protagonist of This Side of Paradise (1920), Amory Blaine, is
attached to no real city according to the text, but his family has definite ties to the
Midwest, as his grandfather has an estate in Lake Geneva, Wisconsin, and he stays for a
brief period of time with relatives in Minneapolis. He leaves those connections behind to
attend school in the East, beginning a new life in an area that he believes more interesting
and invigorating than the one he left behind. The characters of The Great Gatsby are
almost entirely Midwestern, as Nick Carraway notes near the end of the novel, “I see now
that this has been a story of the West, after all—Tom and Gatsby, Daisy and Jordan and I,
were all Westerners, and perhaps we possessed some deficiency in common which made
us subtly unadaptable to Eastern life” (177). While set almost entirely in New York and
Long Island, the characters in the novel come from places like Chicago or Midwestern
small towns and have moved East in search of something more interesting or exciting.
Wescott, Hemingway, Powell, or almost any other expatriate Midwesterner also
addresses this shift from rural to urban in their works, a shift that is more about trying to
leave a Midwestern identity than gaining a city address. The possibilities elsewhere are
always contrasted with the possibilities left behind.

Characters in Dawn Powell’s novels also feel that life outside the Midwest
presents better opportunities. In The Happy Island (1938), usually classified as one of
her New York area novels, the Midwest features quite prominently. One of the main
characters, Prudence Bly, is from the small Ohio town of Silver City and many of her friends have moved from similar small town backgrounds to New York. The large number of individuals who perform this migration contribute to clever comments within the novel itself on the contrast of native New Yorkers versus the Midwesterners who had transplanted there. Upon establishing themselves in the city, most of the Midwesterners quite readily cast off their former identities in the interest of taking up much more exciting lives and wanting to fit in with their new way of life. Powell explains,

The friends of Prudence and the friends of Prudence’s friends were born, so far as each other knew, with a canapé in one hand and a dry martini in the other. Their roots, except for the documented Europeans, flung back to covered wagons, mining camps, village poolrooms, lonely farms on the prairie; but these parts were snapped off like admission coupons at the gates of the great city. Where had they met? On transatlantic steamers, in a star’s dressing room, at a duty dinner—for each other the past began there, the previous years were mere nourishment to the plant, the twisted underground roots were forgotten by the gay blossom. So Pinckney once lived in an Oklahoma oil town, shabby offspring of a telegraph operator? So Prudence grew up in Ohio flour bins? So Dol Lloyd came from generations of rich eccentrics in an Iowa town? So Van Deusen came from a broken-down Boston family? So what? These roots were buried, a whole dimension lost, until the day the flower itself faded and dropped, forgotten, into its cast off cradle. (46)
Despite casting off these roots, one of the main struggles in the novel is between Prudence and Jefferson Abbott, an old boyfriend from her hometown who has newly arrived in the city. While Jeff sees nothing but shallowness in the lives of Prudence and her friends, she still finds that she has feelings for him, so much so that she follows him back to Ohio to live on the farm. Even there, however, love is not enough and she returns to the craziness of her New York life, finding the small town as repressive, predictable, and bland as it had been when she had left in the first place. Powell’s contrasts between urban center and regional periphery further exemplify the lines people attempt to draw to moderate the confusion they feel over their dislocation and confused modern identity.

This search for further excitement outside of the Midwest in many ways embodies some of the spirit of modernism, in the way that modernist texts often pushed the boundaries of the conventional and tried to achieve higher or different artistic ends. The characters in these texts (along with the writers themselves) were searching for something more or something different. Writers like Ernest Hemingway, F. Scott Fitzgerald, Glenway Wescott, and others were concerned with discovering a larger world, particularly in capturing a larger sense of freedom and culture and the excitement that comes with discovering or experiencing those senses firsthand. Having grown up in fairly ordinary Midwestern families, they were part of a group of expatriate Midwestern writers who were searching for the extraordinary. Most of their writing contrasts the stability and ordinariness of the Midwest with the possibilities presented by the world found outside of that region. In many ways, this contrast serves as a symbol of the larger contrast taking place in the world at large, between the ways of the past and the potential
of the future. The Midwest was beginning to attain much of the “everywhere” or “anywhere” universality of its image during this time, partially through the work of these authors, who encouraged the idea through their writing of the Midwest being the foundation for many things, but a foundation that should be left behind. The Midwest was the center of the United States, what would later be termed the “heartland,” but a center that failed to answer the needs and demands of the young people like themselves trying to find or reconcile a sense of meaning in the universe. The Midwest was home, but the belief of these writers was that it was a home that needed to be left behind in order to grow or recognize a greater world.

There’s No Place Like Home

What complicated the lives of so many of these Midwestern writers is that the region was not so simple to leave behind. As their own lives and those of their characters show, cutting ties to the one stable center they had did not simply free them from all of the problems they saw within the Midwest, it often only resulted in making their own lives much more unstable. In addition, the very things that tied the more regional Midwesterners to the land still attracted the Midwestern expatriates. Many of the writers still had family members who lived in the Midwest, giving them unavoidable reminders of the world they were trying to leave behind. Many of them also underestimated the importance of place and the effects it can have on an individual. In the work of writers like Wescott and Powell, it becomes apparent that despite having moved elsewhere, these Midwesterners still bore the imprint of many of the qualities of the region, both those that
were admirable and also the very qualities they claimed to reject. Their preoccupation with Midwestern people and locations, particularly in the lingering influences the region had even beyond simply their early work, was a clear indication that their roots were harder to sever than they had anticipated. Midwestern writers during the early twentieth century, both those that stayed and those that left, were caught in a struggle to understand and define who they were in light of the changes taking place in the world. What Midwestern expatriate writers found was that they could not simply recreate or redefine themselves in whatever form they desired. They would always have an attachment to the Midwest.

The nostalgia that Midwestern writers had for the region was pervasive. The fact that so many of the expatriate Midwesterners freed themselves of the region and then chose to write about it from afar seems significant. Hemingway composed the Midwestern stories of *In Our Time* during his early years in Paris, far from the forests of northern Michigan where they are set. He wrote in the posthumously published *A Moveable Feast* (1964) that from a distance he could see the Michigan landscape better than if he was actually there. The nostalgia and reflection helped his writing. Fitzgerald had been away at school, attending prep school in the East and then later college at Princeton, spending only vacations in the Midwest, and yet still drew upon a Midwestern background for Amory Blaine in *This Side of Paradise*, the characters in *The Great Gatsby*, and used Midwestern locations for many of his early short stories. Robert McAlmon composed the stories of *A Hasty Bunch* and his novel *Village: As It Happened Through a Fifteen Year Period* while in New York and Europe, not South Dakota where
they are set. Glenway Wescott did not write any of his Midwestern novels until he had left the Midwest behind to live in the eastern part of the United States and various places in Europe. John Herrmann wrote his first Midwestern novel while in Paris, far from his native Michigan. These writers were experiencing other things and other places and yet chose instead to write about the places they had come from. To have such a large group of authors who lived outside the region, who in effect “escaped,” returning to the region for subject matter and as a place to reflect on more profound ideas like the state of modern society or modern man, seems hardly to have been coincidental. Even Ford Madox Ford, reflecting on the stories he collected in Paris during the 1920s for The Transatlantic Review, commented that,

> The Middle West was seething with literary impetus. It is no exaggeration to say that 80% of the manuscripts in English that I received came from west of Altoona and 40% of them were of such a level of excellence that one might just as well close ones’ eyes and take one at random as try to choose between them. It is true that a great proportion of them were obviously biographical in conception and all of them local in scene. But a just perception of one’s surroundings and of one’s own career form the first step towards a literature that shall be great in scope. (It Was 338-39)

Ford’s comments acknowledge both the prolific nature of Midwestern writers during the time, but also the significance of their subject matter. Even though Midwestern born writers were not always warmly embracing the Midwest in their writing, they were hardly leaving it behind. Like the writers who stayed within the region, they were finding the
Midwest symbolic or suggestive of something larger in the world and channeled that sense of meaning or nostalgia into their writing.

When Midwestern expatriate writers found themselves out in new and foreign places in the world, their memories of the Midwest were sustaining. Alwyn Tower, Wescott’s narrator in *The Grandmothers*, finds something of value in thinking back to his family’s history. In Europe, thinking back over the stories of his family, the Alwyn explains,

> Alwyn daydreaming in Austria, a little self-consciously a poet . . . And for a moment the well bred voices, the philosophies, the orchestras, were swept away. For a moment all Europe seemed less significant than the vicissitudes of pioneers, men who were anonymous unless they were somebody’s relatives. He did not quite like their suffering, their illiterate mysticism, their air of failure; but he understood them, or fancied that he did. It did not matter whether he liked them or not—he was their son. (18)

Wescott emphasizes Alwyn’s attempts to distance himself from his history through his disapproval and dislike for much of his ancestors’ way of life. However, Alwyn also sees a struggle in trying to leave that entirely behind. Still a descendant of those people, he is shaped and created through their experiences. He has distanced himself physically and mentally, and yet still ties linger between his present and the past, his life in Europe and his memories of the Midwest. The same kind of lingering ties that characterized Alwyn existed for many of the writers themselves. Fitzgerald speaks in letters of a nostalgic
attachment to St. Paul, telling one of his St. Paul friends that he would like his daughter, Scottie, to

have some sense of life in the middle-west + to have some friends there.

[. . .] My own heart is here as always, yet a part of me will always live in St. Paul which I think of as a tough + usually impolite titty and am indebted [sic] to for the ability to take it. [. . .] Its perhaps a weakness in myself that makes me cling to the civilized + sophisticated. But I want my daughter to know St. Paul. (Bruccoli and Dugan 432)

Despite never returning to live in St. Paul after 1922, Fitzgerald obviously felt there was still something valuable from experiencing life there. Hemingway had been bequeathed the family cottage in upper Michigan upon the death of his father and, while he never returned to spend any time up there, he never sold or gave up ownership of the cottage. These sort of sentimental gestures demonstrate the strong nostalgic pull the Midwest had for many writers despite their removal from the region and criticisms of it. They left and infrequently returned, but nonetheless were unable to clearly sever ties.

Many times, Midwestern expatriates left the region only to surround themselves with other Midwesterners, limiting their exposure to new types of people. The authors traveled in intersecting groups and their characters quite often do the same things. Hemingway, Fitzgerald, Wescott, Powell, and John Herrmann knew each other. Robert McAlmon was friends with most of them. Louis Bromfield was acquainted with many. While some of this can be equated with authors’ paths casually intersecting due to being in the same line of work, many of these individuals deliberately spent time together and
corresponded quite frequently, both as part of an expatriate group overseas and as individuals scattered in various parts of the United States. Many of these writers illustrate this same tendency in their novels and stories, as their characters also surround themselves with people from their own region. The main character in John Herrmann’s novel, *What Happens* (1926), Winifield Payne, feels uncomfortable in his New York job, stating, “The city was hostile to him. He would feel more at home in smaller provincial cities, where the people were more like his own Michigan people” (127). While Herrmann’s novel never specifically spells out what makes Michigan people different from those in New York or elsewhere, his statement does imply a sense of regional distinctiveness and the idea that there are similar sympathies or elements that can bond people from the same area together. For individuals who were fairly committed to the idea of transcending their Midwestern past, it seems telling that many of them still gravitated toward Midwesterners even when pursuing that regional freedom.

Because of the positive attention regarding their work on the region, many Midwestern expatriates often returned to writing about it even late in their careers. After spending so much time trying to get away from the region, they went back to the security of the Midwest as a setting trying to recapture some of their earlier success or find elements of themselves they had lost due to the passing of time. For some of these writers, they made this return after years of living in other regions of the country or the world. Fitzgerald would continue to draw on his Midwestern background for stories throughout his life, as the basis for projects like his Basil and Josephine stories, even after his move away. Hemingway was working on a Midwestern based Nick Adams story,
“The Last Good Country,” during the last decade of his life; the story was still unfinished at his death. Michael Reynolds notes in *Hemingway: The Final Years* that some of the appeal for Hemingway was in finding “the lake, the woods, and the trout exactly as he had left them, directions still running true. It was exactly like being there once more, only better, because he got to be Nick as a youth, not himself in his fifties” (255). Dawn Powell’s novels contained Midwestern characters right up to the end, despite their almost exclusively New York setting after 1934. She broke the New York pattern only for the publication of one more Midwestern novel, *My Home is Far Away* (1944), and dabbled with a sequel to the book for the rest of her life but would never complete it. Louis Bromfield continued to incorporate Midwestern characters in books throughout his career, even if they were not set in the Midwest. These were writers who had broken free of the Midwest, who had achieved varying amounts of success, and who no longer had to use the Midwest in their writing, but they still chose to return. These writing ventures often did not bring the acclaim the writers hoped or find their way to completion, particularly as the type of stories they were creating were tougher to sell as literature was changing after 1940; however, it still shows the strength of connection these writers inevitably had with the Midwest, a connection that did not disappear simply because they left the region.

Tradition was a strong force holding many Midwesterners to the region, and ties and customs stemming from the area were hard to break. Louis Bromfield commented in a forward to his novel *A Good Woman* (1927) that his first four novels could be published as one under the title “Escape.” His early novels all concern the idea of changing times
and the effect that it has on different generations, particularly when those individuals attempt to escape the past. *The Green Bay Tree* (1924) and *Possession* (1925) are the two novels within this series that deal the most strongly with the Midwest, in particular “the Town” a place founded by pioneers that evolved into steel mills and industry. The characters of these novels are shaped by their pioneer pasts by having inherent qualities of restlessness and a desire to achieve and conquer new things attributed to their ancestors. These characteristics create difficulties for the children of the Town as the younger generation has a hard time applying these older ideas and beliefs to a new modern world. The characters in Bromfield’s novels manage to escape the town, but it is never entirely a clean break. Lily Shane, despite a move to Paris in *The Green Bay Tree* and creating a successful, independent life there, is nonetheless attached to the town where she was raised and her childhood home there, Cypress Hill. In a state of delirium after a frightening experience, Lily’s mind merges the images of war with the images of industrialization from her hometown. Upon hearing the sound of gunfire rolling across the countryside as World War I becomes part of her reality, “Lily would sit up and talk wildly in a mixture of French and English of Mills and monsters, of cauldrons, of white hot metal that absorbed the very bodies of men. The distant rumbling was for all the world like the pounding which had enveloped Cypress Hill in the days of Lily’s youth” (314). While Bromfield is obviously making a comment combining the destructive forces of war and industrialization, he is also making a comment on the insidious nature of place. Even though Lily has lived abroad for years, the memories of her childhood and her attachment to that place are as strong as ever. In *Possession*, Lily’s cousin Ellen
Tolliver finds that the Town has strong ties for her as well despite her distance. After achieving success as a pianist with the stage name Lilli Barr, Ellen is invited back to the Town to perform and has conflicted feelings about doing so,

She found herself brought up sharply against the problem of the Town. They wanted her there; they were, strangely enough, proud of her. […] She had left them all believing that she would never turn back, believing that by stepping aboard the express for the East she had turned her back forever upon a place which, in honest truth, she despised. But she had not escaped; there were ties, intangible and tenuous, which bound her to the place. There were times when she was even betrayed by a certain nostalgia for the sight of the roaring black furnaces, the dark empty rooms of Shane’s Castle, closed now and barren of all life; the decaying smoke-stained houses that stood far back from all the streets surrounded by green lawns and old trees. (360)

Tradition and habit have left lingering influences on the characters in Bromfield’s novels, and despite their escape from the Midwest, they still find a sense of attachment to the place they left behind. Escape is not as easy as it appears.

The region still maintains healing properties for the characters in several Midwestern expatriate novels. Even though many authors are trying to leave the region behind, the place they leave behind still carries a lot of power. The region contains some of the healing power for modern problems that so many writers who stayed within the region noted or alluded in their novels. Hemingway, in In Our Time, crafted a book
where the Midwest figures prominently as a place of learning and also a place of rejuvenation. In some of the early Nick Adams stories in the collection, the Michigan landscape is a place where Nick learns lessons about life, being presented with the reality of dying in “Indian Camp” and navigating personal relationships in stories like “The End of Something” and “The Three Day Blow.” Nick’s education in many ways comes full circle by the end of the collection, as he returns to Michigan in “Big Two-Hearted River.” Hemingway wrote later in life that “Big Two-Hearted River” was about Nick returning to Michigan after having been through various war experiences. The structure of the novel confirms this, starting with Nick as a young boy and ending with his return to Michigan as a man, with an interlude of several other stories in-between, stories that depict war or European experiences. In the beginning of “Big Two-Hearted River,” Nick’s fishing trip appears to be a hopeful solution to problems that are never fully specified. The blissful simplicity of Nick’s experiences camping and fishing along the river begin to rejuvenate him. Early on in the story, shortly after leaving the train and beginning his hike to the campsite, a reader learns, “It was hard work walking up-hill. His muscles ached and the day was hot, but Nick felt happy. He felt he had left everything behind, the need for thinking, the need to write, other needs. It was all back of him” (179). The ritual of setting up camp and going through the particular motions of getting ready for fishing steady Nick. There is purpose and certainty in these actions. When fishing, Nick enjoys the experience, catching several fish but trying to stay clear of the swamp, despite the fact that he knows there are probably good fish to be found there. The swamp represents a bigger amount of uncertainty for Nick, an experience he is not sure he wants to have at
the moment. The story still shows how the process of being on this trip has helped to heal or rejuvenate Nick, as it ends optimistically, “He climbed the bank and cut up into the woods, toward the high ground. He was going back to camp. He looked back. The river just showed through the trees. There were plenty of days coming when he could fish the swamp” (212). The experiences Nick has help him to find some strength and happiness, enough so that Hemingway’s closing lines imply that eventually Nick will be able to face more uncertainty, more of the “tragic adventure” that he refers to in fishing the swamp, and take on greater challenges. The region and the rituals that are common to it rejuvenate Nick and help him begin healing from his experiences elsewhere.

Christopher Bennett, the main character of Dawn Powell’s The Story of a Country Boy (1934), returns to his family farm because he has no other choice, but in that ending is suggested a new beginning. His story was a fear shared by many an expatriate Midwesterner, as the thought of returning to the place they escaped was not at all appealing and yet a very real possibility in light of any personal economic hardships. Through what starts as a small summer job in a foundry, Chris works his way up to end up the general manager of the company. This promotion moves him away from the future he expected, inheriting his father’s farm, to a world of new possibilities funded by his increasing status and wealth. Chris takes pride in being a hard working man, proud of his small town roots. He sees himself as no different than many of the men who work under him at the factory. Eventually though, the wealth and politics that come with his position start to distort who he is. Chris starts believing more in the empty encouragement of the executives that he works with and begins to flaunt his wealth.
When the company falls on hard times and the men strike, even protesting by attacking Chris on his arrival at the factory one day, the life he has been living begins to deteriorate. Losing money and eventually his job, the only alternative Chris and his family are left with is a return to his father’s farm. While once Chris had spoken of a return to his father’s farm as a choice or an alternative, using it as a badge of how he had not outgrown his roots, now because it is a forced situation he beings to realize how much he has grown away from where he began. He reflects,

Here he was, coming home to a farm he used to imagine, but what had for so many years seemed the fair reward for enduring the city now was the punishment for failing in the city. How he used to picture this fine day, the taint of cities washed from his hands, free once more to work on the land! He could not remember just when the dream had faded, any more than he could remember when a pair of peg-top pants stopped being the mark of fashion and became ridiculous. He could not fix in memory the shadowy line that separated his being a success and his desire to be one. He thought, without understanding the motivation, of all the wires he had tried to pull to keep in that business he had once despised. He had been so sure he had despised it and all the people connected with it—yet something inside him must have belonged there all the time or wanted to belong there once he had savored it. (298)

The conflict between city life and returning to the farm is a common one in Midwestern literature. In fact, it is a conflict common to the writers themselves, as much of Chris’s
motivations are mirrored in comments Dawn Powell made in her diary shortly after this novel was published, regarding her own situation of trying to find success writing in New York: “Fear is such an utterly disrupting force—fears of no publisher, fear of cringing once more before debtors, fear of being trapped in the Middle West again and dependent on relatives—so that this panic creeps in my pen or typewriter, and nothing is possible” (qtd. in Page 100). Chris’s return is in essence a failure, but it suggests a new beginning and a chance to reconnect with the sense of self he has lost. The man that he had become was no longer based in the principles he had grown up with, and returning to the farm becomes a way for Chris to once again become comfortable with himself and his surroundings.

Many writers who stayed within the Midwest found comfort, solace, and hope there to combat the effects of war and modernization. The writers who left the region, despite hoping for other solutions, found that their search ultimately led them back to where they began. These expatriate Midwesterners attempted to redefine themselves as someone independent of their region, but their lives and their work demonstrate that instead of reinventing themselves they ended up with what could be better described as something akin to a split personality. Physically, they succeeded in breaking free from the region, but emotionally a part of them was always tethered back there. They had no desire to return, yet, something about those lingering memories gave them a sense of place or stability in light of the changes taking place in their lives and in the world around them. While at times the region seemed to operate as it had for Nick Carraway as a “ragged edge,” at least in memory it often functioned as the “warm center of the world.”
These writers were also at the mercy of an artistic world that often emphasized that small town, provincial perspectives were meant to be scoffed at, and while they tried to comply, the contradiction inherent in much of their writing implies that while they did not always agree with Midwestern ways, they could not condemn them as entirely either. As literary modernism looks at images of fragmentation due to the changes of modern times, the conflict within Midwestern writing, particularly through Midwestern expatriate writers like these, highlights the very real fragmentation of self that was taking place, as these writers tried to figure out where they belonged in the world and where their loyalties were placed.

Similar to the work of Midwestern-based writers, the expatriates found much of their solution in the very place they thought was the source of their problems. The Midwest, as a place that symbolized much of the “typical” American lifestyle, served as a location to better address and understand the issues facing contemporary society and the possibilities that existed for solving those issues. Through their novels and stories, the Midwestern expatriate writers tried to define a new sense of identity and make sense of the world around them, seeking the same types of resolution Modernist writers searched for, and ultimately finding the best reconciliation in reflecting on the region they left behind. The Midwest, while contributing to its regional stereotypes in some ways, was also more than those repressive and conventional descriptions entailed. Fitzgerald’s *The Great Gatsby* is perhaps the most notable example of that contrast, in that his characters migrate eastward in hopes of finding something new and exciting and instead return to the safety and security of the region they left behind. The novel delineates an American
problem of identity and restlessness and also a Midwestern problem and solution, as Nick returns to the Midwest finding that the framework of the past can reconcile many problems of the present. The work of all the Midwestern expatriate writers encompasses the struggle and contrast of older ideas with present and future possibilities, suggesting possible directions for the region and nation to follow in order to better know themselves and their surroundings.
CHAPTER 3 NOTES

1 Glenway Wescott (1901-1987) was born on a Wisconsin farm and spent most of his adolescence in the region, attending various local schools and even attending the University of Chicago for a short period of time. He was involved in various artistic and publishing circles, at one point working as an office boy for Poetry magazine. Eventually, in 1921, he left the region behind, living in New York, farms and country houses in the surrounding New York area, and during various vacations and holidays in many European cities. He never returned to the Midwest, other than some holiday visits while his parents still lived in Wisconsin (they moved East in 1937), although the region still played a large role in the literature and writing he published.

2 Robert McAlmon (1895-1956) was born in Kansas and spent most of his childhood growing up in small towns in eastern South Dakota. Eventually, like many Midwestern expatriates, he moved and became part of artistic circles in Greenwich Village and Paris. Not as well known for his own writing, McAlmon’s name appears most in discussions of his Contact Publishing Company, which published work by Ernest Hemingway, William Carlos Williams, and Djuna Barnes.

3 Dawn Powell (1896-1965) was born in Mt. Gilead, Ohio, and lived in the state throughout her childhood. After attending Lake Erie College and earning her degree, she moved to New York and lived there the rest of her life. Her literary output is split in much the same fashion as her life, with five of her early novels based in Ohio and the remainder of her literary work based in New York.

4 John Herrmann (1900-1959) was not the most prolific of writers but several of his novels and stories drew upon his experiences in the Midwest. A native of Michigan who left the region never to return, in his later explorations of the world he was noted most for having married fellow Midwesterner Josephine Herbst and his dabbles in communism.

5 Wescott’s publishing influence was primarily limited to an advisory capacity, mostly with the vanity publishing house of Harrison of Paris (who published The Babe’s Bed), led by his friend Barbara


Louis Bromfield (1896-1956) was born in Ohio but later left the region, living in France for several years (most of those years forming a good portion of this study). Unlike many of the other Midwestern expatriates mentioned in this chapter, he did return to the region in 1938; however, most of the work included in this study stems from his earlier years and is very similar in theme and subject matter to the other Midwestern writers outside of the region during this time.

Hemingway writes in *A Moveable Feast*, without mentioning the story by name but alluding to the trout fishing, that “The story was about coming back from the war but there was no mention of the war in it” (76).
CHAPTER 4

Midwestern Radical Writers, Modernism, and the Regional Proletariat

By the 1930s, the Midwest and all other regions of the country were feeling the effects, slowly but insidiously, of the Great Depression. From the writers of the 1920s and from a new group of writers coming of age in the 1930s, new voices emerged that documented the economic struggles and harsh conditions of many Midwesterners and joined a chorus of voices in the region and in American writing calling for social change and a better way of life. While embarking on new territory, these writers were also building on traditions of the past and on recent thematic and stylistic literary innovations. Most of the Midwestern radical writers were working from firsthand knowledge, seeing and experiencing for themselves the conditions and inequality that they wrote about. Their writing continued the search for veritism\(^1\) and truth that had been an established hallmark of American literary movements since the turn of the century. Their regionally-oriented writing encompassed the unvarnished depictions of daily life characteristic of social realism and at the same time incorporated some of the experimentalism and revolutionary tendencies of modernism. The writers discussed in this chapter demonstrated their politics subtly in their literature and more overtly in their speeches, journalism, and political writings, making an analysis of those aspects of their writing another important factor. While these Midwestern radicals were not able to sustain the momentum of their art beyond the end of the decade, their writing is important because it

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represents the merging, coalescing influence of modernism, realism, regionalism, and the Midwest that combined in the 1930s. This period of writing redefines the role of the Midwest in American literature and demonstrates the strong relationship between regionalism and radical writing. Midwestern radical writers created literature and art that recorded the social conditions of the time while also adapting literary techniques and styles in order to better reach their audience and address contemporary life.

The early 1930s saw a drastic change in the lives of many Americans, as a sharp economic decline followed the booming prosperity of the earlier years of the twentieth century. The changes were so significant that

By 1932, an estimated 28 percent of the nation’s households, containing 34 million people, did not have a single employed wage earner. Most Americans continued to be supported by their own or a family member’s earned income, but even when jobs did not disappear altogether, working hours and wages were often reduced. By 1933, Americans overall had 54 percent as much income as 1929. Furthermore, almost everyone knew of someone who had been rendered completely destitute. (Kyvig 177)

This economic downturn affected factories, farms, banks, retail stores and all manner of employment and industry. For most Americans, trying to simply find money to eat and a way to keep a roof over their head was their primary concern.

The stories of hardship, unemployment and poverty that detailed life across the United States in the early 1930s were no less significant in the Midwest. The onset of the Great Depression in 1929 exacerbated the cultural changes and the social and economic
movements occurring within the region. As the economy worsened and drought conditions increased, farms became less profitable and many rural communities saw the shift from rural to urban life begin to accelerate as people moved to cities to find work or better paying jobs. Those in the cities struggled to reconcile their hopes of fulfilling the prosperous American dream with the grim poverty and financial pressures they were suddenly faced with. Another wave of displaced farmers or workers began migrating about the country, trying to find something better over the next horizon. The Midwest, even from the turn of the century, had been changing from the optimistic land of the pioneers to a region of social and economic uncertainty similar to the rest of the country. Josephine Herbst notes this change and the effect it has on farmers in the Midwest:

All around them is evidence of a changing world; of land that is not the same even in its raw physical aspects as it was in other drought years. Erosion has been slowly at work crunching up the topsoil. Grazing land has been stripped of buffalo grass and cultivated to death. Dry hot withering winds may not be new in the Dakotas, but they now blow on land that has been homesteaded to its last inch. Every past depression bred a new migration wave. Unemployed from cities seeped out to the land to take up claims; farm failures in one section looked hopefully elsewhere. For the first time in the history of this country there is no fresh valley on the other side of the hill. (“The Farmer” 212)

The pioneer past, embraced so heartily by many Midwestern writers in the 1920s who reflected on the optimism of their ancestors, was no longer a source of hope and
inspiration for Midwesterners faced with more strident economic hardships. There were fewer options available to them, and many felt their failure all that more strongly for not living up to what they viewed as the success and fortitude of their ancestors. The shift between generations can be seen in Herbst’s Trexler/Wendel trilogy or in novels like Ruth Suckow’s *The Folks*, where each generation of the Ferguson family shows greater and greater disparity with their ancestors and predecessors. The Midwestern myth of the pioneering, hardworking farmer became prominent in regional consciousness around this time, creating a sense of longing and nostalgia for a history that never really was. This mythology and reflection increased the gap between generations and in many ways established stereotypes and expectations that the region would never quite achieve.

A Radical Midwest

While some aspects of Midwestern culture contributed to confusing contemporary expectations and perceptions, radical writers had a strong history to build upon for support. For a region so often characterized by homogeneity and conservatism, the Midwest was not a newcomer to radical or progressive ideas. Even within the wholesome small town life and strong family structures often attributed to the region, the people were receptive to many forms of organized labor, cooperative farming initiatives, and progressive social ideas. While not always as outwardly radical as many other progressive groups of the early twentieth century, the Midwest was no stranger to protest. As Douglas Wixson, noted scholar of Midwestern radical writers, discusses, the region’s present was shaped by its past:
The new spirit of revolt bore the characteristic marks of an older midwestern literary radical tradition: an intimate familiarity with one’s surroundings, a sensitivity toward the unyielding limitations of small town life and the hardships imposed by change. In terms characteristically midwestern, the desire for equality and social justice remained unabated among this new generation of radicals; suspicious of ideologies and abstractions, they took a firm, pragmatic view of life. These things had not changed from the previous generation. But their subject matter, contemporary social reality, posed staggering challenges. (175)

The drive to better themselves and the society around them was an inherent part of being Midwestern, as the region itself had been settled by so many immigrants and others seeking a better future and a more democratic way of life. These were individuals who were unafraid of asserting their rights, particularly collectively, in order to rectify inequality or unfairness.

Socialism and radical influences were not always powerful but were pervasive in the Midwest. The region had a served as a foundation for many socialist and progressive movements. In *Socialism in the Heartland* (1986) several essays trace the socialist elements in towns and cities such as Milwaukee, Wisconsin, Marion, Indiana, and Flint, Michigan. In “Hothouse Socialism: Minneapolis, 1910-1925,” David Paul Nord cites the “mobilization of organized labor as the most visible factor in the success of the Socialist Party in Minneapolis” (114). In 1910 Minneapolis elected a Socialist mayor, largely as the workers who helped to elect him wanted to concentrate forces against the anti-union
Citizens’ Alliance which wanted to make Minneapolis an open shop town. Meridel Le Sueur’s mother and stepfather were significantly involved in establishing and supporting many of the socialist and radical elements of the Midwest as well. Le Sueur wrote a history of her parents’ radical involvement, *Crusaders: The Radical Legacy of Marian and Arthur Le Sueur* (1984), citing their efforts. In the early twentieth century, she notes that her stepfather, Arthur Le Sueur, “watched the Socialist Party growing in this period. Founded in 1892, it polled thirty thousand votes in the year of the Pullman strike. In 1905 he attended the Socialist convention in Chicago. In 1908 he was on the Red Special of the [Eugene] Debs and [Benjamin] Hanford campaign, and in 1912 he was socialist Mayor of Minot [North Dakota]” (*Crusaders* 23). The Midwest had an active radical history prior to the time many of the 1930s Midwestern radicals began writing.

Proletarian writing benefited from being regionally oriented. Midwestern radical writers used their immediate landscape as setting for their stories and novels, and also incorporated deeper elements of regional culture and identity into their writing as well. The region became another character within their fiction, sharing the experiences of the characters and feeling the impact of the social and economic changes in much the same way. Regionalism also helped provide a greater degree of authenticity. James M. Boehnlein emphasizes the benefits regionalism brought to radical writing:

> The American proletarian writer of the Thirties was interested in producing writing that was notably local or regional in emphasis. The speech, behavior, and landscape of specific and often out-of-the-way places provided the proletarian writer the immediacy of situation and the
actuality of real people. Regionalism allowed for unimpeachable experience by reflecting the aesthetic and political values grounded and vividly invoked in localisms of manners, customs, character types, and dialects. (52)

A regional focus assisted radical writers in achieving much of the centralized and authentic realism they sought in their writing. The fact that many of the Midwestern radicals were incredibly tied to the region, in many cases working alongside the very types of people they were writing about in various Midwestern locales, helped focus their concerns and raised the importance of both their message and the region’s working classes. Julia Mickenberg cites a writer like Meridel Le Sueur as being more complicated by this combination of regional and radical ties than many critics tend to give her credit for. In particular, Le Sueur’s work, and that of other writers, suggests a synthesis of regionalism and radicalism that at least attempted (albeit unsuccessfully in the end) to come up with an alternative solution to social conditions at the time: “As Meridel Le Sueur’s work suggests, there existed within the exploration of American tradition the possibility of examining a regionalized radical heritage as well. Folklorist Constance Rourke had pointed out in 1933 [. . .] that regional folklore, customs and traditions, the ‘explicitly proletarian’ sentiment in localized folk cultures, could serve as a viable basis for revolution” (146). Regionalism and radicalism are often examined separately by critics and scholars and therefore are rarely recognized for the influence the two movements may have had on each other or in combination. Regionalism proved to be a strong foundation for radical writing, as the Midwestern base of writers like Conroy and
Le Sueur suggests, and that complicated interrelation affected the way the region was defined, the way radicals defined themselves, and influenced the attempts made to change and adapt American literature and culture as a whole.

Several of Meridel Le Sueur’s stories demonstrate the added benefits of a strong sense of region or place. Many of her characters are workers or farmers struggling to make a living in Chicago, Minneapolis, or farms spread across the prairies. She describes their surroundings not just to set the scene, but to establish the reality of the situation and because the land itself contributes to the story being told. Despite the fact that local communities and landscapes were often fragmented by social and economic conditions, often the land was one thing that had the power to connect them, even for an instant. In a story titled “People in the Heat” (1934), Le Sueur draws upon the flat Iowa countryside and describes the inhabitants as they face a summer drought. She notes their hunger and the futility of their farming efforts due to weather and other unfortunate occurrences. She ends the story by drawing once again upon the landscape, however, and infusing the image with hope:

But the storm, the Iowa storm comes then like a tearing of silk and the white lightening wounds the sky and the people then running weirdly, uncommon and weirdly lit and there is not a sound but the tearing of silk and the sound of feet running. The ear worms are damaging the corn, there is no seed corn but the feet that are running carry the future and I am running with my quick feet upon the Iowa earth and the rain comes hard and cold at first like bullets that drop off your skin and then it is coming
down like a tearing of silk. There she blows. Running on the earth like a woman in silk. There she is. (42)

Her story is almost prose poetry in the way she strings ideas together, stream of consciousness fashion, in order to convey the momentum of the storm and the rhythm of the feet running across the Iowa earth. By drawing upon the fierceness of the storm and the difficulties facing the farmers and the significance of the land itself, Le Sueur combines region and radical message in a way that recognizes the importance of place and argues for the power inherent within the people there.

The relationship to the land and region was no less complicated for Midwestern radicals than the other Midwestern authors around them. The radical Midwesterners demonstrated some of the same antagonistic love and hate feelings that other writers of the region struggled with and the inequality and plight of the working classes they documented only compounded those emotions. However, despite their troubled relationship with place, many of these writers stayed true to much of their background or region or at least found it indispensable to their art. One of the strongest arguments for this connection at the time was Meridel Le Sueur’s American Writers’ Congress speech where she specifically connected aspects of the Midwest with qualities and ideals of radical or proletarian writing. Radical Midwestern writers also found more proactive ways to connect their politics with the Midwest. Jack Conroy and Le Sueur organized the Midwest Writers’ Conference in 1936, trying to connect writers of the region together in a radical but also common regional purpose. Many radical publications and little magazines were almost entirely regional in their location and their composition. Even
Midwestern radicals who left the region and achieved more mainstream success did not readily or easily leave their region behind. James T. Farrell\textsuperscript{6} is one example. He made a rather distinct break with his region by moving to New York for the majority of his adult life, and still used his experiences growing up in Chicago and the memories of his family there in his novels and stories more than any other characters or setting. Josephine Herbst did not always have endearing things to say about her native Iowa and yet was strongly committed to helping the farmers and workers there, feeling a degree of connection with them when she returned to the state to cover their struggles in her journalism. In “Iowa Takes to Literature,” written in 1926, Herbst takes strong issue with the local women’s club movement in various Iowa towns and their desire to study literature. She states,

In a State, strict as are all Middle Western States in its moral notions, the intense through quarrelsome interest shown by Iowa women for modern writing, particularly that bordering on the unconventional, becomes a natural phenomenon. Browning and Shakespere [sic] are shelved for ‘Tendencies of the Modern Novel’ and Edna St. Vincent Millay. What appears on the surface to be a preoccupation with affairs of the mind, turns out on examination to be at its best a pathetic groping toward some sort of light, and at its worst only a silly attempt to escape from boredom. (467)

While Herbst obviously does not think much of the literary aspirations of Iowa women, she does not see the region as completely without merit, particularly as she sets her first novel there, \textit{Nothing is Sacred} (1928), only two years after making these comments.
Similar to many of the other Midwestern writers of the 1920s and 1930s, the radical writers of the region were also struggling to reconcile their identities and expectations with the region.

The Midwest, similar to many other regions of the country, became a focus of study due to many of the Depression-era organizations and work programs, most notably the Federal Writers Project. The activities that the Project was involved in provided a foundation for regional study. Many unemployed writers and artists found work through this New Deal program and were assigned tasks like writing state guidebooks and recording local folklore. Paul Sporn, in his study of the Writers’ Project in the Midwest, states that the subjects did not include the classical canon or previously published modern works, whether of intellectual depth or light popular appeal. Designed to be a work-relief program for out-of-work writers, it confined itself to original compositions based on primary research, most extensively of local and regional communities and underside cultures. Clearly the Writers’ Project deemed the people of these obscure communities and these generally unrecognized cultures worthy subjects of literature and key to its literary goals. (48)

Meridel Le Sueur, Nelson Algren7, and Jack Conroy were among many employed by this program and, as writers who were already regionally oriented in their own work, were able to contribute their knowledge and experiences to these projects. Le Sueur commented in an interview about the benefits of the opportunity:
After the depression started, it was marvelous because the WPA started. [. . .] That was in ’33. It was great for a writer here. It wasn’t like it was in New York where they only put known writers in the Writers’ Project, but here you were just a writer and hungry. We didn’t have any famous writers. The WPA was not only writing; it was the arts, painting [. . .] It was the first time I had a regular check in that period—in about three or four years. We did other work, we wrote the history of Minnesota. There was a history of each state. (qtd. in Roberts 87)

Working on recording the history of the states and the regional scenery and locations that would be of interest to travelers forced many of these writers to reflect on the region and that history. As many of these writers were already regionally committed, this additional exposure to the history and culture of the Midwest increased their knowledge and awareness, making it easier and more likely for them to situate their work solidly within the region.

Regionalism and the Radical

It seems not entirely coincidental that the regionalism movement gained larger critical emphasis around the time that American society was struggling with social confusion and the economy was affected by rampant problems. Much of the same social and cultural loss and confusion addressed by many “lost generation” writers was felt by the various regions of the United States and regional writing was one way of addressing that identity vacuum. Regional writing, like much radical writing, was experimenting
with ways of reifying regional cultural identity (including how it fit into a larger national context) and trying to establish regional ties to history and culture that could supplant or reconnect the social and identity crises being experienced by so much of American society. Regionalism did not always address issues of modernism directly, however in trying to reaffirm or readdress aspects of the past it was still attempting to redefine the modern. A regional focus provided a sense of historical or cultural continuity for people to cling to in a time of confusion and also contrasted the changes between past and present that were evident as the Midwest was being affected by modern innovation and ideas. Michael C. Steiner, in his article “Regionalism in The Great Depression,” confirms that regional writing and a focus on the local were influential in the way people perceived their immediate surrounding and American culture as a whole: “it is clear that regionalism did not become a self-conscious mass movement in the United States during the 1930s. Yet it is equally certain that regionalism as part of a desire for security of place amid the disorder and stress of the great depression permeated all levels of American society” (443). While regionalism was not necessarily embraced in every corner of the country nor established as a dominant literary influence (for, despite the large quantity of discussion in the 1930s, regionalism was forgotten or ignored for the most part once the decade was over), it did play a significant role in defining American culture and identity during that time.

Regionalism was merely one form of expression for the Midwestern radical writers. They also embraced elements of realism more than any other literary style, but it was a more outspoken realism, not simply recording the reality of life but intertwining
social and political commentary throughout their fiction. Much of it reified what Michael Gold referred to as a “proletarian realism.” He declared in the *New Masses* that “within this new world of proletarian literature there are many living forms. It is dogmatic folly to seize upon any single literary form and erect it into a pattern for all proletarian literature” (5). There was freedom in portraying the struggles of the working class, and yet “Because the Workers are skilled machinists, sailors, farmers, and weavers, the proletarian writer must describe their work with technical precision. The Workers will scorn any vague fumbling poetry, much as they would scorn a sloppy workman” (5). The literature emerging from the working classes, particularly the Midwest, adhered to this sense of accurately capturing the lives of the workers as they were and giving voice to the struggles they were actually experiencing. Barbara Foley affirms this goal of radical authors, stating that they wrote with “an emphasis upon doing so with strict verisimilitude” (110). What gave this literary movement a different tone from previous expressions of realism is that radical writers were concerned with recording not only life as it existed, but also in presenting that reality in a way that inspired reflection and, ultimately, social and economic change.

Emerging writers in the late 1920s and 1930s—Jack Conroy, Meridel Le Sueur, Josephine Herbst and others—began to show more of what the world was really like, examining the harsh conditions for what they were and not using the sense of history and legacy alive in the Midwest to overly idealize what they saw taking place around them. These were writers who were deeply engaged in examining working class problems firsthand, often as they themselves worked at factory jobs or other scattered employment
in order to feed their families and keep themselves alive. Their novels and stories sought to emulate the voice of the people as they were, not artistically polishing the images they observed and the actions of the characters but striving to portray them as they truly existed. In many ways, their work aspired to the truest definition of realism, but differed from earlier realists in that their intentions were not solely to capture life as it was but to highlight within that portrayal the struggles and indignities often suffered by their protagonists and advocate for more jobs, better working conditions, and other social and economic changes. Meridel Le Sueur affirms this sentiment in her afterword to her novel *The Girl*, originally written in the 1930s (and published in excerpts at that time) but not published until 1978, explaining the basis for the novel:

This memorial to the great and heroic women of the depression was really written by them. As part of our desperate struggle to be alive and human we pooled our memories, experiences, and in the midst of disaster told each other our stories or wrote them down. We had a writers’ group of women in the Workers Alliance and we met every night to raise our miserable circumstances to the level of sagas, poetry, cry-outs.

There was no tape recorder then so I took their stories down. Some could not write very well, and some wrote them out painfully in longhand while trying to keep warm in bus stations or waiting for food orders at relief offices.

They looked upon me as a woman who wrote (like the old letter writers) and who strangely and wonderfully insisted that their lives were
not defeated, trashed, defenseless but that we as woman contained the real
and only seed, and were the granary of the people. This should be the
function of the so-called writer, to mirror back the beauty of the people, to
urge and nourish their vital expression and their social vision. (149)

Le Sueur’s commitment to expressing and recording these voices was common to many
of the radical writers of the 1930s, particularly many of the writers from the Midwest. As
many areas of the Midwest served as a breeding ground for progressive ideas, the region
did not always follow party philosophies, preferring to focus on the people themselves
rather than radical ideology.

Jack Conroy’s novel *The Disinherited* (1933) adheres to this drive for realism.
Larry Donovan, the protagonist of the novel, faces a variety of situations in his life,
starting at a young age when his father is killed in a mining accident. Larry ends up in
various Midwestern locales in his pursuit of work to support the family because of his
father’s absence, moving from railroad shops to a steel mill to automobile factories. A
passage describing Larry’s first experiences at the steel mill demonstrate Conroy’s
adherence to common speech patterns and the common aspects of the working world:

> My conductor tapped the saw’s steersman upon the shoulder, nodded at me, hung my slip on a nail, and headed for the office. When the channel was finally reduced to shorter lengths, the saw was shut off. Silence weighed oppressively.

> The man at the saw’s wheel, whose name was Romeo, was really the foreman, I discovered.
“No goddam Bohunk, anyway,” he observed with evident satisfaction. “Boy, you picked yourself a mankiller for a job. Average life of a steel saw man is six months. If the noise don’t drive you goofy, a pile of steel’ll topple over on you, or a dumb crane man lower a girder across your neck.”

This greeting was not exactly encouraging, but I was not surprised or disturbed. I had learned at the railroad shops that to fill a new man with misgiving is considered great sport. It is the same impulse that impels schoolboys to persecute a newcomer. (132)

Larry’s education, something he pursues in spite of his working class status even though it calls for studying whenever he can get the time, provides him greater insight perhaps than the average worker regarding his experiences. But Conroy’s fidelity to voice and experience make Larry’s interactions in the various mills and factories where he is employed indicative of working experiences everywhere. Considering Conroy’s own working background, many of his jobs provided detail and description to make these portrayals as truthful as possible.

A Changed Modernist Literary Climate

While realism and adherence to truth ruled much of the Midwestern radicals’ purpose, the innovations of modernism were still a factor in their writing. While none of the radical writers are generally classified as modernist in the style or content of their fiction, aspects of their writing show an awareness of the modernist aesthetic. While not
embracing the same extremes in literary innovation and techniques, the Midwestern radicals had knowledge of larger literary trends and movements. Douglas Wixson notes this climate in his study of Midwestern radical writing:

The rebellion of the ‘artists’—the literary experimentalists who ‘revolutionized’ the word, the expatriate writers who violated sexual taboos in literature—had altered the climate of reception when the new generation of literary radicals began to publish. The expatriates and literary modernists had fought their own battles to gain recognition, publishing first in little magazines open to experimentation. With recognition came critical attention and mainstream publication. The literary radicals had found no such acceptance by the 1930s. Mainstream editors received them coolly, unwilling to take risks on unknowns whose subjects were politically sensitive. Most established critics ignored their work. Expatriate writers like Edmund Wilson, Malcolm Cowley, Matthew Josephson, and Robert McAlmon, however, began to respond to signals sent by the radicals about the social and economic crisis. Admiring the literary experimentalism of the modernists but assailing their shallow imitators, the midwestern radicals reasserted the social-political content of rebellion, looking to earlier models as appeared in socialist and Wobbly publications. What was called in Eugene Jolas’s *transition* ‘the revolution of the word’ inspired debate among literary radicals without marking their work in any significant way. The ‘artists,’ on the other hand, were
excluded from the close-up familiarity with working-class subjects, condemned as it were to remain observers despite the attempts by some in the 1930s to espouse ideals of collective identity. (178-79)

While radical writers were closer to the lives of the people they were writing about, they struggled to gain recognition, often by using techniques established by the modernist movement to counter their own marginalization, such as the creation of politically radical little magazines.

Modernism contained elements of radicalism, however it was a more subdued or covert radical influence than what emerged in later literature. Much of this was due to the complicated relationship between modernism and contemporary culture, particularly political culture. The modernists were making statements about the need for change in the world, but their work was less grounded in making explicit social statements. When radicalism was explicit in their writing, it was often fleeting or addressing specific, isolated aspects of the social reality around them. More mainstream authors who expressed radical views in their writing gained a bit more attention due to their reputations or established publishing record, yet their work was more distant from the true situations of the working class due to their status as literary figures or intellectuals. Ernest Hemingway is one example. He made an appearance at the Second American Writer’s Congress and published *To Have and Have Not* (1937), the closest he ever came to writing a radical novel.¹⁰ For a period of time in the 1930s, it was fashionable to be Communist or to support radical causes particularly because of the social situation in the
United States. Daniel Aaron notes much of this distinction in his book *Writers on the Left* (1961), stating

for the majority of the writers who were associated in some way or another with the movement, it was the times, not the party, that made them radicals. The party attracted them because it alone seemed to have a correct diagnosis of America’s social sickness and a remedy for it. The overwhelming majority never joined the party, but they put on “red shirts” as an emblem of revolt, as a way of showing their repudiation of the “stuffed shirts.” (160)

Many of the more established authors participated in radicalism as part of this social movement, while many of the truly radical writers worked hard to try and tell their stories and represent the working classes throughout their careers.

Midwestern radicals differed significantly from the high modernists, yet they demonstrated many of the same elements of style and form. Modernist writers were more often driven by a sense of artistic purpose in their writing, a purpose that advocated for different kinds of social awareness and change but on a milder level. Radical writers were concerned with their art, but as a means of representing and achieving a broader and more intensive social agenda. As Marcus Klein notes in his study of radical writers in the 1930s, many writers were familiar with modernism at the same time that they were trying to deal with immediate social concerns and issues:

The cause was after all literary as well as proletarian, and proletarian literature was among other things a new episode in the literary modernism
which had come into being at least as long before as 1912. On the one hand, much of the history of modernism—comprising the great formal innovations, the general hardening of sensibility, and the great joy of various iconoclasms—had by the end of the Twenties already been written. On the other hand, there was a new generation nearby, which apparently was quite willing to share in the modern lessons, but which must have found them also to be somewhat alien. (134)

Through the writing of Midwestern radicals much of this lingering attachment to modernism can be found, even as many of the writers are often reinventing these characteristics and conventions in their own way. Josephine Herbst, in her Trexler/Wendel trilogy, merges a variety of perspectives into a collage of characters that is reminiscent of many of the nonlinear narratives of the modernists. Each volume of the trilogy shifts perspectives between the various characters in the story, between different historical periods or reflections on the past, and intersperses newspaper headlines and letters within the text. It is a montage reminiscent of Dos Passos’ USA trilogy although not as complex. Through this method, Herbst tells the evolution of the Trexler/Wendel family through the generations, starting just after the Civil War and following the characters into the 1930s. The Trexler family starts in the east and due to migrations of various family members and the different circumstances they encounter, covers a great deal of the United States, with much of the second and third novels influenced by a Midwestern location, as one of the Trexler daughters, Anne, marries Amos Wendel and settles in Oxtail, Iowa, determined to prosper. While they never quite succeed, their
children move outward and take on the modern world, so that the third novel, *Rope of Gold* (1939), focuses most on their daughter Vicki as she marries and moves East to New York.

This migration from the Midwest to the East mirrors much of Herbst’s own experiences, and while her characters, particularly Vicki, negotiate the difference between East and Midwest they are also negotiating the ambivalence of modern times. Modernist and radical elements are scattered throughout the trilogy. In *Pity Is Not Enough* (1933), the radical influences can be seen in subtle ways toward the end of the novel, when Herbst talks about the anarchists being executed in Chicago and the subversive thoughts that were seeping around the country. A struggling friend of Joe Trexler, a central character in the first novel who lives in South Dakota, explains that he has no faith in large government or corporate systems anymore: “What good will that do? You staked yourself and you got a high sounding title. Superintendent. How much else you got for all your hard work? Damned little else. Listen, I’m putting what stake I got in *men* after this, not the *ground*. You can’t buck those big fellows and they know it. They’re using you. When they get through, they’ll throw you out” (*Nothing* 336). While not necessarily a radical novel, Herbst is capturing much of the radical spirit of the working class through comments like this.

Later, in Herbst’s *The Executioner Waits* (1934), characters demonstrate awareness of modernist literature. In having a literary party at their apartment, Jonathan and Victoria Chance are further caught up in the literary culture of the time. One of Jonathan’s friends from Michigan, Lester Tolman, part of their working class art circle
who had gone to Europe in the war and experienced many new things, is visiting in town and they throw a party to celebrate. The scene details many aspects of modern literary culture and criticism, particularly in reference to contemporaries like James Joyce:

Tolman said the old realism was dead. The old language was dead. The old literature was dead. It was all dead. People like Joyce were creating a new world of language.

One of the advertising men said he couldn’t understand a word of it. ‘I don’t understand a word he’s talking about,’ said the fellow miserably, at the same time trying to give the impression that if he didn’t understand there was probably nothing there to understand.

‘I could read you some of it, you shut your eyes, listen, it’s all sound, when you listen to it long enough, a real meaning comes out of it.’ He shut his own eyes and with the air of a priest turned his head listening. Even Jonathan was embarrassed at the pose of his friend. He coughed and said that he had read *Ulysses* so many times he almost knew it by heart.

‘But the last part, that nighttime monologue of Mrs. Bloom’s, that’s the most marvelous thing,’ said one of the girls rolling her eyes. She just wants men to think she’s pretty hot herself, though Vicky. Nine chances out of ten, the girl did not know what it was all about. (340-41)

This passage has an almost metafictional influence on the novel, bringing aspects of the critical discussion taking place regarding contemporary fiction into a work of contemporary fiction. The comments of the characters do more to demonstrate the
shallowness of many of the party attendees than to make a statement about contemporary literary techniques or value. However, this awareness deepens the social and cultural commentary of the novel. Herbst’s writing shifts between different perspectives in a way that makes the uncertainty of the characters’ lives all the more real for the reader, similar to the way modernist writers used techniques like these to also convey the fragmentation and uncertainty of their own perspectives and experiences.

Much like the roving characters of American modernist novels like Hemingway’s *The Sun Also Rises* (1926) or Fitzgerald’s *The Great Gatsby*, the characters in Midwestern radical novels were still plagued by a sense of disconnection to home and region, a relationship complicated in the 1930s by the economic situation in the country. Jake Barnes or Nick Carraway were never forced from their homes by economic necessity, whereas the characters in many Midwestern radical novels left in hopes of a better way of life or left because they really had no choice. They were plagued by a sense of Midwestern restlessness that Meridel Le Sueur highlighted in her speech to the 1935 American Writers’ Congress, stating that nothing had ever really been rooted in the Middle West, that people were always moving and searching for something more. Besides being a regional tendency, movement became characteristic of the American population as a whole during the Great Depression, giving economic impetus to an already restless modern American society that was trying to find a foundation in a continually changing world. No example is more characteristic of this American movement than the travels of the Joad family in John Steinbeck’s *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939). Meridel Le Sueur’s protagonist in *The Girl* had to leave her family due to
economic necessity, as there were too many mouths to feed. Even before the girl left and began working, her family was always on the move; she explains, “we moved from one house and city to another in the midwest, always trying to get something bigger and better, trading something, moving and how we once traded for a farm with only plum trees on it so we moved again, us kids sitting on the heaps of stuff, and mama crying and praying” (Le Sueur 10).

In Conroy’s *The Disinherited*, Larry Donovan wanders the Midwest continually in search of work or better opportunities. His search is out of necessity, not driven by desire or want. He is faced with the burden of supporting his family and his loyalty to the rights of workers and unions leads to often chaotic working situations that result from strikes and labor disputes. This leads to his termination from many different jobs, jobs that are already hard to come by with the high amount of unemployment during the 1930s. As a result, Larry keeps moving about the country looking for a more stable job or one that will make more money. Some of this erratic movement is captured as he looks out the door of a boxcar on his way to Detroit and the promise of another job, reflecting,

As the door opened, the clatter and roar of the train ascended to a higher pitch. The coolness gathered first in the low places—rushed into my face. Across the fields the hills purpled slowly, the low sun gilding their crests briefly now and then. I was breaking loose again, as I had when I left Monkey Nest Camp for the railroad shows, as I had when I went to the city to see about Rollie’s insurance. (181)
The upheaval caused by the booming industry of the early twentieth century, both in terms of the modernization that gave birth to the financial rise and the inevitable financial bust that led to the depression, blurred the lines of personal identity for both modernists and radicals alike. The changes taking place in society rendered the old way of life meaningless except for the nostalgia it continually inspired, and as a result, people were trying to search for some kind of permanence or deeper connection in their lives.

The sense of movement and a restless nature contributed to the Midwestern radicals sharing a concern with modernists regarding the nature of time and the immediacy of the moment. The challenges of the present tended to motivate a type of existential existence that was more suited to the day to day needs and concerns of the radicals and the working classes that they were representing with their art more than a sense of evolving history. There were differences in the perspectives of the radicals and the modernists, however. While both groups of writers were contending with modernity and noting that the way of life it provided was so different from that of their ancestors or even their parents, radical writers were less into exploring situations for the immediacy of the moment itself and instead focused on the immediacy of the moment because the harsh economic conditions they encountered called for that sense of immediacy. As many individuals during the Depression spent most of their time wondering where their next meal was to come from or how they were going to pay that month’s rent, that lifestyle forced a moment by moment existence on those individuals to worry only about their immediate needs, not taking time to worry about the past or to do more than dedicate a passing, wistful daydream toward the future. In James T. Farrell’s Danny O’Neill
novels. Danny’s parents come into money bit by bit, either through the arrival of a paycheck or a financial gift by one of their extended family, and while that money brightens their lives it is a transitory happiness as in the next instant the money disappears to pay for food or the doctor or to get barely caught up on bills. As the lack of money leaves for little advance planning, the O’Neills can only focus on existing from day to day. The uncertainty of the times made general life that way for many individuals, as one day someone might have a job and the next they might be unemployed. Modernists were often concerned with moments of self-reflection, while many radical writers were concerned with moments because those were the only way to find fleeting happiness, momentary prosperity, or a short reprieve from hunger.

Stories from earlier decades involving the Midwest focused more often on the lingering effects of the past or the prospects of the future, focusing on the actual moment only as a means to demonstrating the significance of that past or the promise of the future. The mythologies underlying Midwestern literature prior to the 1930s built either on the hard working nature and courage of the region’s pioneers or on the potential for those establishing homes and living in the region to achieve the American dream of prosperity. The sense of immediacy found in many Midwestern radical stories demonstrated a change in that perspective. In a work like O.E. Rölvaag’s *Giants in the Earth* (1927), the past is something that tethers people to the world they left behind, as shown by Beret’s nostalgia for the land and traditions of their native Norway, while her husband Per Hansa is fixated on the potential for a fresh start and prosperous success in the land they own and the new country around them. Per Hansa sees himself as starting
his own kingdom in a way, establishing a farm that will provide for his family, his sons, and future generations of the family. These underlying mythologies are still apparent in the work of many Midwestern radicals, but they no longer have the power they previously did, functioning as reminders of the current inability to focus on much more than the present.

These mythologies start to break down in many of the Midwestern writers who left the region in the 1920s, as their sense of confusion and loss due to modern times is augmented by the distance between their own personal histories and the stories of their regional ancestors they have grown up with. In Farrell’s Studs Lonigan trilogy, Studs’ life demonstrates the differences between past and present. The immigrant neighborhood where he lives in Chicago is filled with individuals who are trying to build better lives for themselves, but as a member of the younger generation Studs struggles to find a life with the same optimism in light of his surroundings. He wants to be recognized as someone intelligent, with a tremendous degree of strength (shown through his conquering street fights with neighborhood toughs) and great potential for his future. However, the reality of what he wants from life never merges successfully with the reality of his surroundings. He spends more time drinking and roaming aimlessly about the neighborhood than he does trying to accomplish anything productive. This attitude is further exacerbated by the onset of the Depression, when work is difficult to find even if Studs was interested in finding it. Ultimately, Studs’ death while still a young man at the end of the trilogy sends a message of futility for the future more than a message of hope. The endings created by Midwestern radicals never result in happy endings. In the best of circumstances, they
suggest that there is at least promise in the future, although it is usually promised clouded by present circumstances. Meridel Le Sueur’s “girl” is homeless with a newborn baby, Conroy’s Larry Donovan is heading west hoping to find work, and Nelson Algren’s Cass McKay, in *Somebody in Boots* (1935) is unemployed again in Chicago and on the move. The prosperity and achievement that characterized the culmination of prior Midwestern novels no longer applied to contemporary stories, particularly due to the oppression of current economic and social conditions.

Grassroots Midwestern Literature Gone Global

Too often, modernism is seen as being a monolithic movement in literary study and, as such, scholars and readers tend to dismiss many of the other elements of literature taking place simultaneously or including authors who are not part of the typical modernist canon. Modernism was a radical movement in many ways and closer examination of Midwestern radical writing can contribute to a more complete understanding of the genre. In many cases, while not always widely published, the Midwestern radicals were being published significantly enough to have merited more critical attention. Even though they were exhibiting many of the same literary conventions or themes as other writers of the time, their work was marginalized. Many of these writers, like the earlier Midwestern writers of the 1920s, had H.L. Mencken to thank for some of their success. Wixson cites Mencken’s influence:

> Ironically, it was a political conservative, H.L. Mencken, who provided the broadest access to this new current of fresh, vigorous writing drawn
from life. Mencken’s *American Mercury* printed Jim Tully’s ‘Bull Horrors’ (October 1927), Charles Sampson’s ‘Peach Harvest’ (October 1928), Henri Tascheraud’s ‘The Art of Bumming a Meal’ (June 1925), and Thomas F. Healy’s ‘The Hobo Hits the Highroad’ (July 1926). [. . .] Mencken’s ‘authors’ were no less representative of the 1930s: William Faulkner, Zora Neale Hurston, Meridel Le Sueur, Erskine Caldwell, Josephine Herbst, George Milburn, Jack Conroy, and the bricklayers, longshoremen, and taxi drivers who contributed work narratives. The discovery of Mencken’s essays in *Prejudices* played a crucial role in Richard Wright’s decision to write. Whatever judgment one wishes to make concerning Mencken and ‘the mainstream,’ it is evident that these writers owed more to the uniqueness of their experiences in America, involving in certain instances tramping and factory work, than to European literary traditions or café life in Paris, or indeed to the dominant cultural experience of the 1920s. (102)

Midwestern radicals could also be found in popular publications like *Scribner’s Magazine* and also in the most prominent radical publications of the time, like the *New Masses*. Their novels were put to press by publishing houses that were far from avant garde. While not necessarily enjoying all the same accolades as writers like Hemingway and Dos Passos, these Midwestern radicals were far from hiding in the literary background.
Much of the marginalization Midwestern radical writers faced, despite all their contributions to American literature and their commitment to the working classes, was due to their regional location and subject matter. The Midwest, while often perceived as far from the artistic and social pulse of the nation, was actually a birthplace for many radical ideas and a breeding ground for social change. Midwestern radical writers who were living in the Midwest were well exposed to the prevalent ideologies of the time, even if they were not always the strongest advocates or endorsers of those ideas. Le Sueur, while writing mostly about Midwestern workers, particularly in Minnesota, was a member of the Communist Party and participated in various radically based conventions and groups, like the American Writers’ Congress in 1935. Jack Conroy was involved with the Communist Party while living in the Midwest but broke away from many of their ideas when he saw that the intellectual radical establishment based out of New York was often at odds with the social realities that he was experiencing and observing in the Midwest. Farrell’s move from Chicago to New York exposed him to more mainstream radical movements, and yet he famously broke with Stalinist followers in the 1930s, siding more with the philosophies of the Trotskyists and never entirely finding comfort and acceptance in either group. Josephine Herbst focused on her own ideas and opinions regarding social change and used those to guide her actions, associating with various radical groups when it suited her cause and ignoring much of their political and social drama when it did not. One example of her association with movements when they were convenient was a trip to Russia she took with her husband, John Herrmann, to attend the International Congress of Revolutionary Writers in 1930. While not a member of the
Communist Party establishment, the couple was given an invitation by Michael Gold to attend the congress as guests, giving them an opportunity to view the conditions in Russia while not entirely placing themselves in line with the party itself (Langer 115-17).

Conroy, Le Sueur, and others knew that distance often worked against them in gaining the same type of influence that other radicals had by being located in places like New York. The authors tried to do things to rectify the problem: Conroy started publication of *The Anvil* (1933-35), a radical little magazine dedicated to publishing the literature of the actual worker; and Le Sueur helped to organize a Midwest Writers’ Conference in Chicago, to rally the writers of the region in a common working class cause. None of these efforts proved successful, as the scattered locations of Midwestern writers made organizing under a common strong voice difficult. As these were truly working class writers, they also faced difficulties finding time to dedicate to these projects, as the hours they spent at work meant time away from writing and organizing.

The Eastern base of the Communist Party of the United States, as well as the fact that many of the men and women in control of the party were able to give it their full attention, overruled most of the Midwestern efforts and marginalized much of what they were able to accomplish.

What also interfered with some of the recognition of the Midwestern radicals was that in the publications and overall work of these writers a dedicated focus can be seen on Midwestern people and issues. Meridel Le Sueur’s articles and stories focus on Midwestern farmers in Kansas and Iowa, miners in the Mesabi Range in northern Minnesota, and truckers on strike in the city of Minneapolis. Her concerns are on the
overall issues facing workers as a whole, but in particular she is concerned with the Midwesterners who surround her and their struggles and successes to define a better life. In fact, Le Sueur’s 1935 American Writer’s Congress speech focused entirely on how the Midwest was an ideal location for proletarian literature and how those authors and worker-writers were best suited to express many of the issues facing farmers, workers, and individuals in the country as a whole. Her writing serves as a primary example of the contentions she makes in her speech, demonstrating how overall proletarian concerns are indeed active in the Midwest. Conroy’s characters are also all Midwesterners, based in many ways on the type of workers that surrounded him in his various jobs. From Missouri miners to Detroit autoworkers, Conroy examines and explains the lives of other Midwestern workers like himself, emphasizing their way of life and also the contrasts of their lives with those of others in other regions of the country. Herbst, Farrell, and others also focus their writing on Midwestern characters. In Farrell’s case, aspects of the Studs Lonigan trilogy and the Danny O’Neill books foreshadow ethnic divisions in a regional city like Chicago that would be addressed in more detail by writers such as Richard Wright in Native Son (1940). While it is entirely common for many writers to draw on experiences close to their own lives, many proletarian writers or writers who tried to address proletarian themes did not have such authentic knowledge. Many of the members of the New York radical movement and other successful radical writers did not have the same credentials as the Midwesterners, who could speak from their own stories of working alongside friends and fellow workers. Not only were Midwestern radical
writers attempting to re-orient the center of literary power, they were also trying to empower regional and therefore more marginalized voices as well.

Where previous Midwestern writers were often revolting from the village, these Midwestern writers were revolting from the establishment. Rather than a backlash against provincialism, there was a backlash against financial inequality and unfair treatment of workers. Dawn Powell’s highlights some of this shift more specifically in her novel *The Story of a Country Boy* (1934). As her last Ohio novel, Powell contrasts much of Midwestern life with the changes being brought about by modern developments. Christopher Bennett is a farm boy who becomes a successful businessman. In making this transition, he feels that he has still maintained his connection with his working class childhood, but when the workers at his factory protest and strike, he is bewildered by their actions. Bennett has learned to love status and the privileges it brings and feels that because he was able to climb the ladder of success many of these men must be able to do the same thing. Encountering some of his own misfortunes, Bennett slowly begins to realize that in the process of rising up in the world he has compromised many of the ideals he valued so much as a member of the working class. Many of the radical novelists, writing around the same time as Powell, were not always drawing quite this comparison but were strenuously advocating for a change or shift in the disparity in wealth and social class that arose in the United States due to economic conditions. A novel like Conroy’s *The Disinherited* while centered on a main character spends more time discussing the life of that character and those around him in the context of larger social conditions. Their concerns take on a much broader context. Where Powell’s
concerns seem more oriented to one individual and the changes that take place in his life (to some degree being indicative of larger social issues), Midwestern radicals were more often looking at the larger issues and detailing the lives of characters caught up within those struggles, advocating social change on a large scale that would then consequently affect the lives of individual workers and lead to a more equitable society.

While at times they enjoyed such success and acceptance, the nature of their politics and the volatile locus of literary power often undermined many of the Midwestern radical’s messages by suppressing their stories or denying them an equal opportunity to publish. Little magazines and self-publishing ventures were not entirely new to the Midwest in the 1930s, considering that Chicago had served as the founding location for Poetry and The Little Review, two major little magazines of the modernist era. In the 1930s, Jack Conroy founded The Anvil as one way to try and maintain his own control over the publishing outlets available to radical writers. While the periodical flourished for a short time, it was eventually taken over by higher figures in the Communist Party and re-centered in New York, eventually dropping the Anvil name and surviving as purely The Partisan Review. Writers in other Midwestern cities attempted to start their own literary journals:

Little magazines were springing up in midwestern towns like Dubuque, Cedar Rapids, Davenport, and Peoria. The contributors were mainly unknowns, scattered far and wide. Stranded by the economic crisis, they hoped to establish contact with other writers and editors through publication. In response to the fact that the commercial press seldom
published little-known writers, particularly if the writing was political in context, leftist magazines like *Anvil*, the *Dubuque Dial*, the Cedar Rapids *Hub*, *Hinterland*, *Left*, and others attempted to create a space outside the hegemonic literary system within which a literature of renewal might be produced. (Wixson 314)

These little magazines and independent publications gave voice to many writers who were unable to gain recognition outside of the Midwest or recognized writers who had a hard time placing stories with a strong radical or working class message.

Most of these little magazines published solely Midwestern writers or solely writers with working class credentials. Published with very little money and by the efforts of volunteers, these publications gave voice to those who had difficulty finding an outlet elsewhere. Conroy reflected later in life on the content of *The Anvil*:

> Much of the stuff we published in The Anvil was rough-hewn and awkward, but bitter and alive from the furnace of experience—and from participants, not observers, in most instances. Our material naturally invited the jeers of the more esthetic urban and academic critics, but editors—and book publishers, too—began to look with more favor on our motto: “We prefer crude vigor to polished banality.” (Introduction xiv)

*The Anvil* was the publication that introduced Richard Wright’s early work and gave space to work that writers such as Erskine Caldwell found difficult to publish elsewhere. Wixson comments that the first two issues of *The Left* contained authors such as
Norman Macleod, John Rogers, Joe Kalar, H. H. Lewis, and Leonard Spier—who were represented in the first issue, along with east-of-the-Hudson radicals Sherry Mangan, Harry Roskolenkier, Horace Gregory, Edwin Seaver, Alan Calmer, and Louis Zukofsky. Conroy’s sketch of an incident from the 1922 railroad strike appeared in the second issue, along with stories and poems by Bob Cruden, Albert Harper, Kalar, Ed Falkowski, Edwin Rolfe, Herman Spector—and ‘Jon’ Cheever (the same John Cheever who turned to genteel fiction, the author of *The Wapshot Chronicle*). (318)

Most of these authors never achieved great fame or worldwide recognition but were committed to the proletarian cause and produced literature that represented social and economic realities.

American literature often seemed to have an Eastern focus in the early twentieth century, for while successful writing could be found in every part of the country the prominent publishing centers and literary critics were in Boston and New York. Midwestern writers often did what they could, as did many regional writers, to try and unseat some of that power or at the very least draw attention to the fact that other cities and regions were capable of supporting art and literature. Whether simply focusing on Midwestern stories and settings, as many of the more conventional realist writers of the 1920s did, or advocating radical change as writers like Conroy and others of the 1930s did, attempts were made to make the Midwest a more significant player in the national literary discussion. It was also a way to try and put into practical action some of what
these writers hoped to do on a larger scale, taking matters into the hands of the people, the writers themselves, and allowing them to determine their larger artistic significance or destiny in the same way they wanted workers and others to have more control over their social and economic futures.

The Midwest in the 1930s had little of the potential or prosperity of earlier years. As the West was declared closed by Frederick Jackson Turner at the turn of the century, there was no longer a sense of new potential further along the horizon. The writers of the 1930s, however, were not far removed from the pioneering tales of their parents and grandparents, having been raised on stories of conquering the land. Circumstances related to the Great Depression and other social issues complicated that history, as it was difficult to conquer anything in a world where hard work was not enough to allow a person to succeed. The characters in Midwestern radical novels and stories were not afraid to work for a living, but they found the opportunity to work limited and what work they could get provided them with little to live on. Josephine Herbst called attention to this in her writing about Midwestern farmers as she stated that there was no longer a “fresh valley on the other side of the hill” (“The Farmer” 212). Farmers were forced to abandon farms that could no longer produce crops or cattle for profit. In Jack Conroy’s stories, auto workers sat outside factory gates, hoping for an opportunity to work but often becoming discouraged by the sheer number of individuals waiting alongside of them. There were not enough jobs for all of them. These are social and economic conditions that affected the entire country in the 1930s, but they also complicated the definition of the Midwest. In the 1920s, where writers like Fitzgerald, Hemingway, and
others headed out for new opportunities and sought excitement in order to try and reconcile their Midwestern pasts with a modern present, in the 1930s this contrast or disparity was even larger due to the lack of material means needed to bridge that gap. The gap between Midwestern past and present was wider than at any other time in the region’s history.

The work of Midwestern radical writers is an attempt to bridge some of that disparity and divide between Midwestern past and present. In their grassroots empowerment of the peoples’ voice, they not only attempted to take control of literary culture and values from the larger literary and artistic circles, but also formed a fledgling pioneer group that tried to find some of the values and important qualities of the past in the alienation and loss of the future. It was a modern form of pioneering, not the turning of soil and the building of farms like many of their ancestors but the formation of new connections to people and place that more accurately reflected the alienation of modernization. The Midwestern radicals worked to empower the working classes and find comfort in communities in order to combat the struggles they faced. The radical writers were a segment in a historical and cultural bridge, building on the work of turn of the century Midwestern writers and their definitions of place and culture, filtering those images and ideas through the attempts to combine that heritage with modern influences in the 1920s, and finally reinventing the Midwestern cultural heritage in the 1930s, giving it renewed relevance in the tumultuous period gripping American culture as a whole. Their attempts were not always readily accepted and, based on their treatment in subsequent literary history, were not always accorded the respect and importance they should have
earned, for what was truly important about their work was that the attempts at redefinition and evolution were being made.  This was a link in a chain that connected writers like E.W. Howe to Bess Streeter Aldrich to Ernest Hemingway to Meridel Le Sueur. The writers of the Midwest were as lost as many of the “lost generation” in terms of understanding their place in the world, and looking at the way various Midwesterners attempted to cope with that loss in addressing their immediate surroundings is what makes Midwestern literature important to consider in light of literary history as a whole.

At the end of the 1930s, radical writing (as well as regional writing and modernism) diminished significantly. As World War II brought about an end to the Depression and helped fuel an economic resurgence in the United States, it also brought about an upswing in patriotism that unified people in spite of any regional differences and made questioning government policy or advocating any “communist” ideas dangerous. Many of the Midwestern radical writers moved away from prominently publishing, due to either the folding of many little magazines and the relocation of many Midwestern publishing attempts to cities such as New York or because of blacklisting due to their affiliations with the Communist Party and other radical revolutionary elements. Radical ideas failed to firmly take hold in the United States, just as an emphasis on regionalism and regional importance also died off. People found a sense of unity and purpose in the situation placed in front of them and even when that focus died off at the end of the war, they were reacting to many new social and national problems that had evolved as a result of the conflict. The developments in transportation and communication as well as an increasingly national rather than regional sense of American identity changed the way
American literature and culture was being perceived. This is not to say that regional concerns or regional writing died off entirely, nor that radical writers were not still prominently advocating for the lives of the common people, but that once again there was another move along the bridge between Midwestern past and present and that post-World War II other adaptations were being made, giving way to other stages in Midwestern and American literary history and culture.

The argument that many Midwestern radicals and regionalists were trying to make during the 1930s fell short of full scale acceptance. Because of marginalization on many different levels and because of many different social and artistic concerns, the terms “regional” and “radical,” particularly when linked together, became double descriptive burdens. Douglas Wixson notes much of this attitude as it relates to Midwestern radicals of the 1930s:

No one of the radicals attained the celebrity status or achieved the lasting national reputation of the expatriate writers. The early years of the Depression produced no great writer in the Midwest by the standards of the dominant culture. Reality was too overpowering somehow, the terrible social drama of dispossession and failure too consuming. Writing from the margins, but not as bystanders, since most of them were directly engaged in the experience of dispossession, the radicals touched on aspirations and concerns central to the lives of large numbers of people. Their writing testifies to the courage and resourcefulness of the ‘disinherited,’ but few of the multitudes actually read it. Their political
naiveté, journalistic attachment to contemporary events, and simple, direct writing styles won them little mainstream critical approval. (175)

Writers like Conroy, Le Sueur, Herbst, Algren and others were largely ignored for most of the twentieth century, existing mostly as asides or footnotes to a radical subculture during the 1930s. Most would not truly gain the larger recognition they deserved for being major players in both Midwestern and radical American literature until the 1970s, when regionalism again became a subject of literary interest and the political climate of literary studies was open to previously marginalized ideas. These radical writers, and their relationship to modernism, contributed to a much more comprehensive conversation taking place in the Midwest than is often accurately reflected in scholarship and served as pioneers and innovators redefining both the region and American culture.

More recently, scholarship has focused on reclaiming many of the more marginalized radical writers and this movement has resurrected many of the Midwestern radicals as well. James T. Farrell and Meridel Le Sueur are often mentioned in scholarship alongside other, often more well known, radical figures of the 1920s and 1930s like Mike Gold and Emma Goldman. Le Sueur’s work has also received significant attention in recent years, particularly for her role as a woman writer. Douglas Wixson’s book, *Worker Writer in America: Jack Conroy and the Tradition of Midwestern Literary Radicalism, 1898-1990* (1994), undertakes a close examination of these Midwestern writers taking into consideration the social and cultural aspects of the region they were writing from. While Wixson’s book covers the specifics of the radical movement within the region in more detail, particularly its Communist influences and
aspects, and covers the subject in a way this chapter does not need to repeat, what Wixson’s scholarship and that of other scholars fails to fully examine is the interaction between the ebbing influence of modernism and the burgeoning interest in regionalism influencing radical writing by Midwestern writers in the 1930s. Only by examining all aspects of literary culture during the early 20th century can an accurate picture emerge of the changes taking place in American art and culture.

The Midwestern radicals deserve more examination and recognition for recording and commenting on an important era in regional and national history. These writers are telling stories and preserving lives that address issues that were important during the time that they were writing but are still issues and ideas that are addressed in contemporary American culture. While the social and economic conditions of the 1930s have definitely improved and advanced as the twentieth century progressed, even in the twenty-first century we are faced with social and economic issues due to globalization, outsourcing, downsizing, and other workplace related issues that generate very similar questions and concerns. In reading the novels and stories of the Midwestern radicals we can reflect on the American past and present, examining situations where individual and collective rights became the forefront of discussion, rights that are often still being fought for or reflected upon today.
CHAPTER 4 NOTES

1 “Vertism” is a returning reference to Hamlin Garland’s late nineteenth century discussion of the goal and purpose of regional writing.

2 Born in Iowa, Josephine Herbst (1892-1969) grew up there and later attended several colleges around the country, eventually settling in New York City and a small house in Edwinnia, Pennsylvania. Married for a period of time to fellow Midwesterner, John Herrmann, Herbst became noted for her novels and stories that dealt with radical plots and situations, many drawing on elements of her own experiences and observations.

3 *Pity Is Not Enough* (1933), *The Executioner Waits* (1934), and *Rope of Gold* (1939)

4 Meridel Le Sueur (1900-1996) was born in Iowa and grew up in a family well steeped in socialism and radical thought and involved in those circles in the Midwest. While some of her early years were devoted to other concerns and some time on the West Coast, by the late 1920s Le Sueur was back in the Midwest detailing the concerns of the working classes in her writing and advocating in their welfare. In particular, Le Sueur’s work is noted for her focus on women’s issues and rights during the early twentieth century, recording and transcribing many of their experiences in her fiction.

5 John Wesley “Jack” Conroy (1898-1990) was in many ways the quintessential Midwestern worker-writer. Born in Missouri, he spent his early years observing the concerns of workers and the union in the coal mining camp near where he was born and in his own experiences in factories and on automobile assembly lines. He drew on those experiences for work like his novel *The Disinherited* (1933) and in his editorship of The Anvil, a periodical published in the 1930s devoted to the writing of workers.

6 James T. Farrell (1904-1979) is best known for his fiction collections detailing the lives of characters like Studs Lonigan and Danny O’Neill as they represent many of the same experiences and knowledge that he himself attained growing up in a working-class Irish neighborhood in Chicago. Farrell left Chicago behind after a few years at the University of Chicago and a trip to Europe and moved to New
York, where he would reside for the rest of his life. However, his fictional characters and concerns were almost always located back in the area and neighborhood where he had been raised.

7 Nelson Algren (1909-1981) was born in Detroit, Michigan but is associated most with the Chicago, as that is where his family later moved and where he spent much of his life. His radical associations are where he derives most of his notoriety, particularly in the Midwest.

8 Michael Gold (originally born Irwin Granich, 1893-1967) was an influential figure in early twentieth century American radicalism. He worked on radical periodicals, spending time as a contributing editor on The Liberator and later becoming an editor of The New Masses. His most notable literary work was the proletarian novel, Jews Without Money (New York: Liveright, 1930)

9 Le Sueur’s “Afterword” was written in October of 1978 for the publication of the novel.

10 Hemingway’s ties to the radical movement are limited to brief experiences in the 1930s. In 1935 he published an article in the New Masses (17 Sept. 1935), “Who Murdered the Vets, angrily addressing a hurricane that had passed through the Florida Keys murdering many veterans doing relief work there. Hemingway and John Dos Passos worked on the documentary The Spanish Earth, trying to help raise money and awareness of the Spanish Civil War. He spoke briefly at the American Writers Congress in 1937, the same evening as Earl Browder, the Secretary of the Communist Party of the U.S.A. at the time. To Have and Have Not was published in October of 1937. While not exactly a proletarian work of art, the novel does have a working class protagonist, Harry Morgan, who struggles to support himself and his family, resorting to rum running and other smuggling in order to make a living due to economic conditions. Morgan’s death at the end of the novel, due to his affiliation with some Cuban revolutionaries who had chartered his boat, suggests a flaw in revolutionary ideals and an inability for individuals to succeed on their own.

11 A reference to the Haymarket Riot in Chicago in 1886 and the subsequent hanging of four suspected leaders of the riot.
The Danny O’Neill books consist of *A World I Never Made* (1936), *No Star is Lost* (1938), *Father And Son* (1940), *My Days of Anger* (1943), and *The Face of Time* (1953). My observations regarding Farrell’s work on Danny O’Neill centers more on the first three books of the collection, that focus more on Danny’s childhood and adolescence, as they are closer in publication period to the rest of the authors discussed in this study.

Farrell’s Studs Lonigan trilogy consists of *Young Lonigan: A Boyhood in Chicago Streets* (1932), *The Young Manhood of Studs Lonigan* (1934), and *Judgment Day* (1935).

Meridel Le Sueur had a poem “Spring Out of Jerusalem” published in the April 1933 issue of *Scribner’s* (an issue that also featured a story by Hemingway).

Conroy, Le Sueur and others were marginalized during much of their careers for either their Midwestern affiliation, their radical connections (Le Sueur would be watched by the FBI for a period of time), or the dismissal of artistic value in their work. Only in the late 1970s and early 1980s, with the rising interest in women authors and other literary minorities, like radical writers, did their work begin to gain critical and artistic acceptance in literary circles.
CONCLUSION

Midwestern literature and modernist writing are not as different as most scholars have previously perceived. Midwestern writers during the 1920s and 1930s were incorporating many of the same stylistic and thematic elements important to their modernist counterparts and providing similar commentary on the changes taking place socially and culturally. Ignoring these comparisons leads to an incomplete view of early twentieth century American literature and culture, particularly in the Midwest, which is hopefully rectified by much of the analysis in this current study.

In Chapter 1, I highlighted the popular critical perceptions and definitions regarding regionalism, modernism, and Midwestern literature, demonstrating much of their current inadequacy. These terms are laden with a great deal of literary and cultural baggage that obfuscate and at times oversimplify the significance and impact that they have in understanding American literature. Regionalism was far from a passing fad and impacts American literature far more than simply categorizing a particular writers’ locale. Definitions of modernism tend toward an institutionalized, easily defined view of literary technique or tradition and ignore the more subtle ways the techniques and themes give shape to the movement. Midwestern literature also tends to be dismissed or overlooked in light of literature from regions like the South or the Northeast, an oversight which is detrimental in understanding a large region of the United States and its significant role in defining American mythology and culture. These terms need increased reassessment and renewed focus, particularly in regard to the writers in the chapters that follow.
Definitions are important to teachers, scholars, and readers in establishing boundaries and limits that allow comparison and reflection, yet as Chapter 1 establishes definitions should not be viewed or treated as finite ways of understanding a type of literature or text. As many of the literary works within this study show, the typical definitions applied to regionalism, modernism, and Midwestern literature are often inadequate. Regionalism is an important aspect of American literary and cultural analysis and those larger implications need to be realized. Studying regional literature informs the local, national, and international. Modernism is more than a series of criteria. The themes, techniques, and characteristics of literary modernism inform a style of literature but also call attention to significant changes and reactions taking place in the early twentieth century that inform a larger sense of history and culture. Midwestern literature is an important aspect of American literature. The Midwest is not simply “flyover country” or a bland flat space in the middle of the United States. It is a thriving, vibrant region that reflects and augments much more of the national history and culture than it is given credit for. Midwestern literature needs to be viewed as an important part of American literature and culture in order for a comprehensive understanding of American identity to be achieved.

A redefinition of literary terminology, particularly in regard to the categories of regionalism, modernism, and Midwestern literature provides many avenues for further exploration. The continued pejorative use of “local color” and “regional” often dismissed an entire body of literature that provides valuable insight into localized and distinctive aspects of American culture and the distinctions made in Chapter 1 encourage further re-
examination and recovery of many of these authors and works. There are also theoretical parameters that govern regionalism, much like other literary movements, and a more specific articulation of those theories and their larger implications needs to be articulated and published. In a global world seen as increasingly more flat and homogenized, regional theories and studies provide valuable insights into the local distinctiveness that characterizes all aspects of national and international culture. Modernism and regionalism has also been examined in some detail, particularly in regard to Southern literature, and yet there is still so much to be gained in terms of understanding by looking at the terms in conjunction with each other rather than always in separate comparison. All regions of the country were affected by or contributed to American modernism and further research should be done to look at this phenomenon by encompassing all regions of the United States. Chapter 1 also highlights the significance of further study in Midwestern literature, research and redefinition that has been significantly expanded upon by scholars in organizations like the Society for the Study of Midwestern Literature and can continue to be expanded upon through further analysis of the role the Midwest plays in American literature and culture. The Midwest needs to be understood for its significant role in American culture and identity.

As I discussed in Chapter 2, Midwestern writers who stayed in the Midwest were addressing the same cultural and social issues that were important to modernist writers both nationally and internationally. Despite their decidedly regional and often rural focus, Bess Streeter Aldrich, Zona Gale, and others were feeling the same effects of shifting history and culture. Like modernists, they were feeling a sense of
disillusionment or disconnection from the world, which the Midwestern writers tried to
counter by remembering aspects of the past and trying to apply or adapt elements of those
situations to the present and future. When faced with contemporary situations of major
historical implication, such as World War I, these Midwesterners turned to the local to
find some kind of reconciliation or sense of order in a world that seemed increasingly
disordered. While modernists looked to find cohesion and order in their art, the
Midwesterners who stayed within the Midwest felt that the land could reconcile and
redeem the increasing social and historical divide.

Recognizing the role of Midwestern writers in light of larger literary movements
like modernism provides a more complete picture of the literary and cultural climate
during the early twentieth century. While many of these writers are no longer widely
read or studied, they deserve to be as their work was highly indicative of the culture and
style during the time they were writing. Many of these authors were popular and sold a
substantial number of novels during the early decades of the twentieth century, making
their point of view valuable in terms of studying popular culture at the time. In addition,
their literature demonstrates many of the same aspects as literature already valued for its
subject matter and artistry. Bess Streeter Aldrich, Zona Gale and others provide a more
comprehensive view of the value found in the Midwest and the cultural climate of the
nation at large.

This chapter suggests many further areas of study. Almost all the authors
discussed within Chapter 2 have had very little research or analysis devoted to their work.
Aldrich, Gale, and others have been the focus of some more recent study due to their
status as women writers; however, the other aspects and implications of their work need to be more fully explored as well. In addition, as many of these writers are out of print or only slowly beginning to be recovered, it raises the question of how many other authors may yet be undiscovered or largely unknown. The writers in this chapter had a similar degree of influence and comparable artistic talent to many of their more well known contemporaries and that comparison suggests that other writers that may yet be discovered might have similar art and commentary to contribute to a greater understanding of the Midwest and twentieth century literature. The fact that many of these writers were published by prominent New York publishers despite marginalized Midwestern locations or subject matter is another area that deserves further study.

In Chapter 3, the Midwestern writers who left affirmed some of the work of the writers who stayed local, even though their intention was to do anything but to confirm the value of the Midwest. The Midwestern expatriates left the region in search of something to give more meaning or purpose to their lives, particularly in light of the disparity they saw between the Midwest and the rest of the world. The world of their ancestral past no longer seemed to function adequately in light of the tumultuous present. However, as their physical distance from the Midwest grew, their reflections and writing continued to bring them back to the region. While adapting to many of the more experimental literary techniques and themes of modernism, the Midwestern expatriates associated those techniques quite often with the region they left behind. The Midwest was a place that represented restrictive morality and conformity, but it was also a complicated place to move away from as the attachments and memories the authors had
to the region were difficult to sever. As modernism was a movement strongly associated
with place, this lingering attachment is unsurprising, but significant as so many of these
writers are valued and associated for their work independent of the Midwest and yet the
region is such an inherent part of their philosophies and worldviews.

In examining the national and international lives of many of the Midwestern
expatriates, greater insight can be found into twentieth century literature and culture and
also contemporary American culture as well. As individuals continue to negotiate the
complicated distinctions between national, international, and global issues and identities,
observing how writers like Ernest Hemingway and Glenway Wescott dealt with their own
inconsistencies and ambivalent emotions can be valuable. These writers merged the
nationally and internationally cosmopolitan with the local, demonstrating how cultures
and communities evolve. These writers also adapted and evolved literary art and
techniques in the process, creating a Midwestern, modernist, realist, regionalist form that
acknowledged the tenuous and coalescing boundaries that form individual and artistic
identity. Understanding that these authors were both Midwesterners along with all their
other literary and artistic titles raises the status of the region and recognizes the
significant place it occupies in American culture.

While this particular study argues for the value and importance of the Midwest in
light of the larger literary movements of the early twentieth century, more specific work
can be done in examining that connection further. In particular, Ford Madox Ford’s
comments regarding the prevalence of Midwestern writers in submitting to The
Transatlantic Review in addition to his comments on the inherent nature of
“middlewestishness” in early twentieth century writing need to be examined further. This could also be expanded to a more complete analysis of the role of Midwestern writers in little magazines or avant garde publications as a whole, as even writers from earlier chapters, like August Derleth, made occasional appearances in these literary forums. Dawn Powell is a writer from Chapter 3 who also deserves a great deal more analysis and attention. Despite recent efforts to resuscitate her work through occasional scholarly efforts and through the republication of many of her books, the stereotypes discussed in this study are still at work and, as a result, Powell’s novels and stories are still languishing in a form of scholarly oblivion or dismissal. Examinations of her relationships and influence with other prominent writers of the time and providing her novels and stories the chance be explored with less scholarly bias is something that will hopefully extend from this study.

The radical Midwestern writers of the 1930s, as discussed in Chapter 4, are yet another aspect of early twentieth century Midwestern literature that prove important to understanding the region and American literature and culture as a whole. The Midwestern radicals were driven by a desire to improve the conditions of their fellow workers and the conditions of their Midwestern communities. Through the social, cultural and literary environment of these writers, they encountered and adapted to some of the conventions of literary modernism while drawing on aspects of social realism to strongly present their points of view and argued for the Midwest as being a significant location for understanding these situations and issues. The Midwestern radicals tried to turn the social and economic challenges the region and country was faced with into
situations where workers and farmers could prevail and regain success and control over their own destinies. Their adherence to social realism and their incorporation of new literary techniques laid bare the issues the Midwest was facing and also advanced the region’s artistic and cultural environment at the same time, particularly as their self-publishing periodical ventures gave them a voice denied to them in many other literary circles.

As this chapter and the few other works also on these authors that already have been published show, the Midwestern radical writers were participating in a regional grassroots movement that was important for providing a voice to the working classes and disenfranchised during the 1930s. Like many of the authors in this study, these writers are often lesser known or completely overlooked, and yet their literature and their social and political statements and efforts were significant for their attempts to change the region and thereby aspects of the world for the better. Literary scholars, historians, and readers in general gain a more complete knowledge of the social and cultural dynamics of the Midwest through these authors. The faithfulness of Jack Conroy, Meridel Le Sueur, and the other writers of this chapter to portray the conditions and issues facing individuals as truthfully and loyally as possible is an effort to be recognized and admired during a time when so many of the voices they represent were unable to be heard or were ignored entirely.

The most significant area of further research suggested by this chapter is in examining in much more detail the relationship between radical writing and modernism. Modernism has radical elements within many of its subjects and techniques that are
similar or comparable to much of the radical writing produced during the 1930s. This is alluded to at times by scholars, but never explored in depth. As this particular project attempts to expand that oversight by examining aspects of modernism as they influence or are adapted by radical authors of the Midwest, this analysis could be expanded on a much larger scale. Due to the blacklisting and marginalization of many of these authors, like many of the other authors in this study, Meridel Le Sueur, Jack Conroy, and others also deserve more recognition and scholarly focus.

As this study has shown, Midwestern writers and regionalism deserve more attention and focus in literary study. While readers and scholars have devoted some study to the subject, particularly in looking at women and minority writers, the region as a whole should be addressed in greater depth. The Midwestern writers discussed in this study substantively compare to their contemporaries. Regions cannot be studied in a vacuum; they must be contrasted and examined in light of the cultures and histories that surround them. Philip Joseph, in his study of how late nineteenth and early twentieth century regionalism contributes to global studies of local community, states “One of my central contentions is that regionalism speaks most pertinently to us when it recognizes a dynamic, mutually informing relationship between members of a locality on one hand and the institutions and cultures of a globalized world on the other” (7). Joseph’s statement, an extremely contemporary take on regional studies, supports the basis for this study. Modernism and regionalism need to be viewed in contrast with each other, particularly as they represented a global and local movement (or at least were rather strictly perceived that way), as the local informs the global and the global reflects back on
the local. This study advances much of this contemporary perspective and provides insight into a literary era and relationship that is important to understanding American history and culture and its future evolution.
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