

"Same Trailer, Different Park": Staging Small Town Life

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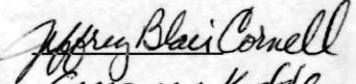
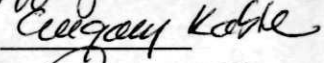
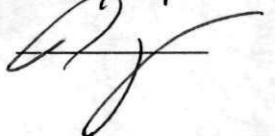
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“If you ain’t got two kids by twenty-one,
you’re probably gonna die alone.
At least that’s what tradition told you.
And it don’t matter if you don’t believe,
come Sunday morning, you best be there
in the front row like you’re supposed to.
Same hurt in every heart.
Same trailer different park.”
-Kacey Musgraves

The excerpt above is the first verse to self-proclaimed small town girl and Grammy award winning country singer Kacey Musgrave’s “Merry Go Round” from her debut album, *Same Trailer, Different Park*. In the song, Musgraves paints the picture of her own small town life with compassion, sympathy, and understanding to what it is to be from a small town—the belonging, the restlessness, and the alienation. American theatre shows a lot about the way the world views small towns as well as the ways in which small towns view themselves and, while the scope of what a small town is and how it affects the residents according to American media is quite varied, there are many common themes throughout the different presentations of small town life. Three of the most common themes throughout these plays are family, community, and exclusion. For the last century, American playwrights have been voicing their own perspective on small town life through their works; consequently, each has added uniquely to the existing dialogue. For the purpose of this paper, I will be focusing on the ways in which family, community, and exclusion are presented in the following plays: Thornton Wilder’s *Our Town* (1938), William Inge’s *Come Back, Little Sheba* (1950), Michael Stewart, Lee Adams, and Charles Strouse’s

Bye Bye Birdie (1960), Beth Henley's *Crimes of the Heart* (1981), and Tracy Letts' *August: Osage County* (2007).

Family is often presented as the center of not only small town life, but of American life in general. The idea of family is so central to American identity that it has been at the center of everything from political campaigns to horror movies. When those family values are translated to the stage, we get a microcosm of American society. In his essay "The American Family and Boundaries in Historical Perspective", historian David Brion Davis of Yale University describes the social myth of the American family in society in the following terms: "In a land of rampant change, fluidity, and self-seeking individualism only the family remained as a stabilizing and regenerating force." While this is a common view of American families, Davis points out that American families through every generation have had varying levels of closeness and functionality—especially given that certain cultural practices that were normal in their own time are no longer considered appropriate. One example would be the way in which wealthier American mothers would send their babies away to be fed by local nurses regardless of their ability to care for their own child which, while common in its own time, culture, and context, is no longer a socially acceptable practice. The idea of family has changed since the early twentieth century, but the idea of it as a building block for society is still a common belief. The changing view of the American family and the role it plays in small town society can be traced throughout the five plays. (Davis, 1979).

Our Town by Thornton Wilder made its New York debut at Henry Miller's Theater on February 4th, 1938. The small town at the center of the play is called Grovers' Corners—an imagined town somewhere in New Hampshire. Grovers' Corners is meant to represent any small town in the American landscape. Set from 1908-1913, *Our Town* follows the citizens of Grovers' Corners in the first act as they go through their daily lives, in the second act as they attend the wedding of Emily Webb and George Gibbs, and in the third act to Emily's funeral. The play discusses the importance and unimportance of every little thing that happens in Grovers' Corners. (Wilder, 1938).

Thornton Wilder's *Our Town*, produced in 1938, paints a Norman Rockwell-esque portrait of the American family by focusing on the basics: daily life, marriage, and death. American actress Stella Adler, who worked with many of the biggest playwrights in twentieth century American theatre, described this element of Wilder style in the following quote taken from a compilation of lectures she gave on American playwrights: "What Wilder didn't admire was overintellectualization. He wanted, in his own plays, the kind of truth that would go on for generation after generation. There will always be families. They'll always have a boy and a girl. They will die and be buried in the same cemetery where their parents are buried. Those are universal truths." (Adler, 2012). This statement rings true in the way in which families are treated in *Our Town*. Thanks in many ways to that simplicity, Wilder provides the clearest idea of family in any of the five plays.

The Gibbs and the Webbs, the two families we spend the majority of our time focusing on, show us a picture of the typical American family—one mom, one dad, one son, one daughter. From the 1890s to the early two-thousands, the majority of couples with children had one or two children making up for roughly one-third of all households, so this dynamic fits with the onstage portrayal of both *Our Town* and *Bye Bye Birdie*. (Sandbox Network, 2019). The makeup of each family varies a little with the daughter, Emily, being the eldest Webb with one much younger brother, Wallace, while Rebecca Gibbs is only a bit younger than her brother George. (Wilder, 1938).

With each family, we get a genuine sense of love and care. Mr. Gibbs calls on George's love for his poor, overworked mother to get him to take on more responsibility of household chores and we see Emily turn to her mother for reassurance while battling with her insecurities as they peel peas together. (Payne, 2010) We do not, however, focus on these familial connections. We don't see Emily and her younger brother, Wallace, reconnect in the final graveyard scene, and that is for a reason. In *Our Town*, the family is shown more as a societal unit than as a psychological study or a narrative focus. (Haberman, 1989). For this reason, the only things that really need to be established are that they are a normal, loving, functioning family unit. There is no elaboration into the deep feelings a mother has for her child or for the strong bond between siblings. Nothing of the kind needs to be explored for the play to work as family is not the focus of the play, merely a tool used within the play to tell the larger story of life in Grover's Corners. (Haberman, 1989).

In their book on the expectation of fathers in America, Dr. Jerrold Shapiro, Dr. Michael Diamond, and Dr. Martin Greenburg define the role of the father as “an authority figure who disciplined and taught the children about the ways of the outside world.” (Shapiro, 1995) Mr. Gibbs and Mr. Webb each affirm this as the role of the father in society through their actions in the play. Mr. Gibbs, as already discussed, talks to his son about household chores and thus about responsibility. In this, he helps to guide his son and teach him right from wrong—acting as both a teacher and an example for the man he wishes his son to be. (Cardullo, 1998) Mr. Webb fills the fatherly role by stepping in when Emily and George get mutual cold-feet on their wedding day and he talks to both of them about the role he expects George to take up in his daughter’s life and in the act of giving Emily away. In doing this, Mr. Webb reinforces how society should run. Like the railing on the side of a bridge, the father is there to direct his family along the difficult road and to keep them from falling by the wayside. (Payne, 2010) Mr. Gibbs and Dr. Webb were recognized for their regular role as the head of the family from the start as shown in the following excerpt taken from the New York Times review by Brooks Atkinson: “On one side of an imaginary street Dr. Gibbs and his family are attending to their humdrum affairs with relish and probity. On the opposite side Mr. Webb, the local editor, and his family are fulfilling their quiet destiny.” (Atkinson, 1938).

American educator Catharine Beecher once described the role of mothers in the family in the following way: “...to American women, more than to any

others on earth, is committed the exalted privilege of extending over the world those blessed influences, which are to renovate degraded man.” (Davis, 1979). In this way, mothers are expected to rear the children and support them throughout their life while the father was the disciplinarian. (Shapiro, 1995). Mrs. Gibbs and Mrs. Webb both fill the motherly role in society in their own ways—as does Emily to some extent in the third act. These three ladies each love their children and care for them; we see this from the things Mrs. Gibbs and Mrs. Webb do for their children in the first act and in the care with which Emily discusses her baby in the final act. The clearest demonstrations of their role within society are their actions rather than their words. Mrs. Gibbs and Mrs. Webb first take the stage in the first act and they are making breakfast for their families. They go on to feed the chickens, peel peas, and tidy the house. These normal, everyday tasks are the things these women do to keep the house rolling along. (Films Media Group, 2007).

In the late nineteenth century when this play is set, middle-class mothers are usually stay-at-home moms that spend their days dealing with household chores and rearing the children; given this cultural idiom in the context of its own time, Mrs. Gibbs and Mrs. Webb are a clear representation of the every-woman. More than doing for their family with direct service, these mothers fulfill the societal role by singing in the choir. The choir is a religious community activity which keeps the mothers entwined in the social structure in town and in doing so keep their family involved with the local community. Just as the women folk gossip about Simon Stimson’s drunken behavior, one

can imagine that the family who were not involved in church would be a topic of discussion for many a busy-body. By doing the housework, seeing after the children, and being both the spiritual and the social backbone of the family, Mrs. Gibbs and Mrs. Webb fulfill the expected role of the mother within society.

The children each perform their roles—with small variations from the daughters and the sons. George and Wallace serve as the sons for the story, but, given Wallace's youth, George is the main focus. George's role is shown quite clearly by the future he discusses with Emily in the soda pop shop scene. Go to college—or not—, get a job on his uncle's farm, take over his elderly uncle's farm, find the one and settle down; that is the path George is headed down. The same trajectory is close to what one could expect to see from Wallace had he lived long enough to follow it, with the most likely deviation being an alternate occupation. (Stephens, 1958).

The daughters, Rebecca and Emily, follow their roles in society by helping their mothers, getting married, and becoming wives and mothers. Each girl discusses her own ambition, Emily's for speeches and Rebecca's for money, but neither chases after any crazy dream to become some great orator or a filthy rich business woman; instead, these passionate young girls grow into married women and, presumably, mothers much like their mothers before them. We see this idea of dreams going by the wayside in exchange for following societal expectation in Mrs. Gibbs' forever unrequited desire to go to Paris. The most that can be made of any girlish ambition is that Rebecca does

manage to be part of the ten percent of town citizens that does not live in Grover's Corner for the rest of their lives. The children's role is to train to become the mothers and fathers of the next generation. (Shen, 2007).

Come Back, Little Sheba by William Inge paints a very different image of family. *Sheba* premiered in the Booth Theatre on February 15th, 1950 with Shirley Booth in the starring role of Lola. Instead of there being a traditional family dynamic, there is simply a middle-aged couple and a temporary boarder. The main character of the piece are Doc, Lola, and Marie. Doc and Lola are the aforementioned middle-aged couple and Marie is the lodger who is renting room from them while attending university. Doc is a recovering alcoholic who works as a chiropractor. Very dissatisfied with his life and his wife, Doc has taken an unrequited interest in the seemingly pure Marie. Lola is also quite unhappy with her life and spends her days trying to make connections with everyone from the neighbors to the milk man. Doc and Lola were actually based on Inge's own family in his maternal aunt and uncle. Inge wrote about his aunt and uncle many times throughout his career, from *Sheba* to the semi-autobiographic *My Son is a Splendid Driver*. By talking about the extremely personal issues of these two characters, Inge was able to speak to the issues of family in small town society. The intimate lives of his characters speaking to the universal issues present in life was a common thread in Inge's work on the whole. In a 1953 New York Times interview with journalist, Milton Bracker, titled "Boy Actor to Broadway Author", Inge describes his role as an author as

looking to “...find all I can in the human lives that I know and are available to me—and find meanings in those lives.” (Bracker, 1953).

Doc and Lola are miserable, but hopeful for a change at the beginning of the play. Doc is hopeful in knowing Marie and thinking on what a promising, virginal young woman can offer. Lola is hopeful for a deeper connection with anyone and everyone so that she can recapture her youth. Rather than the sweet, innocent, virginal young girl that Doc imagines her to be, Marie is a more duplicitous character who has an affair with her college friend, Turk, while she is in a long-distance relationship with Bruce. Marie symbolizes Doc’s lost faith in the future when he discovers that Turk has stayed the night. Lola’s faith is lost when, towards the end of the play, she realizes that her long lost dog, Sheba, is never coming back. (Shuman, 1989).

The idea of lost hope represented by both Marie and Sheba seems essential to the idea of family in the play because the lack of family for both Doc and Lola seem to be the glaring difference between themselves and the people they wanted to be. (Leeson, 1994). The biggest pointer to a lack of children and of a coherent family unit being the source of their misery is the minor character of Mrs. Coffman. Mrs. Coffman is Doc and Lola’s neighbor. Coffman has multiple children and a husband all of which are reliant on her to play her part in the family structure. While her family is not pictured, we get the idea that they are a perfectly normal family. Lola goes to Mrs. Coffman and tries to socialize with her, but Mrs. Coffman rebuffs her attempts at contact

due to Lola's slovenly nature—a slovenly nature that likely came about as a result of having no one to clean for or take care of apart from herself and the self-sufficient Doc. The idea that she would clean and take care of herself if there were someone other than Doc there to appreciate it is substantiated by the fact that Lola starts cleaning up her house—top to bottom—the second that Marie's fiancé, Bruce, comes to visit. (Inge, 1950).

The moment in the play that illustrates the difference between the mother as a cog in the machine of her family represented by Mrs. Coffman and the unmarried, unproductive woman removed from family as represented by Lola is the penultimate scene. Following Doc's departure, Lola turns to Mrs. Coffman, who came rushing to Lola's aid during Doc's attack, and asks her advice. Mrs. Coffman offers simple advice: "Get busy, lady. And forget about it." (Inge, 1950). Take care of yourself, take care of your house, take care of your husband, and be productive. Mrs. Coffman is productive; she takes care of her family and serves her society in doing so. This productivity is shown as the difference between Lola and Mrs. Coffman suggesting that Mrs. Coffman could have easily been as miserable as Lola if she had not found a way to occupy herself—namely through her children. The idea of family is reinforced in small town values through the breakdown within *Come Back, Little Sheba* because it paints the picture of life without family as a complete societal breakdown. (Galens, 1998). (Metzger, 2019).

Another play that shows a typical two-child household is *Bye Bye Birdie*. With a book by Michael Stewart, lyrics by Lee Adams, and music by Charles Strouse, *Birdie* opened in the Martin Beck Theatre on April 14th, 1960. *Birdie* follows the life of struggling musician Albert Peterson and his loyal secretary and long-term girlfriend, Rosie Alveraz, as they try to find a way for Albert to get out of the music business and into a teaching position just as he has always dreamed. That way out is the song “One Last Kiss” which will become a big hit when Conrad Birdie sings it after a big publicity stunt involving him kissing Kim MacAfee, a typical all-American girl, in Sweet Apple, Ohio, a typical, all American town. Despite a few complications along the way, Rosie and Albert are able to escape the world of show business and settle down.

The MacAfee’s are the lens through which we view small town life in the 1960 Broadway musical. Again, we have a mom, a dad, a son, and a daughter living in a small town in the United States. The roles seem to be the same at first, but there is a slight inversion. (Adams, 1960). Kim MacAfee, by calling her mother by her first name and disrespecting her parents in other small ways, shows a different way to grow up. The next generation does not become like their parents before, but they take over from the previous generation like a change in political administration. The beliefs don’t have to be the same. The roles don’t have to be the same. Unlike the role of her mother that Emily chooses to assume as a continuation of the same, Kim is not the faithful daughter; as shown in “Whole Lotta Living to Do”, she wants to explore the world before she settles down with her “George” in the form of Hugo Peabody.

At the same time, Kim wants to date Hugo while sewing a few wild oats.
(Woller, 2014).

Feminist scholar Pat Macpherson discusses Kim MacAfee's role in the play and in society as a whole in the following quote from the chapter, "The Revolution of Little Girls" in the book, *Off-White: Readings on Power, Privilege, and Resistance*: "From the girdled, coiffed, and pinned-to-a-steady model of wifedom-in-training that was the highest attainment of 1950s femininity, Ann Margaret (who played Kim MacAfee in the 1963 movie adaptation of *Bye Bye Birdie*) throws herself off the white family pedestal and into the streets." (Macpherson, 2004). A lot of what Macpherson claims was present in early drafts of the musical. The original subplot for the young woman who would become Kim MacAfee was a young woman in Sweet Apple actively seeking an end to her virginity. The Kim that ended up making it to both stage and screen is far from this brazen young vixen. From "One Boy" and "How Lovely to be a Woman", we get a very clear picture of what is important to the more demure Kim MacAfee that made it through all of the cuts. (Strouse, 2008). While the supposedly empowering character of Kim that Macpherson writes about is not far from the character shown in the first two-thirds of the musical, the end of the musical fundamentally changes the message she sends, from one of female empowerment to one of brief experimentation before rejoining Sweet Apple society. The old-fashioned ideas still appeal to her as she respects the lives her parents have built, but they aren't exactly what she wants for herself. She wants to grow up, be pursued by young men, and be accepted by society as a

young woman with her own, independent identity. With her treatment of Hugo Peabody, the audience is given the impression that she will eventually give in to the white-picket-fence-life that generations before her have carved out as the ideal; however, we simultaneously get the idea that the power structure between mother and father will be quite different for the future Mr. and Mrs. Peabody. Kim MacAfee will not be the faithful subservient wife to Hugo Peabody. She'll love him and do for him, but, much like with Rosie and Albert, she'll be the one calling the shots. While not a subversive idea, it is a step away from the Gibbs and Webbs where the traditional roles are strictly attended to. Despite this small change, the family still functions as a societal unit. (Macpherson, 2004).

We see another slight subversion to expected cultural norms in the relationship of Albert Peterson and his mama. Mrs. Peterson pushes him again and again to find a nice young, white woman much like herself, but Albert remains interested in the Spanish Rosie Alvarez. It takes quite a while for Albert to stand up to his overbearing mother, but he does eventually tell her that Rosie is the girl for him—even though it goes against his mother's wishes. The moment even deserves its own song in Albert's mind as he sings out "No more Sonny Boy. It is Mr. Albert P." in "A Giant Step for Me"—a number added in during the nineties revival of the show created by the same team that was behind the original show. Rosie is not a replacement for his mother and Albert is not a replacement for his father; like Kim and Hugo, Albert and Rosie serve

to show a slight generational difference in a way that isn't present in *Our Town*. (Gellert, 1961).

A deeper departure from the traditional comes in with the McGrath sisters in *Crimes of the Heart*. Written by Beth Henley, *Crimes of the Heart* premiered off-Broadway in the Manhattan Theater Club on December 9th, 1980. Set in the real town of Hazlehurst, Mississippi, the play follows the lives of the McGrath sisters: Lenny, Meg, and Babe. Lenny turns thirty as the play opens and, in all that time, she has not left her grandparents' house. Babe has recently shot her husband—who survived the attack—and is now facing legal trouble as well as scandal. Meg, who has been failing in Hollywood ever since she left home, returns to Hazlehurst to help her sister in her time of need. On top of all their present issues, the girls must continue to deal with their mother's suicide which happened when they were very young. (Henley, 1980).

None of the three McGrath girls are mothers, only one is married, and they are all approaching their thirties—a point at which motherhood becomes less likely, though still possible. These women are not from a traditional home. Their father left when they were young, their mother committed a well-publicized suicide not long thereafter, and they were taken in by their elderly grandparents following their mother's death. Beth Henley takes us into the play with Lenny, the oldest daughter. Lenny cannot follow the same trajectory as Kim MacAfee or Emily Webb for one simple reason: she can never be a mother. Lenny has a defective ovary—a fact which her old granddaddy has

brow-beaten into her head since she found out about it. This ovary becomes a great insecurity for Lenny. What man would want to be with a woman that couldn't bear him any children? Her insecurity even goes so far as to sabotage a prospective match for her. Lenny met a man through a Lonely Heart's Club and she falls hard for him, but she breaks things off after introducing him to her granddaddy because she assumes he won't want her anymore if he finds out about her ovary. In his book *Understanding Beth Henley*, Robert Andreach describes Lenny's disposition in relation to small town life in the following passage: "Henley's play presents...the tension between the fierce lunacy underlying the small town life she knows and so well and the sunny surface that tries to accommodate it." (Andreach, 2006).

Meg McGrath is the middle child. Unlike the typical middle child, Meg was clearly given an excess of attention as a child—even to a point of contention between her and Lenny. This differentiation from the normal family dynamic seems directly tied to their mother's suicide as Babe informs the audience that Meg was the one who found their mother's dead body in response to Lenny's suggestion that Meg was spoiled; the implication being that spoiling Meg was her grandparents' attempt to make up for the trauma of finding her mother's body. (Gupton, 2002).

Interestingly, Meg tries to use her pain to make herself into a stronger person. The first time that this coping mechanism appears is in a scene with Lenny and Babe. Lenny goes off about how much attention Meg always got in

response to finding out that Meg took a bite out of every single candy in the box that Chick gave her—her only birthday present—in order to garner sympathy from her younger sister. Consequently, Babe steps up to Lenny and defends Meg by telling her about the way in which Meg used to force herself to look at posters advertising for a charity for homeless children before using her money to buy an ice-cream sundae. Lenny sees this as an example of Meg's selfishness; however, Babe sees it as Meg's way of trying to make herself stronger. Going further to convince her older sister that Meg is, indeed, a caring person, Babe tells her that Meg used to stare at pictures of horribly diseased people in one of their granddaddy's old medical books—just to know that she could handle it. In Meg's mind, it's as if facing a horror without flinching is the only kind of strength she's interested in. (Andreach, 2006).

We also see Meg avoid many other emotions throughout the story. The earliest implication we get of her avoiding emotional connection of any kind is in her prior relationship with Doc. Throughout the play, it is made quite obvious that Meg still harbors feelings for Doc by both her jealousy at the mention of his "Yankee" wife and two "half-Yankee" children and through her going off with him to a moonlit rendezvous in the penultimate act; yet, it is made clear that not only did she leave him, but she broke his heart. The backstory between the two is that he was her longest, steadiest relationship in a long line of suitors while she still lived in Hazlehurst. Doc really loved her and, as we can see by him checking up on Lenny in the very beginning, he is a good guy at heart. He just has a weakness for Meg. She clouds his judgement.

For Meg, Doc would stay in town to face a hurricane. That is not said metaphorically. Doc is partially crippled as a result of staying in town for a hurricane that Meg asked him to stay for. Meg left him after the hurricane. She wasn't any kind of nurse or even a visitor during his hospital stay. She was just gone. By disappearing from both Doc and Hazlehurst to the more glamorous Hollywood, there are two views you can get of Meg: the view Chick has for her or the view Babe has for her. Chick, their cousin, sees Meg as "cheap Christmas trash" that took advantage of poor Doc and then dropped him the second he wasn't of use anymore. Then, we get Babe's point of view: Meg never wants to let any relationship—from her boyfriend to her sisters—weaken her; by staying with Doc, she would have had to admit that she cared and, in caring, become weak. (Plunka, 2005).

Another time in which we see Meg emotionally distance herself from others is in her first onstage conversation with Lenny. Lenny asks Meg why she didn't write or visit for Christmas and Meg tells her that she doesn't read the letters from home because she doesn't want to feel sad. In doing this, Meg emotionally distances herself from her family in addition to the physical distance that came with the big move to Hollywood. Lenny reads this as Meg not caring and she calls her out on it, only for Meg to point out that the letters wouldn't hurt her if she didn't care. Later in the play, we find out that Meg lied about missing Christmas for work in this conversation. In reality, she was hospitalized for mental health issues. Meg had no interest in sharing her burden with her sisters, but she was ready to hop on a bus as soon as she

heard that Babe was in prison so that she could help her sister bear her burden. Meg also inserts herself into Lenny's problems by trying to push her into taking the next step in her relationship with Charlie. Clearly, the bonds of sisterhood matter deeply to Meg, but she has no desire to push any of her problems off on anyone else due to a deep sense of self-reliance. When she finally opens up to Lenny about how bad things have been for her over the last year, we see the estranged sisters bond. It is at this moment that Lenny finally seems to understand Babe's perspective on Meg—eventually leading to her chasing Chic up a tree with her broom. (Plunka, 2005).

The way family is shown through Meg's relationship with their granddaddy is distinct from the positive side shown from Lenny's support. We get an idea of pressure from this relationship. While the grandfather never seems to be abusive or even mean to any of the three girls, he does put a lot of pressure on each of the girls for different reasons: for Lenny it is her ovary; for Babe, it's her marriage; and for Meg, it's her career. Meg wants to be a singer and, from what other characters say about her, we get the impression that she is a very talented vocalist; however, she has given up her singing career to work in a dog food factory. Why would this be? Perhaps due to the fact that she had internalized all of the pressure from her granddaddy's master plan for her life and it had sucked all of the joy out of music. When she gets back from Doc, one of the big revelations she had from their sordid night together was that she could sing again. "And I sang all night long." She went from not being able to warble a note to a full-fledged songbird in one night's time because she

was finally away from any of the pressure of her granddaddy's influence. She wasn't singing for her career or for anybody who might judge her. She was singing for herself for the first time in a long time and that was a freeing experience. It was freeing that she stumbles in one a broken heel the next morning without a care in the world—ready to stand up to Granddaddy and set the record straight about exactly how bad things had been in Hollywood. Granddaddy being in a coma puts a wrench into those plans, but the feeling is still there. (Gupton, 2002).

Babe McGrath is the youngest of the three sisters. Both Lenny and Meg seem to have maternal feelings towards her. Their feelings make sense in regards to Babe not only being the youngest, but being the one who was the youngest at the time of their mother's suicide and thus having spent the least amount of time with their mother. In families where the mother is absent, it is quite common for the older siblings to step in as a surrogate parent—even in situations where they are placed with a new, steady guardian immediately as was the case for the McGrath girls. Another common aspect of child-parent psychology is the fear each child carries throughout their life that they will turn into their parents. In his essay "Becoming Attached" on the infant-parent relationship, clinical psychologist Robert Karen explains the fear in the following excerpt: "This dread, that our character mirrors one of our parents', is very common, and the terrible certainty that some of us have that we will re-enact the worst aspects of our upbringing with our own children is not only widespread but seems depressingly well-founded." (Karen, 1990). Given that

her mother committed suicide when she was quite young, it makes sense that Babe—and her sisters as well—would fear following the same path as their mother. Babe, married at a young age to a man that doesn't really love her, is the only one that seems to be following that trajectory. The pressure from her grandfather to follow the same path he pushed her mother on was likely only adding to her emotional distress. (Karen, 1990).

Babe is very defensive of Meg and is probably the closest person to Lenny given her shut-in lifestyle. Beyond her relationship with her sisters, Babe has issues stemming from her granddaddy and the way he raised her. Babe is infantilized by her grandfather. This is done literally with her name, but it is also done through him making decisions on her behalf—specifically regarding her marriage. Granddaddy is quoted as stating that “Marrying Zachary Boudreaux was the right thing for Babe, whether she knew it yet or not.” (Henley, 1979). From this, we get the idea that not only did Babe not love her husband now, but she had never loved him. She married him because her granddaddy told her it was the right thing to do. Opposed to her sisters, Babe's trauma is something she's made a lifetime commitment to. Lenny's shut-in life may make her miserable, but, as soon as she steps out on a limb, Charlie answers the phone. Meg may have had a full-on psychological breakdown chasing her career, but, as soon as she bought a bus ticket, she came back home to be with the people she loves. If Babe wanted to leave her husband, then she would have to deal with at least a year of separation, a very messy divorce, and being publically drug through the mud as his well-

established family threw the McGrath name deeper into the mud. (Paige, 2005).

Overall, *Crimes of the Heart* gives us a functional dysfunctional family. They don't always do the right thing, but their hearts are always in the right place. Granddaddy wants the best for his girls, so he pushes them in the wrong direction. Lenny pushes Charlie away so that he can fall in love with a woman who can give him the children she assumes he wants. Meg avoids returning home to make her family proud. Babe, or Becky, shoots her husband, but not because she hates him—because she needs to be free from him. Beyond that, each member truly loves the rest of their family and would do stand by them even if they're the town spinster, town whore, and town violent train wreck respectively. The family serves as a point of safety for everyone to return to when the world crashes down—no judgement, no fear. By serving as a refuge, family still has a purpose in society, but one quite different from the older plays; consequently, family is the world we all belong to and the outside world, or community as a whole, is more questionable. Kelly Younger sums up the idea of family and the way in which it holds the McGrath women back in her book *Henley in an Hour*: “None of the characters can move forward into the future unless they bury the past. None can escape their individual ‘civilian life’ (be it a life of fear, regret, or anger) unless they rebel against family tradition, Southern custom, and societal gender expectations. And none can move toward autonomy unless they first turn to each other.” (Younger, 2013).

In *August: Osage County*, we get a truly dysfunctional family. The Tracy Letts play opened in the Imperial Theater on December 4th, 2007. Set in Osage County, Oklahoma, *August: Osage County* tells the story of the Weston family following the disappearance of the patriarch, Beverly. His wife, Violet, is a pill-popping, cigarette smoking bully that pushes around everyone from their housekeeper, Johnna, to her own daughters. Barbara, their oldest daughter, returns home with her estranged husband and daughter, Jean, to try and find her father. Ivy, the middle daughter, never left home and has looked after their parents for all these years. Karen, the youngest daughter, returns with her fiancé Steve who no one in the family has ever met. As the play goes on, the characters wear more and more on each other only adding to the misery of the people that they love most. (Letts, 2008).

Just how dysfunctional they are is made quite clear in the prologue scene where Beverly tells Johnna about his alcoholism and his wife's pill-popping. Rather than supporting each other as a family where the home serves as a refuge for you in a trying world, home is a place where everyone regresses to the worst possible version of themselves before tearing each other to shreds. The Westons are not the McGraths. While Henley showed the ways a family can support you, Letts shows the ways a family can tear you down. Letts shows this through all three of the sisters within the run of the play, but it is most clearly shown in the eldest daughter, Barb, and her relationship with her mother, her daughter, and her husband. (Letts, 2008).

The oldest of the three Weston sisters, Barb is the only one to have a family of her own; however, that family is falling apart on its own. Barb is estranged from her husband because he cheated on her with a legal, but still teenaged student from one of his lectures. While her husband, Bob, recognizes that he crossed a line with his infidelity, he ultimately seems to blame Barb for the whole event when he calls her out on being too sanctimonious. We do see that the two, at one point, had a loving, functional relationship. The very first scene of Barb and Bob shows us the connection they had as the two joke about the Plains. The audience has yet to be let in on their marital issues, so this scene, depending on direction, can read very easily as a mundane conversation between a loving husband going down to Osage county to support his wife while his father-in-law is missing and his appreciative wife—at least until he reaches for her hand and she shews him away with a plain “Don’t.” (Letts, 2008). This whole scene sets up both the relationship they once had—which they can easily slip back into when they’re not thinking about it—and the relationship they have now where he can’t even hold her hand to comfort her during a family crisis. (Blatanis, 2019).

Barb also has an interesting relationship with her daughter Jean that further explain her marital issues. Issues within the marriage present themselves in the ways in which they want to raise their daughter. Throughout the entire play, Barb continues blame Bob for making their daughter too pretentious. Bob has issues with Barb’s overprotective parenting style. We do see the two come together as parents when Karen’s new fiancé, Steve, is caught

molesting their daughter, Jean. Both react with anger and hostility targeted at Steve while trying to get answers from Jean about the whole situation and Barb even goes so far as to side with Bob over Jean. The way in which Barb sides with Bob is from her slapping Jean when she calls Bob out on hooking up with a girl not much older than herself. In doing this, Barb actually causes a further division in both her marital relationship and her motherly relationship. Jean was standing up for her mother by calling her father out, so she feels betrayed by her mother's hostile reaction. Bob is horrified that his wife slapped his daughter to a degree that lets us as an audience know that Jean probably wasn't spanked as a child. In this one act, Barb alienates her whole family. (Blatanis, 2019).

The "truth-telling" which Violet called for has brought about something ugly in Barbra which she never wished to see: her mother. Violet is more than just a mother to Barb by the end of the play—she is the ghost of Christmas future. Violet and Barb are alike in more than just biology; they have a similar history and behavior. Barb's husband cheated on her with a much younger woman and she took the supposed high road—only making him feel guilty; never actually leaving him or even yelling at him. While the first glimpse into the story shows Violet being volatile and Bev being understanding, by the end of the play we find out that their marriage had a similar dynamic since he cheated with her younger sister and she silently resented him for it until the day he killed himself. *August: Osage County* seems to show that a family built

on guilt and mutual resentment is a hindrance rather than a source of strength. (Glàvan, 2015).

In relation to family, the use of community in these small town plays is far more telling of small town life as each playwright either imagined it or experienced it depending on their background. Family told the story of an individual household while community tells the story of an entire area. In American media, community seems to be the thread tying all small town works together. Church, school, neighborhoods, and different community organizations work to form the social exoskeleton for small town life and it has an effect on every individual raised there. Those who hold a negative view of small town life see this community as an oppressive structure that held them back throughout their adolescence; consequently, those who hold a positive view of small town life see these organizations as the building blocks who helped shape not only them, but their entire world view. All of these plays comment on the formation of identity in community along the wide spectrum from the positive in *Bye Bye Birdie* to the negative in *Come Back, Little Sheba*. (Wuthnow, 2013).

The idea of community is present in *Our Town* from the very beginning. We're not introduced to a family or a character, but to Grover's Corner—the quintessential American small town. The main way in which community is presented throughout *Our Town* is through the church. The church as central to American small town life is a repeated theme throughout much of American

storytelling and holds true for the makeup of many small towns throughout the United States. (Konkle, 2006).

In each act, there is one section focused on a church event. For the first act, that event is choir practice in which Mrs. Gibbs, Mrs. Webb, and the rest of the choir work diligently under the direction of the surly Simon Stimson. The song, at first, seems a tie into the community as well as a tie to the audience. Beyond time and place, the human race is tied to the past, present, and future. (Konkle, 2006). The hymn which ties this and the following community scenes together is evident of Wilder's work on the whole. In his essay entitled "Thornton Wilder and the Tragic Sense of Life", theater scholar Robert Corrigan of Johns Hopkins says the following in regards to Wilder's style as a playwright: "Each of his (Wilder's) plays is a hymn in dramatic form affirming life." (Corrigan, 1961). Through their connection as a church family, Grover's Corner has found a collective source of meaning in their daily lives that ties them to life. (Corrigan, 1961).

The second act's big church moment is the marriage between Emily and George for which the entire town seems to be in attendance. The town reaches out and supports the marriage by attendance as can be shown through Mrs. Soames' constant repetition throughout the ceremony of just how much she "loves weddings". With this kind of reaction from the town, there is a positive reinforcement about this wedding. The old white middle-class town is supportive of this nice, Christian wedding between a smart young white

middle-class girl and a smart young white middle-class boy. There is nothing subversive in the actions of the community and that, in itself, speaks volumes. Donald Haberman explained the importance of this ordinary event in the following excerpt from his essay “Our Town: An American Play”: ““Their (the people of Grover’s Corners’) heroism is that they did what was before them; and did not waste time or energy wishing for something else. Their failure is that they lived knowing so little of what they were about.” (Haberman, 1989). Their community bands together to live—not to achieve some greater purpose or enter into a new enlightenment. Their community activities through the church reflect that in their casual nature.

The final act’s church scene is the funeral. Everyone is dressed in black as they lay Emily to rest. Throughout the acts, each church scene has been punctuated with the same hymn: “Blessed Be the Tie That Binds”. Here below are the lyrics to the first two verses of that sacred old hymn written in 1782 by John Fawcett: “Blest be the tie that binds/ our hearts in Christian love. / The fellowship of kindred minds/ is like to that above. / Before our Father’s throne, / we pour our ardent prayers. / Our fears, our hopes, our aims are one, / our comfort and our cares.” (Fawcett, 1782). The lyrics of this hymn paint a spiritual connection which holds this very community together. How they are in “Their coming, their going, and their dying” are inexplicably linked to the church as well as each other. In this way that the citizens act as congregants, congregants as citizens, each tying themselves to the tradition and belief which the church represents in this life and the next. Beyond the direct textual

interpretations of this song choice, the use of a hymn, of any kind, speaks to the nature of the church as an institution. Nowadays, you walk into a church in small town America, everyone above the age of eight is able to recite the King James Version of John 3:16 verbatim. In Grover's Corners, "Blessed Be the Tie That Binds" is as John 3:16 is in my own time and place; it's the cornerstone of their worship and the way that they, as good Christian men and women seek to live out their lives.

Religion is seen as a cornerstone in this community not because Wilder was some missionary bent on converting the masses, but because Wilder was highlighting an important facet of life in this one representation of small town America. Outsider figures, like alcoholic church organist Simon Stimson, are separate from the Christian lifestyle regardless of any church involvement and, as outsiders, are not given respite from the drudgery of every day, meaningless life. Corrigan goes on to speak to this view of life: "...the awareness of the tragic nature of things informs every serious outlook. You can escape it in play or other forms of illusion; you can transcend it in religion..." (Corrigan, 1961).

The community in *Come Back, Little Sheba* is shown not through either half of the central couple, but through the side characters. The milk man, the mail man, and the men from Alcoholics Anonymous all serve to show community in their brief interactions with Lola and Doc. These men come in, do their jobs, and go out. Their entire purpose as characters is to be functional members of society to highlight the breakdown present with both Doc and Lola.

The Alcoholic Anonymous members, especially, serve to show the ways that a formerly dysfunctional person can reenter society and become functional—which is both a ray of hope for people like Lola who fall out of society and a condemnation for people like Doc for theoretically committing to becoming a part of functional society but not making the strides necessary to really reenter society. (Centola, 2008).

In his essay on William Inge, Robert Shuman wrote the following excerpt regarding Inge's style as a dramatist: "Inge was the first successful playwright to examine the Midwest with psychological insight into what small-town life on the plains and the prairies did to people. He wrote about it seriously. He knew from having spent his first thirty-five years in the region what its sociological uniqueness was and how this uniqueness was revealed in the psychology of the people who lived there, particularly those who inhabited towns where everyone knew each other's business and where hypocritical standards of middle-class morality had a significant effect upon most of the citizens." (Shuman, 1989). *Come Back, Little Sheba* shows that exact small town world through the lens of Doc and Lola.

As all roads lead back to Doc and Lola, the community as it relates to the two main characters speaks to the exclusion present within small town life. Small town outsider figures will be discussed more thoroughly further on in relation to all five plays as well as *Sheba* specifically; however, the knowledge that the view we get of community within this play is from the outsider figures

is crucial to the understanding of what small town society means within the world of the play. In his article “Compromise as Bad Faith: Arthur Miller’s *A View from the Bridge* and William Inge’s *Come Back, Little Sheba*” from the literary journal *Midwest Quarterly*, Steven Centola sums up the effect of small town society as it is presented through the meaningless order and restrictions that dictate the lives of Inge’s dreary world in the following quote: “...all society actually gains with such restrictions is the semblance of order, and that facade is obtained at a very high cost.” (Centola, 2008). The breakdown of society, however, seems to only affect people such as Doc and Lola who do not follow the traditional path of marriage and children that everyone from Marie to the mailman seems to be following. The community as a macrocosm is thriving while the community as it relates to the lives of our main characters is deeply flawed; this point shows the community as a success, but the individual as a failure which is quite different than the usual narrative where the individual self is, more often than not, the moral center of the play and the agent of change. (Centola, 2008).

The representation of community in *Bye Bye Birdie* is most directly tied to the music of the piece. Premiering in 1960, *Birdie* was the first successful rock-musical on Broadway. Rock music has a long and complex history with musical theatre; one in which it was believed, for many years, that a rock musical could never be a success because rock music was a fad that could never be seen as substantial as a good old-fashioned, Tin Pan Alley folk song. (Everett, 2002).

The use of rock music is a departure from the typical show tune, but the message of the piece fundamentally underlines the inclusion of rock. The clearest example of the evils of rock music is in “Honestly Sincere” where rock star Conrad Birdie gives a fake performance while extolling the virtues of sincerity. By having the one rock character act so fake, the writing team of Strouse, Adams, and Stewart seem to be mocking rock as a genre for being shallow and inauthentic. The rejection of youth culture throughout the piece extols the virtue of what is and what has been with little respect to what will be; consequently, the young characters give in to the wisdom of their elders in the end seeming to affirm the emptiness of the thing which they held so dear at the start of the play. (Woller, 2014).

The exact shift happens at the end of the play. In the climax of the piece, we see the title character Conrad Birdie get surrounded by a mob of angry townspeople hoping to save the chastity of Kim Macafee. Rock, shown by Conrad Birdie, is what must be chased out of the good, moral small town of Sweet Apple, Ohio—far away from the innocent youth who are so susceptible to his vulgar influence. The youths of Sweet Apple, in order to fit into small town society, must put off their rock ‘n’ roll ways and realize that their parents were right all along. With Conrad as the villain, the community is seen as a loving parent protecting its children from the evils of the world. (Wollman, 2006).

Community in *Crimes of the Heart* is best shown through Babe. Babe is a young woman who followed the rules set out for her by her granddaddy.

She's married to Zachary Boudreaux, a successful lawyer from a powerful, influential family in town. While life with her husband is far from satisfying, Babe knows no famine or poverty. Zachary does take things a step beyond propriety by beating her so badly that she needed to be hospitalized multiple times, but from the casual way this is discussed we get the idea that it has happened to many woman in the area before Babe and will likely happen to a good many women to come. The real issue comes when she fights back both metaphorically using her infidelity to wound her husband's pride and physically using his gun to wound her husband's liver. These transgressions made during the marriage set Babe at odds with not only her husband, but the small town society which he represents. (Ucar-Özbirinci, 2013).

Zachary Boudreaux is a good representative of Hazelhurst society. He's a well-respected man who takes care of himself, his sister, and at the very least financially supports his wife. Zachary works his nine to five office job and then goes home to his pretty, young wife expecting her to bend to his will in the way his culture tells him a wife should. Babe doesn't bend to him and we presume that that is the very reason why he beats her. This is an unsubstantiated assumption, but a fitting one given the only thing we know Babe to have done to go against her wedding vows is to cheat with Willie Jay, which starts after the beatings start. Even if the cheating were the reason, he would still be beating her for her refusal to bend to him. Beyond the abuse, Babe's name speaks to the paternalism present in her relationship with her husband—as well as her granddaddy. While her given name is Becky, her entire family calls

her Babe as she is the baby of the family; consequently, she is infantilized as a character. The way in which a community can hold you down is shown here in Babe's character. (Rosefeldt, 1995).

Babe is not a flexible person; had she been able to bend, perhaps she could have fit herself into the mold of the perfect southern woman, but instead she broke. The same issue is present in her sisters' struggles. A lot of their difficulties in forming lasting relationships can be stemmed back to the trauma of their mother's suicide. Part of the lasting damage in their psyche is a loss of belief in community. In her analysis of *Crimes of the Heart*, Lana Whited explains their predicament in this excerpt: "...for a woman the family is almost always the primary community, any woman's decision to commit suicide is, ultimately, also a statement about her perception of that community's value in her life. To continue to live is, then, to affirm one's life and relationship within the community. To commit suicide is to reject them, and to insist that we are fundamentally all alone." (Plunka, 2005).

The idea that Mrs. Magrath's suicide is a rejection of community is complicated by one crucial detail—the cat. When she killed herself, Mrs. Magrath hung the cat next to her. The hanging of the cat right next to her mistress completely changes the message of the suicide; consequently, Henley makes sure to bring up the death of the cat multiple times throughout the play. To make her point even clearer, Henley inserts a realization into Babe's story arch. Following her own failed suicide attempt, Babe yells out "I know

why she hung that cat along with her... she was afraid of dying all alone.”

Mrs. Magrath’s suicide in light of Babe realization is a clear reinforcement of the importance of community in all lives—even hers. (Whited, 1997).

Another reinforcement of community comes from the end of the play. Instead of any of these three strong, independent women ending the play on their own as an individual, they all end together focusing on Lenny’s one birthday wish; that birthday wish being for them to all be together and happy at some point in the not so distant future. Meg pushes Lenny to call up her gentleman friend from the lonely hearts club, Lenny pushes Meg to be honest about her life, Babe pushes Lenny to be more accepting of Meg, Babe pushes Meg to be more emotional, and everyone pulls together to try and help Babe with her legal troubles. The three sisters work as a community all unto themselves. None of these three women fit into the larger community of Hazlehurst, Mississippi, but they all fit together as sisters and are finding ways towards their own happiness as a group. (Plunka, 2005).

Community as shown in *August: Osage County* is represented by its absence in much the same way that family is shown in *Come Back, Little Sheba*. The best representation of community and its absence is through the youngest daughter, Karen, and the late patriarch, Beverly. Beverly opens the play showing the dysfunction of his family in his opening monologue. The beginning of the monologue is a quote from the T.S. Elliot poem *The Hollow Man*: “Life is very long.” (Elliot, 1925). The quote gives a very bleak look on the

dreariness of life. As he goes on, Beverly highlights the many issues of his life; consequently, all of his issues begin and end at home. If the play had shown the family leaving the house often and socializing with the outside world, this would seem to be a bleak commentary of life in the Midwest; however, Beverly points out their little world to include him, his wife, Ivy, and, on occasion, Mattie Fae's family. Beverly's monologue and the following brief discussion with Johnna and Violet is the only time we see him on stage. Hiring Johnna is one of the last things he does before he goes missing only to be found dead of an apparent suicide. (Letts, 2008).

While Miss McGrath's suicide in *Crimes of the Heart* seemed to be a rejection of community, Beverly's suicide seems to be a rejection of isolation. Miss Magrath, much like Babe, was worn out by a life filled with attempts to conform to what society wanted of her. Beverly's life, in contrast, is spent surrounded by only his family with little to no interaction with the outside world. In her essay "Family Carnage: Tracy Letts' *August: Osage County*", Gabriela Glâvan describes the inner working of the family, as shown throughout the play, in the following terms: "The high voltage tensions inside this family reach unfathomable levels due to an element that works properly only on stage—the claustrophobic space of the house." (Glâvan, 2015). That same claustrophobia fills the lonely lives of all the Westons as they remain isolated from society with only each other to talk to. Without socializing with the outward society, Beverly and the Weston clan in general have degenerated

into an endless cycle of making each other more miserable. A life separate from community is, in that case, a life not worth living. (Glâvan, 2015).

Throughout the course of the play, Karen is shown as different from the rest of her family in that she still has a sunny disposition on life. While Ivy has been worn down by life with her parents and Barbara's marriage failing has taken the air out of her sails, Karen has yet to have some deep tragedy break her down. She got out of her parent's house and has tried ever since to find a new community to support her. Her positive outlook is shown most clearly when, following a tirade in which her mother admits all of the awful things that she sees in herself, she responds: "You're not nasty-mean. You're our mother and we love you." (Letts, 2008). Instead of pills, alcohol, incest, or self-denial, Karen's opiate of choice is positive thinking.

Karen's dream is simple: she wants to get married, have kids, and live the suburban housewife fantasy. The idea of a cookie-cutter life appealed to Karen from a young age as a positive alternative to the dysfunction she saw at home. By fitting into American society as she perceived it, Karen hoped to find the love and acceptance she never got at home. Her dedication to this dream is evident in her relationship with Steve. Steve is her fiancé and, as a woman in her late-thirties, she sees him as her last chance for a family. From early on, Steve is shown to be inconsiderate—taking phone calls at dinner after the funeral; talking about his job in detail. It would be easy to write it all off as

Karen settling for an annoying husband rather than have no husband at all, but Steve manages to cross a serious moral line in the play. (Glăvan, 2015).

The line he crosses is Jean. Jean, Barbara's teenage daughter, is nearly assaulted by Steve in the third act of the play. The two begin by smoking pot together before he suggests that she shotgun a hit—an act in which Jean practically kisses Steve to breathe in the smoke from his hit. From there, Steve lets go of the weed premise for them spending time together and starts putting the moves on her. Johnna comes out armed with a skillet and breaks things up by force. Karen, Barbara, and Bill then all come out and react differently to the scene. All confused in the beginning, Karen and Barbara have a heated discussion once they finally understand exactly what transpired. In Karen's defense of Steve, she goes so far as to implicate Jean in the whole affair telling Barbara: "You better find out from Jean just exactly what went on in there... 'Cause I doubt Jean's exactly blameless in all this. And I'm not blaming her." (Letts, 2008). Justifying his behavior is the way Karen chose to remain in this relationship because it is her connection to society and, at her age, she believes it to be her last chance. While Barbara is horrified at Steve and his attempts to molest her underage daughter, Karen claims it is all a misunderstanding. No matter how Barbara confronts her with the truth, Karen clings to Steve's innocence and leaves the house with him. *August: Osage County* thus teaches not only that there are some sacrifices to be made to fit into society, but that those making those sacrifices can lead to justifying the heinous. (Ricketson, 2011).

Whenever a community is created, there are certain rules, guidelines, and general notions regarding acceptable behavior within said society. As these communities are built on these shared beliefs, those who think or act differently either intentionally separate themselves from the community or are ostracized until the time they turn their back on the dissonant lifestyle—returning the town to peace and harmony. The formation of communities thus creates outsiders. (Leung, 2017).

American media is particularly obsessed with outsiders; from James Dean to John Bender, the individual who spits in the face of orthodox society is a central figure to American identity. Small town stories are full of these characters and those characters tend to fall into three camps: the hero, the villain, and the victim. The hero figure is usually the main character who is held back by the small town society surrounding them that manages to change their minds through the course of events. An example of the hero figure would be Ren McCormick in *Footloose* who manages to change the minds of Bomont to the point where an out-of-town prom is possible for his graduating town. (Ross, 1984). Often an out-of-towner with fresh ideas, this character is separate from society at the beginning and they and society come together in a move towards a new social equilibrium. This kind of outsider does have a basis in real world examples—one such example being Louise A. Blum who wrote the autobiographic *You're Not from Around Here, Are You: A Lesbian in Small Town America* where she talks about the real world prejudice present in small town America. (Blum, 2001).

The outsider villain is a different character entirely. Rather than the hero of the piece, the outsider is instead the antagonist who comes up against the good, moral main character who was born and bred on small town values. Of course, the main character is triumphant in the end and the villain goes home defeated. An example of the villain outsider would be Judd Fry in *Oklahoma!*. Judd Fry is the villain in the musical who opposes the heroic Curly and as such provides an example of everything wrong in the world which is separate from the moral right that is society. (Zinnemann, 1943). These kind of examples serve to show the danger of going against small-town mentality. American radio host Paul Harvey once said: “In small towns as well as large, good people outnumber bad people by one-hundred to one. In big towns, the one-hundred are nervous, but, in small towns, it’s the one.” (Wise Old Sayings, 2019). This mentality supports the small town community over the individual. While there are certainly people who show psychotic tendencies regardless of their environment that do not fit into small town society; however, that is not to say that this story is the typical one for an outsider in a small town. (Cowley, 2012).

The outsider as a victim is a distinct character from both the villain and the hero in that they usually have little to no autonomy. While the hero and villain are usually outsiders of their own decision, the victim is usually an outsider for things beyond their control—usually race, gender, or sexuality. The victim figure is usually pushed out of society and never allowed back in regardless of anything they might do or accomplish. An example of the victim

outsider would be Blanche's husband in Tennessee Williams' *A Streetcar Named Desire*. Blanche and her late husband lived in a small town in the south in the middle of the twentieth century—a time and a place where his homosexuality was socially unacceptable. His suicide within the context of the piece is used as trauma within Blanche's past, but also serves to show him as a victim of the small town that surrounded him. (Williams, 1947). As a victim, the character is usually relegated to a minor part to serve as an example of society as a flawed system; rather than create change as the hero figure would, the victim is more a character that brings about sympathy instead of results. (Guilbert, 2004). The five different plays each show different types of outsiders and the ways they react to their small town surroundings.

From *Our Town* to *August: Osage County*, each play either shows a character that doesn't fit in to the small town environment or it discusses such a character. The things that keep people from fitting into said small town society are numerous and varied; from the things they can't control—like race—to the things they have limited control of—like drug addiction—to the things they can control, but chose not to—like sexual activity. No matter the reason, these people appear in each story simultaneously opposing small town life by defying its conventions and sustaining small town life by being a part of the framework of their respective towns. (Buckner, 2013).

In *Our Town*, there are two references to outsiders. One is a comment about a segregated community of Polish people within the town made during

one of the Stage Managers many monologues—showing a cultural divide within the town. He even goes on to mention that the drunken behavior of one Simon Stimson would be usual on that side of the tracks; consequently, the social hierarchy of white as the moral superior is set up with only Mr. Stimson as an exception. One character, “Belligerent Man”, calls for an explanation of what is being done to right the social wrongs during the explanation of Grover’s Corners’ demographics. Editor Webb replies that “...we’re all hunting for a way the diligent and sensible can rise to the top and the lazy and quarrelsome can sink to the bottom... we do our best to help those who can’t help themselves.” (Wilder, 1938). The serious problems that lurk in every town—large and small—are overlooked not out of malice, but out of complacency and ignorance regarding any kind of solution. Racism is a big problem in American society from its conception to now, but *Our Town* chooses not to linger on racial issues. Instead, Thornton Wilder spends the majority of his outsider commentary in the figure of Simon Stimson. (Cardullo, 1998).

Simon Stimson is the church organist and choir master in Grover’s Corner. He is also an infamous drunk in an unhappy marriage. There are only two times in which we see Stimson alive within the play. During his first scene with him, we see him directing the choir rather rudely. He even goes so far as to mock the choir for their substandard performance. Here, we get our first idea that Grover’s Corner doesn’t live up to his standards. In the second scene, we see him stumble across the stage drunk, look into the audience, and stumble offstage as the Stage Manager talks about his wife’s efforts to round

him up. From this, we get the idea that he should fit in as a married man still young enough to have children, but he chooses not to by not having children and indulging in alcohol. Addiction is a hard issue to deal with and it can cloud the mind to a point where picking up the next bottle is more of an attempt to reach your normal emotional level from before you started, the first bottle is always an attempt to change your emotional state. Something about his life made Stimson pick up his first bottle. By the end of the play, he commits suicide. Two onlookers at the graveyard in the final scene explain his death away by saying “Some men aren’t made for small town life.” What is it about Simon Stimson that made him not fit in? It’d be easy to say his alcoholism, but what was it that drove him to pick up that first bottle? (Elliot, 2013).

One theory is that he was a dreamer and an artist, but was never able to make it out of Grover’s Corner, so his life of disappointment made him bitter, drove him to the bottle, and made him lash out at the town he so resented before finally hanging himself in the church attic with one last act of rebellion. While it is an interesting notion that’s supported by both his career choice and his speech in the final act where he talks to Emily about how people never get life while they’re living it with all the bitterness of someone who truly got it while still alive,—as the Stage Manager tells that artists and poets kind of do—there is another theory that would change the meaning of the entire play. That theory is that Simon Stimson is a closeted gay man. (Elliot, 2013).

Quite often, the play *Our Town* is written off as an overdramatic piece about enjoying life as you live it, but Thornton Wilder disagreed. Whenever that was brought up, he would point to two things as the evidence that his play couldn't be wrapped into that nice, pretty little explanation: Emily's postmortem realization that her life "was nothing more than a series of trivialities" and Simon Stimson's suicide. (Haberman, 1989). While Emily is arguably the main character of *Our Town* and her moral bearing weight on the entire meaning makes a great deal of sense without any question, Simon Stimson is a minor character. He speaks a few lines, interacts with no other character directly, and has vomiting once as his biggest action on stage. Why would Thornton Wilder put Simon Stimson on the same level with Emily in terms of the meaning of the play? Perhaps because they're opposites. (Buckner, 2013).

Emily is a smart, heterosexual young woman who marries young and dies giving birth to her second child. She fits into Grover's Corner society very well. You could even say she thrives there. Simon Stimson withers. He's married, but not happily. We're under no assumption that his wife hugged his grave in grief following his death in the way that George did when Emily died. While one would usually assume that a man married to a woman was straight, this was written in a time period where the custom was to get married no matter what you were because being openly homosexual was met with societal exclusion far beyond what Stimson faced for being an alcoholic. Thornton Wilder himself once said in a letter to Gertrude Stein that "it may be laid down

as a law that in America 80% of all married homosexuals (read: closeted) are frantic alcoholics.” (Elliot, 2013). From this quote, we can see that the idea of a closeted, married, miserable homosexual is a character that Wilder believed was possible—even if it may not have been what his intention was with Stimson. (Elliot, 2013).

There are other reasons to believe that Simon Stimson may be gay. Wilder’s comment to Stein may have opened the door to him writing about a character such as Stimson as a gay man, but what in the script actually goes on to support it? There’s actually a line from the original Broadway script for the play that suggests as much. When discussing Stimson’s alcohol abuse, one of the other characters explains it by saying that “Those musical fellas ain’t like the rest of us, I reckon.” (Elliot, 2013). “Musical” at first glance would refer to Stimson as a troubled artists—fitting him into one cliché—but the term was once a homosexual slur in the 1930s—when *Our Town* was written. The line, in light of the slur, would seem to imply that his homosexuality was an open secret and a source of exclusion for Stimson even if his married status offers him some security from social judgement. The big question with this line is: who wrote it? (Niven, 2012).

In most plays, the playwright is the one who wrote each line. Maybe one or two lines here and there were improved by an actor during an out of town preview and made it into the official script, but the lines usually come from the playwright. This line, however, never even made it into the published script—

just the original acting script for its Broadway debut. In the case of *Our Town*, the line could be by Thornton Wilder and bear all the weight of his original intentions for the character or it could have been written by Jed Harris, the original director. Jed Harris was a very controlling director with a bad reputation throughout the theater world. Playwrights found him especially difficult to work with as he would often add in new lines, ask for entire scenes to be rewritten, and even push for official co-writing credit. He was no different when it came to *Our Town*. (Gottfried, 1984).

Jed Harris' controlling nature had a big impact on *Our Town*. There were positive—like him pushing Wilder to write the soda pop shop scene between Emily and George to help build their relationship for the audience. There were also negatives—like him pushing his actors to perform the death scene three times the day after they heard about one of the stage hands committed suicide. Harris wasn't just this controlling with his actors. Wilder once wrote in another letter to Gertrude Stein that he let Harris make small changes and add in a few stupid, little jokes to placate him as Harris would continually push in this and many other productions which he directed to become a kind of coauthor of each script in spirit if not in name. So, was Stimson being “musical” a stupid joke Harris sneaked in or was Wilder planting a seed about what was really wrong with the choir master? With both men long dead, it's hard to know. Some link Stimson's perceived homosexuality to Wilder's own sexuality. Wilder was a bachelor all his life. He never married and he never had any kids. Like many bachelors of the time, his sexuality came into

question. In many other ways, he was like Stimson. Wilder was an alcoholic, an artist, and not really suited for small town life. A self-insert character such as Stimson is certainly a possibility. Wilder was a very private man and there have never been any letters or journals—personal or otherwise—telling about his sexuality; however, there was a supposed lover that came out of the woodworks following his death. This man claimed to have been intimate with Wilder on several occasions without Wilder ever accepting or owning his homosexuality. While it seems certain that this man and Wilder did cross paths at some points and may have even been friends, there is no proof behind his claims. All of this leaves Wilder's sexuality up in the air which in no way clears up Simon Stimson's sexuality. (Elliot, 2013).

From Simon Stimson and the Polish side of town, *Our Town* shows other figures—be they racially other, sexually other, or an other because of their inappropriate behavior—can represent the powerless in the framework of Grover's Corner and of the country on a broader scale. The work seems neither to condemn nor condone the practice and merely to present it as a way of life. This matter of fact approach applies to every aspect of *Our Town* in its characterization of life in small town America at the turn of the twentieth century. (Bruckner, 2013).

In *Come Back Little Sheba*, we get a similar other figure in the form of Doc and another other figure in the form of Lola. Doc, like Stimson, struggles with addiction. While Doc has been sober for nearly a year, we get the idea

that he struggled with alcoholism since the loss of his and Lola's baby when they were both in their late teens. If that assumption is correct, Doc was an alcoholic without any attempt to get clean for roughly two decades before he finally got help. AA seems to be the vehicle Doc uses to become socially acceptable again. By following the steps of the program, he's gotten old clients back, gained the respect of his neighbors, and established a kinship with the other AA members—who seem to be his only friends. Unlike Stimson, there is no uncertainty about Doc's sexuality. Doc's interest in Marie makes it quite clear that he is a heterosexual man; however, he's a heterosexual man who has next to no interest in his wife anymore. There is one scene where his interest in his wife is rekindled by her dancing with him and sharing a moment of lost youth remembered, but the second Marie comes in he goes back to resenting Lola for holding him back. (Inge, 1950).

John Steinbeck wrote in his 1947 novella, *The Pearl*, that "...every man in the world functions to the best of his ability, and no one does less than his best, no matter what he may think about it." (Steinbeck, 1947). Doc's entire identity is built in opposition to this statement. Doc has not become his best possible self. This isn't the best possible universe. In the imagined reality where he didn't settle down with Lola at such a young age and followed his mother's career advice, Doc truly believes that he would be a successful doctor with a young, pretty wife—someone like Marie—and children. He wouldn't be a chiropractor with an aging wife and the bitter memories of the child they almost had. Doc seems to fit into society now, but he had to suppress his

emotions to get to that point. He couldn't drink to cope. He couldn't dwell on it. He just had to let it go. And he did. Until he came out swinging an axe at the only person in the world who could understand what he was going through. (Combs, 2004).

Lola, on the other hand, has a very by the book life with one vital societal transgression in her past. Nowadays, Lola is shunned by pretty much everyone she tries to have a relationship with. Lola tries to connect with their lodger Marie, but she tolerates her at best. Her neighbor looks down on her for not keeping her house in order or raising any children—things that are worthy efforts to put your energy into unlike the mindless daily drivel that Lola does to pass the time. The mailman takes pity on her by agreeing to write her a letter, but pity isn't a replacement for a genuine human connection. The milk man seems bothered by her despite finding her flirting flattering. Turk seems to be bothered by her entirely—finding her flirting disturbing. Her husband resents her. Her father is ashamed of her. Her mother stands behind her father, even if she still keeps in touch. What did she ever do to the three people she should be closest to make them turn away from her? She got pregnant. Lola got pregnant by Doc out of wedlock and they lost the baby and, since then, they've all blamed her. (Inge, 1950).

Lola's ostracized from regular society and has been since she was a young woman, but how does she deal with it? She copes through a series of trivial activities, an obsession with the past, and constant attempts at

conversation with others. One may even wonder how she keeps trudging along doing the same pointless things with the same, unsatisfying results. Her issues, unlike Doc, seem to be blamed on none but herself. She bears the burden of making a poor decision as a young girl which led to an unwanted pregnancy which led to a shotgun marriage and the loss of her father's respect. Lola's issues with her father are present throughout the play with her constantly referring to her emotionally withdrawn husband as Daddy, but the two most revealing moments regarding her issues with her father happen towards the end of the play. After getting viciously attacked by Doc, Lola calls her mother to return home again in an attempt to find not only safety but the youth she has left behind only for her mother to pass along the message that her father will not permit her return—the implication being that he has not forgiven her for her fall from grace oh so many years before. The final signal toward this deep insecurity comes from her last dream in which her father presides over some great athletic competition and names Doc the victor thus approving of her husband and her life choices. Without her father's approval, without society's approval, Lola remains alienated and withdrawn. We can see her hope is dead in the end when she refuses an invitation to spend a day out with the Coffman family in favor of staying home alone. While it was their own sin that set them apart from small town society, Inge paints Doc and Lola more as sympathetic victims of a broken system than any kind of villain. (Combs, 2004).

Bye Bye Birdie has four outsiders in its story: Ma, Albert, Rosie, and Conrad Birdie. Ma is an outsider because she pushes her son away from marriage and children to be a successful songwriter. Ma remains an outsider throughout and is then sent on a train out of town. Conrad is an outsider because he is a celebrity chasing the pleasures of life rather than taking on any of the traditional responsibilities of a wife or a kid. He remains an outsider for his hedonistic ways and is railroaded out of town along with Ma. From these two figures, we learn that you become an outsider if you step away from the tradition of white-picket-fence America and towards your own, nontraditional desires. Albert and Rosie reinforce this idea. (Macpherson, 2004).

Albert and Rosie are both heroes in this piece, but they are outsiders from the first. First of all, they are out-of-towners. Being from the big city is a mark of inequity in idyllic small town America. What further separates Rosie and Albert from the good people of Sweet Apple, Ohio is their long engagement. When an engagement last for six years, it sends the message to the rest of the world that you're in so little rush to get married, that you never really will. While Albert and Rosie dance around the idea of marriage, kids, and small town life, they can never really be a part of it until they take that next step. Rosie's desire to take the next step makes her a more welcome outsider in the town with the people of Sweet Apple treating her kindly and with respect, while Albert, who has one foot in this world and one foot in show business, is treated with an animosity close to that which Conrad gets from the men in town. When Albert finally agrees to marry Rosie, give up show business, and become

a small town English teacher, everything is rosy in both song and theme. They've been accepted into small town society because they have assimilated to the ways of small town culture. A man and woman of a certain age must marry and bear fruit. In their backing this up, they show the positive side of societal pressure. Societal pressure can help to steer people along the right course in some cases. (Robinson, 2014).

In other cases, societal pressure can make a person crack. You can see this quite clearly in the character of Meg in *Crimes of the Heart*. Meg has been an outsider since she was a little girl. Meg and her sisters were cast out of respectable society when their mother committed suicide. From that day on, they've always been the trashy McGraths. Meg's own actions growing up have done nothing to lessen this notoriety. In high school, Meg earned an illicit reputation for her intimacy with quite a few guys. The myth of Meg only worsened when she left for Hollywood—hoping to make it big, but finding no actual success. Meg returns to Hazlehurst and is a point of contention even in her own family who at best see her as broken—Babe—and at worse see her as trash—Chic. The town seems to agree with Chic—seeming to hold no sympathy for their fallen daughter on her less than triumphant return. (Rosefeldt, 2001).

One of the biggest things keeping Meg out of proper society is the fact that she is a single woman. Worse than that, she's single and not even looking for a husband to settle down with. Her most serious relationship was with

Doc, who she dated as a teenager. Given their youth at the time of their relationship and what was a significant age gap in the world of teenagers, Doc should have been the more mature, in control one of the pair; however, Meg is the one to bear all the blame of their severed relationship in the eyes of Hazlehurst society. Why does Meg bear the blame? Because she left him. If Meg had stayed with Doc, she'd have been questionable, but there would be people in the town that still side with her; however, leaving Doc with a limp and without a second glance, Meg lost the sympathy of all but Babe as she made her exit. Meg became an outsider of her own volition as can be shown through her selfish acts described by Babe as a way to find strength. (Rosefeldt, 2001).

Meg's bad behavior and less than perfect pedigree keep her from the well-ordered society of Hazlehurst so much so that she leaves. Her biggest moment in the play is when she goes out with Doc, a married man, and spends the night "singing". A proper young lady, like her cousin Chic, would never spend the night out with a married man no matter the history or the activity. Chic would feel scandalized by the whole situation. Meg feels a freedom in it. When she releases all of the minutiae of small town propriety to accept her own individuality, Meg feels the freedom to finally sing again. In this freedom, we get the point of the entire play: valuing self over society. Small towns are the enemy here because they provide an intense social code going back several generations in a way that no city can. (Ucar-Özbirinci, 2013).

The world Henley creates—beyond any of the specifics of individual characters—speaks to the issues of life in all its insanity. The use of a small town shows the claustrophobic insanity present in not only the lives of the McGrath sisters, but in life more generally. When discussing Henley’s work, William Demastes described her style in the following way: “...her work escapes the intellectual detachment of the French absurdists and existentialists, and because it takes the horrors of life out of the lecture halls and puts them in a kitchen, it argues that the absurd has an immediacy and relevance to daily existence that other works can’t claim to argue.” (Plunka, 2005). This relates to outsiders in Hazlehurst, Mississippi because it shows the ridiculous nature of some of the prejudice and judgement present in small town society despite it being treated as a normal part of everyday life. (Plunka, 2005).

August: Osage County is the story of an entire family of outsiders and each of them could be featured here for their reasons in their own ways, but the true outsider of the play is Johnna, the house keeper. Johnna stands out from the rest of the characters for her race, her lack of relation to the core family, and her job status. Unlike the Polish people from *Our Town* who were relegated to their own small section of the town, Johnna has the freedom to live in and around the white people for whom she works. However, she is kept at a different status—though not a hopeless one. Unlike Willie Jay from *Crimes of the Heart*, who had to escape from Hazlehurst at the ripe age of fifteen due to an older woman taking advantage of him, Johnna is not limited by the same

reversed moral code. The Weston girls fuss at their mother for any rude comments she makes to Johnna about her race. (Letts, 2008).

The conversation between Barbara and Violet about what to call Johnna, Native American or Indian highlights not only a generational difference, but different kinds of hypocrisy. With Barbara, the idea of calling Johnna a politically incorrect term is inappropriate because it goes against the current social norm—not realizing that Violet is using the term which was politically correct in her youth and still feels socially normal to her. Barbara explains this new term to describe Native Americans by telling her that “It’s what they want to be called.” Violet counters asking who they are and how you can know what an entire group of people prefer to be called. Surveys of indigenous people actually show that the preferred term for “Native Americans” by a small, but noticeable margin is actually “Indian”. The hypocrisy of Barbara in this conversation is that she believes that the term approved by macro-culture—white culture—speaks to the wants and desires of minority groups they claim to protect. While the use of the term Native American is what Barb has come to believe she should say to be sensitive to Johnna and all other Native American people, she never takes a second to actually talk to Johnna about what she would prefer to be called. (Gaffney, 2006).

Violet chooses the more direct approach; she is just racist. When Violet calls Johnna an Indian, she’s using it as an insult. She implies that Johnna is stealing and gets mad at her constantly for being there. However, Violet has an

arc where, in the end, when no one else is there for her, she turns to Johnna and Johnna, whether for her paycheck or out of being a genuinely lovely person, holds her as she breaks down. From Violet's character, we get another idea about why she slights Johnna from her comments to Barb that she doesn't even know why she's here. Beverly hired Johnna without consulting to her. Instead of representing a race of people to her, it's quite possible that Johnna just serves as a reminder of everything her late husband ever did behind her back from impregnating her sister to committing suicide. Either way, acting out on Johnna is only acceptable in her mind because she is an "other". (Scanlan, 2016). (Mohler, 2011).

Johnna is the most distant character from the action. Bev may have been nice to her when he hired in a time of financial need while she studies to be a doctor, but she feels nothing comparable to the grief of his family members. The only person for whom she may feel more grief is Steve, Karen's fiancé. However, his close connection to Karen gives him a reason to be involved on a level that it would be inappropriate for an employee that barely knew him. By having her be the one nonfamily member around throughout the play, Letts sets Johnna in a sharp juxtaposition with the Westons. (Mohler, 2011).

This juxtaposition places Johnna on the moral high ground above the Westons despite her job working for them. One such instance is when she holds Viv during her breakdown at the end. Another instance is her defense of

Jean when Steve makes a move on her. Before we discuss the skillet scene, there is an early scene that builds the Johnna/Jean relationship in a way that influences the impact of that scene. Jean shows up at her grandparent's house with her parents in tow and immediately goes up to the attic. This is completely normal behavior for Jean as she has stayed in the attic every time that she's come to visit and, to some extent, considers it her room. However, this time it is different because Johnna is now staying in the attic as a live-in cook, maid, and general aid for her elderly grandparents. Jean instantly feels alienated because a place she sees as hers has been taken over by Johnna and Johnna feels similarly because she is reminded yet again that she is a stranger here. The scene advances when Jean recognizes the space as belonging to Johnna now, but still remains asking Johnna for her permission to smoke weed here in the attic, away from the prying eyes of her relatives. Johnna offers her a relative sanctuary in her time of superficial need. While this scene does not evolve the strangers to the best of friends, but it does show a moment in which Johnna is sympathetic to Jean's plight. The connection established here may very well be the reason that Johnna was alert enough to check on Jean the night of the skillet incident. (Mohler, 2011).

During the night of the skillet incident, Jean is in the front yard with Steve and he pushes himself on her. He lures her to hang out with him with the offer of marijuana and, when they're smoking, he encourages her to "shotgun" a hit off of him. Shotgunning turns into kissing and he begins to advance on her sexually before Johnna shows up armed with a skillet which

she uses to beat Steve in the head. In this moment as in the later moment with Viv, Johnna is the hero of the scene, but is not recognized or rewarded in any way. While the Polish people from *Our Town* were held to no moral standards and Willie Jay from *Crimes of the Heart* was held to a ridiculously high moral standard, Johnna is the moral center which cast a bright light on all of the main characters. All of the other adults throughout the play have an easily identifiable flaw. Viv's verbally abusive. Bev's a cheat. Mattie Fae is a verbally abusive cheat. Charles is a pushover. Barb's verbally abusive and sanctimonious. Bob's a cheat with a thing for significantly younger women. Ivy and Little Charles are incestuous pushovers. Steve's a pedophile. Karen's so desperate for a husband that she'll marry a pedophile. Each of these adults is truly flawed, but Johnna has no discernable flaw throughout the play. Johnna is the outsider from their family and from their flaws. Letts wrote a play about a dysfunctional family and, by having the one person without a connection to the family be practically perfect, he reinforces this idea. (Ricketson, 2011).

The negative side effects of this choice is that Johnna really ceases to be a three-dimensional character. Instead of being a real life representative of her community with the requisite flaws that any person or community would have, Johnna represents an other with none of the moral hang-ups the white family she works for has. In her presentation "Nostalgia, Irony, and the Re-Emergence of the Reified American Indian Other in *August: Osage County*" from a comparative drama conference whose content was recorded in the book *Text*

and Presentations, 2010, Courtney E. Mohler discusses the issues of Johnna as a character in the following excerpt: “Johnna’s presence as an ethnic Other, a cultural outsider and relative stranger within the house, helps present the Westons as ‘The American Family’. She anchors this white American family in the center of its swirling, violent home, mostly staying on the periphery of the action as she moves from room to room, dusting the surfaces sullied with of attempting and ultimately failing to maintain the American Dream.” (Mohler, 2011).

Being placed in contrast to this gloom and decay makes Johnna a positive character, but an unrealistic one; one that makes this representation, as one of the few representations of Native Americans on the stage in modern theatre, disappointingly shallow. Johnna’s biggest emotional scene is the first one she’s in where Bev talks to her about her father’s passing and her medical aspirations—neither of which are things she ever brings up or that really feed into her absent character arc. While it’s easy for some of the characters in an ensemble cast to be left without a definable character arc, Johnna and the cop who only appears in two short scenes are the only characters without an arc. It becomes noticeable that the one person of color is one of two characters without an arc. While having a person of color present throughout the play is something absent in all of the small town plays, it is made very clear through Johnna’s character that the inclusion of a person of color is more important to the play than any depth given to the character. While Johnna is a character we could all aspire to be, she sticks out as an underdeveloped inclusion used

to show the relative dysfunction rather than any of her own issues or the issues pertinent to Native Americans more generally. (Mohler, 2011).

From Grovers' Corners to Osage County, the small towns presented on stage all vary in the ways they present family, society, and exclusion. These small towns, as fictional as Sweet Apple or as real as Hazlehurst, seem to represent all the complexity of small town life through these varied representations. Family, whether it builds you up like the Webbs or tears you down like the Westons, works as a societal unit to produce the next generation. In the families that build each other up, society breeds a promising new future full of hope. The families that tear each other down, on the other hand, breed a contemptuous society with all its flaws replicated and worsened with each subsequent generation. The characters as members of those societies, whether they be Kim MacAfee joining the Conrad Birdie fan club or Doc going to his AA meetings, can find either support from their society or a need to conform to fit within said society. Outsiders serve to challenge the society either for the audience or for the character onstage. In those challenges, they highlight real world problems faced not only by small towns, but the entire world. Showing such a wide range of small towns on the stage speaks to the variety of small towns and small town experiences present in the world at large.

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