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EDITED BY JOHN ELY BRIGGS

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Misrepresentative Fiction

Those of you who are old enough to look back with clear vision on conditions in the Middle West thirty years ago know something of the literary dearth, the literary stagnation, that then prevailed in this section of the country. Professor Barrett Wendell, whose *History of American Literature* came out in the opening years of the twentieth century, was often taken to task for assuming that no literature of any value was then being produced in the United States west of the Alleghany Mountains; but, so far as fiction is concerned, the assumption was not far wrong. About 1900, let us say, the eastern States had a cluster of novelists like Sarah Orne Jewett and Mary E. Wilkins-Freeman and the southern States could claim a group of story-writers like Thomas Nelson Page and George

[This critique of contemporary fiction pertaining to life in the Middle West, particularly Iowa, is the address delivered at the Mid-year Convocation by Professor Sloan of the School of Letters at the State University of Iowa. — THE EDITOR.]

W. Cable; but all, or virtually all, we were doing in fiction at that time was represented by H. B. Fuller, Octave Thanet, and Hamlin Garland. It is true that William Dean Howells and Mark Twain, both Middle Westerners by birth, were still living and still writing; but both were in their dotage, with all their successes a long distance in the past. I think I am divulging no secret when I tell you that *The Midland*, the little magazine run by my good friends, John T. Frederick and Frank L. Mott, owed its inception, in large measure, to the conviction of a few men like themselves that the Middle West was dormant in fiction, and that it needed an oracle or a voice to make it spring to life.

Most of you know what a remarkable, what a decisive, literary transformation has taken place in a single generation. Within our own time, we have seen the literary grip of the eastern States and the southern States loosen, and the place in fiction they once proudly held has been passed on to the Middle West — the Middle West that used to be thought of as the home of hogs and hominy, and only hogs and hominy. The States that extend from Chicago to Denver, east and west, and from Minneapolis to Little Rock, north and south, are now definitely on the literary map, and, in fiction at any rate, their names are written in letters that are large and distinct. H. L. Mencken — the H. L. Mencken who so abominates the Middle West that he dreams of it in terms of the hinterland, the cow

country, the Methodist belt and the like — frankly concedes that the best fiction the country has produced since the World War has come from the great prairie States; and E. J. O'Brien, famous for his anthologies of the short story, has only recently been telling us that the literary center of the United States is Iowa City.

Most of what is original in American fiction, penetrating in American fiction, and significant in American fiction the last fourteen or fifteen years has emanated from Iowa and the surrounding States. Booth Tarkington, Willa Cather, Zona Gale, F. Scott Fitzgerald, O. E. Rölvaag, Herbert Quick, Rupert Hughes, Henry K. Webster, Sherwood Anderson, Robert Herrick, Carl Van Vechten, Josephine Herbst, Ruth Suckow, Cornelia Cannon, Sinclair Lewis, Janet Fairbank, Floyd Dell, Edna Ferber, Susan Glaspell, Margaret Ayer Barnes, and Bess Streeter Aldrich have all "arrived", as we say; and, without exception, they belong to the Middle West either by birth or by adoption. The same thing is true of a group of younger novelists — younger novelists who still have their laurels to make — like MacKinlay Kantor, Roger Sergel, Walter Muilenberg, and Nelson Antrim Crawford, who are just as native, just as indigenous, as the hogs and the cattle, the corn and the wheat, that constitute our basic or material wealth.

Nobody but a fool or an ignoramus would unreservedly condemn a group of writers as distinguished as

this, and I want it distinctly understood that that is not my mission, not my intention. I have the same respect, the same admiration, for most of the work done by these men and women that I presume the rest of you have. Novels like *Alice Adams*, *My Antonia*, *Miss Lulu Bett*, *The Great Gatsby*, *Giants in the Earth*, *Vandermark's Folly*, *The Web of Life*, *Red Rust*, *Dodsworth*, *So Big*, and *Peter Whiffle* have all taken a place, a deserved place, in contemporary American literature; and that I have no grudge against them will be clear when I say that I have used most of them in my classes time and again. They have all demonstrated the right to live by living, and there is no other test for fiction, or for any other kind of literature, for that matter, than the test of permanence, or relative permanence, that they have managed to meet.

My particular business here is with a group of Middle-Western novelists and Middle-Western novels for which I confess only a modified respect, and in some instances less than that. Sinclair Lewis's *Main Street*, Sherwood Anderson's *Poor White*, Carl Van Vechten's *The Tattooed Countess*, Floyd Dell's *Moon Calf*, Ruth Suckow's *The Odyssey of a Nice Girl*, and Homer Croy's *West of the Water Tower* are all illustrative of what I have in mind, though it would be easy to amplify the list five-fold or ten-fold. Now let us get into the books and see what they are like.

To the confirmed novel reader at any rate, the most

striking thing about these novels is the dead uniformity that marks them. They are all constructed after a formula, written after a recipe, quite as much as the popular romances of the late W. J. Locke, where a singed cat is always metamorphosed into a great hero. At bottom — stripped of non-essentials, that is — the stories are as much alike as two green peas or two derby hats; the beginnings are the same, the middles are the same, and the endings are the same. The underlying idea is always this : a young man or a young woman, usually of some intellectual distinction or of some cultural aspirations, playing the rebel, the iconoclast, the Ishmaelite, with reference to his or her immediate environment, and nearly always a Middle-Western environment. The brooding young soul, after a bath or two in the works of Randolph Bourne and Van Wyck Brooks, finds all surrounding or encompassing life a dance of the galvanized dead; spiritual frustration, spiritual starvation, are so prevalent that they come to be the rule or norm. They want, oh, so eagerly want, to realize their lives, as they are fond of putting it; but their environment is so unfriendly, so hostile, that the soul within can find no expression or fruition.

The little towns in which they grow up — the Gopher Prairies and the Winesburgs — are like the Nazareth of old : centers of all that is restricting, of all that is debilitating, of all that is deadening, where life — essential life — finds itself undernourished, stunted,

balked. The villagers are vulgar because they stick their napkins under their chins, eat their pie with knives instead of forks, and pick their teeth while they balance in their chairs. The villagers are narrow because they secretly line up with the Ku Klux Klan, tolerantly stomach a Hell where the depraved walk about like kittens on hot bricks, and drive out of town Nellie Gray because she is going to have a baby without benefit of clergy. The villagers are hypocritical because they keep up the W. C. T. U., send dry congressmen down to Washington, and then turn their kitchens, their pantries, and, in some cases, their cellars into home-brew establishments. The villagers are bourgeois because they live in parlors with marble-topped center tables, decked out with huge conchshells and family albums, or with crayon portraits of Uncle Ezra trying his best to look like one of the famous Smith Brothers, and because they read the *American Magazine* and the *Saturday Evening Post*. In a word, the villagers are as monotonous and as drab as the towns they live in, with one long street, often pretentiously called Broadway, where the drug store, the grocery store, the hardware store, all lead down to the frame hotel that hasn't been painted for a generation or to the little red station where the Rocky Mountain Limited whistles and then rushes on.

This, without much exaggeration, is what Sherwood Anderson's Hugh McVey, Homer Croy's Guy Plum-

mer, Sinclair Lewis's Carol Kennicott, and Ruth Suckow's Marjorie Schoesel find themselves up against — a world where every natural impulse is checked as if it were unholy, a world where mediocrity is enthroned until it becomes the norm of life, and a world where pettiness and triviality are elevated into the regions of a cult and a religion — the only cult and religion that the villagers really know. The great American desert has been misplaced in the geographies and the atlases; its true locale is in Iowa, Illinois, Minnesota, Nebraska, Kansas, Missouri, North Dakota, and South Dakota. Here is where the great American drama of the superior individual at war with an inferior environment is being played out — the villain, the ugly, frowning Bluebeard, always or nearly always the Middle West.

Nobody who keeps abreast of the public prints can fail to realize the snobbish, the contemptuous, the God-Almighty attitude toward the Middle West that exists among some, not most, Easterners to-day. There have been some striking proofs of it in the last two or three years and they are doubtless fresh in the minds of all of you. Heywood Broun has described us as "the land of the Babbitts". Senator Grundy has been telling us we belong to the "backward states". Senator Moses has been a little franker by dubbing us "sons of wild jackasses".

That this attitude should exist in the New England

States does not strike me as strange; it is, in reality, a normal, a natural outgrowth of the novels written by one-time or expatriate Middle Westerners who are like the birds that foul their own nests. These writers have done their best or their worst to picture Iowa and the surrounding States as places where the stench of atrophied personality cries to the very heavens, and they have been taken at their word by those like Broun and Grundy and Moses who do not know. I say purposely "by those who do not know" because I am convinced, from more than fifty years of actual contact and actual experience, that there is only a modicum of truth, and often not that, in this common representation of the Middle West — a Middle West that is the epitome, the embodiment, the consummation, of what is cowardly, paralyzing, and mean in American life.

John Cowper Powys, the distinguished English novelist and critic who talked to our students a year or so ago, put the matter rather brutally when he said to me: "It is all a damnable libel and a damnable lie. I have been going up and down your part of the country for twenty-five years, and I know what you are like. Lewis started the nonsense in *Main Street* and the rest have been parroting him ever since." I should not care to put the matter as bluntly or as emphatically as Powys does; but I think there is much truth in what he says.

What I propose to do now is to take you to a little town in western Iowa — a town that I have known

ever since I was a baby in my mother's arms — and let you see what it is like. I believe it typifies and symbolizes what goes on in a thousand other towns in the Middle West to-day, and, to that extent, it is a microcosm of the Middle West.

Magnolia, with its lovely and exotic name, lies on the western tier of Iowa counties. Normally the population is three hundred : when a birth occurs, it shoots up to three hundred and one, and when a death takes place, it drops down to two hundred and ninety-nine. There is a post office, a drug store, a hardware establishment, an eating-house, and, quite characteristically, twice as many garages and cream stations as grocery stores. There are five churches that pay their preachers anywhere from four hundred to twelve hundred dollars a year, and, whenever any blasé newcomer suggests a consolidation of these churches, something assuming the proportions of a free-for-all dog fight is precipitated. The old Congregational Church, now degenerated into an American Legion Hall, used to put on movies once a week, every Saturday night, usually releases two years old where Hoot Gibson or Tom Mix licks his weight in wild cats and then rides off with the lovely blonde to everlasting bliss. The Odd Fellows and the Masons, the Rebekahs and the Eastern Stars, determine the social status of every adult in town; if you belong to them, or any of them, you are eligible to the billiard club that has a rendezvous

above the barber shop or to the Happy Hour Club where the women quote Henry Wadsworth Longfellow and thoroughly canvass their neighbors. Here, if anywhere, we would seem to have the potentialities of "Main Street", and here, if anywhere, it ought to be possible to find these young people whose superiority complex makes them cry out in revolt against their surroundings, "How weary and stale and flat and unprofitable everything is!"

I have kept abreast of the young men and young women of Magnolia for a generation, a long generation at that; and I am prepared to say unequivocally that I have never seen anything of the sort or known anything of the sort. It is true that a number of these young men and young women have left the place to make their homes elsewhere; but they have left it because of the enlarged opportunities offered by the great cities — nearby cities like Omaha and far-away cities like Chicago — for those who wish to get on in the professional world or the industrial world.

Magnolia happens to have produced a number of men who went out into life to become rather eminent, and it is interesting to note their reactions — their mature reactions — to the place that gave them birth and nourished their growth. Newell Dwight Hillis, born in Magnolia, became one of the country's most distinguished pulpit orators — first in Central Church in Chicago and later on in Plymouth Church in Brooklyn

— and he was, for many years, one of the greatest drawing cards in the chautauquas before they became the drivelling and inconsequential things they are to-day. He came back to the old town almost every year while he was lecturing in the Middle West, and I can vividly recall the joy, the almost childlike joy, he showed when he was allowed, on one of his visits, to ring the bell of the old frame schoolhouse where he acquired his earliest lessons. He preached once in his birthplace when he was in the very heyday of his fame, and I have heard him say that the loveliest music he ever listened to in his life was the singing of an old quartette on that particular occasion — a quartette that used to sing in the church when he was a boy.

Charles Fulton, born in Magnolia, went out West when he was a young fellow, and later on became Governor of Oregon, United States Senator from his adopted State, and a great wheel-horse in republican politics out on the coast. He has always considered one of the dominating forces, one of the ennobling forces, of his life to be his early association with the Clarks, the Rices, the Mains, the Harveys, and some of the other fine pioneer families that settled the place back in the sixties and seventies of the nineteenth century. Whether he is alive to-day I do not know, but, if he is, I am sure he would not O. K. the statement of Samuel Goldwyn, the motion-picture magnate, that "Iowa is devoid of romance".

Two or three other men who have writ their names large in the business life of the United States trace their ancestry back to Magnolia, and, from long acquaintance with them, I know they bear no more relation to the fictional rebels of Sherwood Anderson and Ruth Suckow than alchemy does to science. One of the men to whom I refer — a governing official of one of the greatest of Chicago corporations — has recently made plans to have his body brought back to the old place when Death comes later on, and his long, last sleep will be in the lovely country cemetery that looks out over mile upon mile of hill and dale.

Now I come to what seems to me the heart of the whole matter, and that is the distortion, the falsehood, that vitiates the point of view of these malcontents, these rebels, of fiction. Their tacit assumption that the Middle West is a Vale of Tears will hardly stand investigation, will hardly hold water; and I believe it is high time that we who live in the Middle West resent it, as it deserves to be resented.

The late W. L. George, a novelist who was familiar with every nook and cranny of our country, once told me that the Middle West is the typical part of the United States, and that the foreigner who wants to see the United States at its best, or at its most representative, should seek out, first of all, the region where the grain and the stock that feed the nation are produced. George's statement is very far from being nonsense

when we remember that the States west of Chicago and east of Denver have the lowest illiteracy record in the Union and that they contain fewer immigrants of an undesirable sort than any other part of the country.

It is only natural that our chief accomplishments thus far have been of a material sort because we are so young out here that we have had to spend most of the last seventy or eighty years in conquering the soil, in building our houses, in getting a foothold in life, so to speak. When our youthfulness is duly weighed, our cultural achievements strike me as altogether creditable, especially in the larger cities where wealth and intelligence commonly cluster.

The Civic Opera in Chicago, housed in a great and beautiful twenty-million-dollar building, is comparable to any other organization of its kind in the world; one needs only to contrast it with what is done in London, in Paris, in Brussels, in Milan, to realize how fine it is. The Public Art Gallery in Minneapolis has a collection of Rembrandts, of Botticellis, of Titians, that must be a revelation to the Easterner who thinks of Minnesota simply in terms of wheat and Hunkies. The Community Theatre in Omaha has put on four or five first-rate plays — plays by such men as George Kelly, Sidney Howard, and Eugene O'Neill — every year since it was organized, and it has the backing, financial, artistic, and otherwise, of the leaders in the city's life.

There are great symphony orchestras in Chicago, in Minneapolis, in St. Louis, in Omaha, giving the people a taste of Wagner, of Beethoven, of Mozart; and smaller organizations of the same type are taking root in Cedar Rapids, in Davenport, and in other cities that are considerably under a hundred thousand.

We are waking up to the fact, as the rest of America is doing, that man does not live by bread, and by bread alone. In the past, we may have rendered unto Caesar the things that are Caesar's, but now we are rendering unto God the things that are God's. Art has begun to flourish out here and will continue to flourish out here; the schoolhouses, the countless schoolhouses, will see to that. A State that spends as much money as Iowa for education does not need to worry about the practical, the utilitarian, the matter-of-fact, swamping everything else in life.

Before I close, may I ask that a wrong construction will not be put upon all this. The kind of fiction that sentimentalizes about life — the sort of fiction that cries out for sweetness and light when there is no sweetness and light — I abhor, and I have struck at it with all the force I could command from the time I started out as a teacher. I do not care for the *Old Chester* of Margaret Deland, the *Friendship Village* of Zona Gale, the other purely imaginary small towns that are the abode of only simplicity, innocence, and virtue, because I know that such idealized creations are born out of

cheerful, easy illusions and lead to cheerful, easy illusions. What is called the "genteel tradition" in literature, associated with William Dean Howells, is dead, hopelessly dead; and none of us who cares for the truth or loves the truth wishes it back again because it shunned reality by shutting its eyes to what is not "nice" in life.

I want the truth about the small town — the small town of the Middle West — in fiction; but (and here is the kernel of the matter) I want the truth divested of prejudice and cynicism — the prejudice and cynicism that always militate against truth and obscure truth for the reader. The idea that the Middle West is the breeding ground, the favorite haunt, of what is cloying and soul-destroying in American life seems to me as false as what we get in *Old Chester* or *Friendship Village*, and that is the reason I am protesting against it, as a long and loyal resident of the State of Iowa. That we have a monopoly on all that is cheap and banal in life, that we are crucifying our young men and young women, does not accord with either my observation or my experience, and all literature has sooner or later to be measured by those touchstones.

Life out here where the tall corn grows is pretty much what it is everywhere else where things are fairly new, and it is that kind of life — a life that gets down to the common, the underlying emotions — that I should like to see our novelists handle. We have our

hopes and our fears, our joys and our sorrows; and any literature that plays up the fears and the sorrows, and ignores the hopes and the joys, is a partial, an incomplete record, and subject to the indictment that such literature must expect and get. All I want is what has been done over and over again, or the sort of thing that Booth Tarkington, Herbert Quick, Cornelia Cannon, Willa Cather, and other true analysts of the Middle West have done. They did not feel and do not feel that the Middle West is "a cultural wilderness", as Mr. Mencken calls it, but rather a place, like all other places in the world, where the great drama of living and dying is going on, where parents have joyed over their first-born and mourned over their irreclaimable dead. It is such things as these that constitute the basic, the pivotal, the true, life of the Middle West, and, in my judgment, any fiction of the Middle West that endures must get down to such essentials.

SAM B. SLOAN