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Sherwood Anderson's "Shadowy Figure": Rural Masculinity in the Modernizing Midwest

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LaToya E. Eaves

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- 43 Ting, "Bachelor Society," 277.
 44 Alger, *The Young Miner*, 66.
 45 Ibid., *The Young Miner*, 76.
 46 Leong, "A Distinct and Antagonistic Race," 132. See also Wong, "Cultural Defenders and Brokers," 7; and Bederman, *Manliness and Civilization*, 29.
 47 Shah, *Contagious Divides*, 2, 77.
 48 Alger, *Ben's Nugget*, 39.
 49 Sears, "All that Glitters," 395. For a discussion of the "sojourner mentality" within nineteenth-century Chinese immigrant communities, see Tsai, *The Chinese Experience in America*, 34–35.
 50 Alger, *The Young Miner*, 65.
 51 Ibid., 72–73.
 52 Scharnhorst, "Ways that Are Dark," 394.
 53 Alger, *Ben's Nugget*, 46.
 54 Ibid., 79.
 55 Ibid., 97.
 56 Leong, "A Distinct and Antagonistic Race," 144.
 57 Alger, *Ben's Nugget*, 18.
 58 Scharnhorst, "Ways that Are Dark," 381.
 59 Alger, *The Young Explorer*, 207.
 60 Ibid., 223.
 61 Alger, *Ben's Nugget*, 25.
 62 Shah, *Contagious Divides*, 89.
 63 Alger, *The Young Explorer*, 248.
 64 Shah, *Contagious Divides*, 12.
 65 Alger, *Ben's Nugget*, 118.
 66 Ibid., 121.
 67 Alger, *The Young Miner*, 268.
 68 Rupp, *A Desired Past*, 43.

Sherwood Anderson's "Shadowy Figure"

Rural Masculinity in the Modernizing Midwest

ANDY OLER

Sherwood Anderson's 1920 novel *Poor White* queers the countryside—but not by attending to LGBT sexualities, nor by developing rural queer identities.¹ In this novel, rural people and spaces resist normative definition. They disrupt nostalgic views of the country and participate in an ambiguous, contradictory modernity. Protagonist Hugh McVey, for instance, does not fit the common stereotypes of rural masculinity, and his social eccentricities give him "the reputation of being queer."² In *Poor White*, Hugh wanders through the Midwest, lands in the small Ohio town of Bidwell, rises as an inventor, marries Clara Butterworth, and eventually loses his job. Hugh's early life is split between his poor white father and Sarah Shepard, the railroad station agent's puritanical wife, two influences that evoke historical conflicts between Upland Southerners and migrant Yankees.³ Despite Hugh's reputation for queerness, then, Anderson constructs him as a prototypical Midwesterner in a manner that reflects the region's cultural and economic history. Grappling with this mixture of dreaminess and drive, which complicates his ability to form meaningful social relationships, Hugh seeks recourse through mobility, work, and (usually halting) interactions with women. Using terms both individual (iterations of self-made and corporate masculinity) and communal (migration, urbanization, mechanization), *Poor White* demonstrates its attention to Midwestern cultural geography. Anderson clarifies this interest when the novel shifts emphasis, combining Hugh's story with rising tensions in Bidwell between the town's rural agrarian and urban industrial economies. In this combination, the novel suggests how regional, masculine, and modern identities have developed alongside, and been disrupted by, each other and the period's socioeconomic changes.

Focusing on Hugh, other characters, and the town itself, this essay claims that *Poor White* queers the structures of normative rural masculinity. In this novel's version of the modernizing Midwest, nostalgic visions of rural masculinity—the self-made farmer or merchant artisan in a community-building and offspring-producing marriage relationship—prove insufficient. This becomes clear early in the novel when Hugh leaves his hometown of Mudcat Landing: “Well, I’m going away, I’m going away to be a man among men,” [Hugh] said to himself over and over. The saying became a kind of refrain and he said it unconsciously. As he repeated the words his heart beat high in anticipation of the future he thought lay before him” (22). In this passage, Hugh plans to join an ill-defined abstraction: an unnamed and un-located, but presumably successful, group of men. Hugh assumes both his own future success and that it will occur in relation to other men. Along with the group’s abstraction and non-location, Hugh’s excitement and unconscious repetition suggest that Anderson universalizes and idealizes a definition of masculinity that relies on homosocial competition, mobility, and future productivity.⁴ Conversely, Hugh’s universalized expectations of manhood also challenge their normalization. Building on Eve Sedgwick’s claim that challenges to normativity must happen within “an entire cultural network of normative definitions,”⁵ I argue that the novel’s sexual and socioeconomic normativities also reveal their instabilities, which create alternate possibilities for characters and the town alike.

Above all, Hugh’s alternate possibility consists of the shadowy figure of a group of men—successful, future, and elsewhere. Throughout the novel Anderson both invests in that ideal and creates a space in which it does not have to exist. By merging masculinized economic expectations with an abstracted space of production and then returning the novel’s action to the localized setting of a small town, Anderson suggests the existence and potential viability of queer rural spaces for those characters and communities who—independent of sexual orientation—seek usable alternatives to the teleologies of a modernizing rurality.⁶ But while Anderson sees promise in Bidwell’s version of a flexible, accommodating rural modernity, he also indicates the challenges of modern rural masculinity. For example, evoking the abstraction of the imagined group of men, Hugh melds ruralized and urbanized abstractions to invent a mechanized cabbage transplanter, a concrete representation of

modern rurality. Ultimately, however, he cannot balance the town’s socioeconomic ambiguities and conflicting cultural expectations, and he withdraws from the promising space he helped create.

Reincorporated Rural Modernity

Hugh’s search for a queer rural space begins almost immediately after his departure from Mudcat Landing. Upon arriving in an Iowa town, Hugh walks out of town to a hill overlooking the Mississippi River. There, thoughts about his boyhood demonstrate the tensions within *Poor White*’s modern rurality.

The long summer Sunday afternoons had been delightful times for Hugh, so delightful that he finally gave them up, fearing they might lead him to take up again his old sleepy way of life. Now as he sat in the darkness above the same river he had gazed on through the long Sunday afternoons, a spasm of something like loneliness swept over him. For the first time he thought about leaving the river country and going into a new land with a keen feeling of regret. (27)

Scenes such as Hugh’s retreat from town and subsequent nostalgia for the “delightful times” of his youth lead many critics to complain that Anderson’s writing is overly sentimental and nostalgic.⁷ While the rural space enables Hugh’s nostalgia, however, that same space and Hugh’s existence in it are simultaneously modern. This passage emphasizes the inconsistency and complication of Hugh’s feelings, which affect his experience and use of space. For example, alongside his excitement for the travel, he also regrets leaving his home country. And despite his desire for the company of successful men, he removes himself from town into the darkness and loneliness of the countryside. Thus, while *Poor White* acknowledges nostalgic modes, it juxtaposes them with more modern ways of experiencing the countryside. In that inconsistency, Hugh and the novel both define and disrupt the normalized aspects of rural modernity and masculinity.

Hugh’s and Bidwell’s rural modernity resist the dominant narrative of urban-industrial modernity, which economically devalues and culturally subordinates rural people and places.⁸ Alan Trachtenberg has called

these socioeconomic changes and the accompanying cultural narrative “incorporation,” which he defines as “the emergence of a changed, more tightly structured society with new hierarchies of control, and also changed conceptions of that society, of America itself.”⁹ Focusing on urbanization, industrialization, and the rise of corporate capitalism, Trachtenberg explains the centralization of control and power in American society. Although he notes that “the process [of incorporation] proceeded by contradiction and conflict,”¹⁰ he tracks the ways that individuals, communities, and the state were expected to become more efficient and consolidated. In *Poor White*, Anderson explores this tighter structure of economic and cultural hierarchies. He starts with communal changes to Bidwell and the Midwest, naturalizing turn-of-the-century socioeconomic changes by describing them as derived from “a vast energy [that] seemed to come out of the breast of earth and infect the people” (128). Furthermore, the novel’s engagement with incorporation filters down to the individual level in the way that Hugh and other characters negotiate communal change and social expectations.

Hugh’s negotiation of these broad changes can be seen in the way he responds to the region’s “vast energy” (128) with a “queer determined light [shining] in his small gray eyes” (17) but also counters that energy with a tendency to “weariness and loneliness” (37). Hugh’s response indicates how *Poor White* represents the relationship between individual and communal in rural Midwestern communities, and it suggests how Anderson invests in the shift away from definitions of masculinity predicated on economic self-determination. While masculinity studies scholars have emphasized this shift’s relationship to growing urban centers, Trachtenberg’s focus on the process of incorporation indicates how industrial manufacturing entered farming communities, confronting rural people with newly hierarchized forms of management and economic competition.¹¹ Hugh McVey, Anderson’s version of a composite Midwesterner, demonstrates how the incorporation narrative affects and may be challenged by an individual male operating within the framework of modern rurality. For example, Hugh’s cabbage transplanter is inspired by rural needs and produced in a rural setting. However, capitalist speculators finance the machine, and Anderson undermines the pastoral setting by representing the moment of invention in a quavering modernist style in which the twilight makes Hugh appear terrifying to

a family of farmworkers. Engaging narratives of rural masculinity and industrial modernity, Anderson suggests that rural spaces, people, and products participate equally in a broad-based, shifting network of economic influences and social formations.¹²

Through a character who bridges the nostalgic self-made man and the incorporated company man, *Poor White* resists teleologies ranging from incorporation to common conceptions of literary temporality. Raymond Williams, for one, argues that a long tradition of British and Classical literature represents the country nostalgically and the city as a space of futurity. The present, then, can only be “experienced as a tension” between them.¹³ Williams relegates rural spaces to a nostalgic framework of representation, which pairs easily with widespread critical acceptance of Anderson’s affection for ruralized spaces, people, and values. The combination suggests that Anderson might have been expected to accept Van Wyck Brooks’s 1918 charge that American authors should recover a “usable past” as a way to cope with modernity.¹⁴ As seen in *Poor White*, however, Anderson’s representation of the countryside is not entirely nostalgic, but is entwined with Hugh’s inventiveness and, more generally, its potential as an active socioeconomic force. Benjamin Spencer notes that “as late as 1939 [Anderson] could declare that he did not know what a ‘usable past’ is, and that his concern was rather to live intensely in the present.”¹⁵ Anderson’s refusal to acknowledge the historical basis of Brooks’s usable past suggests a similar resistance to the nostalgia that Williams indicates is usually used to represent the country.

Rather, this novel entwines rurality with what Williams would call the future-oriented industrial economy, articulating the temporal middle ground within Williams’s theory. In *Poor White*, that middle ground diminishes Brooks’s historical depth and emphasizes a network of multiple discourses interacting with each other in the present. These range from the gender and economic expectations of Hugh’s desire to be “a man among men” to the affective experiences suggested by representing the countryside as a dark and lonely place. Anderson, then, suggests that Midwestern rural modernity necessarily develops a *usable present*, combining the novel’s present-oriented temporality with Brooks’s interest in usability. But Anderson does not eliminate the past from this novel, which includes examples of self-made men as well as nostalgically represented rural community and land use. *Poor White*’s usable present

queers the countryside by reincorporating elements of the past alongside capitalist desires for growth and increased wealth. In particular, it is a challenge to define Hugh's character exclusively—as rural or urban, nostalgic or modern, independent or corporate—and this suggests that the novel retains a nostalgic vision of independent rural masculinity while also investigating the possibilities of a modernized corporate version.

Conditional Usability

Poor White suggests that modern rurality and rural masculinity resist the nostalgia of Brooks's "usable past" as well as the teleologies of urban industrial incorporation. Hugh McVey and Bidwell reincorporate ruralized identities, spaces, and products into American and Midwestern modernity, which requires them to negotiate a broad range of experiential and socioeconomic discourses. In this formulation, individuals and communities necessarily must be highly and immediately reactive, lest they be pushed aside by any among a variety of forces. Characters attempt to achieve a usable present by balancing a variety of social, economic, and gender expectations. That they must do so in a region undergoing a messy and contradictory process of modernization demonstrates the multiple contingencies at work in this novel as well as the resulting challenges to Bidwell, Hugh, and *Poor White*'s other male characters.

In Bidwell, the local economy provides the key structures of social organization. Men's strength in a largely homosocial workplace, then, extends to an enhanced position in the community at large.¹⁶ The novel's representative example of this new rural economy is the capitalist speculation of Steve Hunter and his (male) investors:

Steve took no chances. He engaged Ed Hall to go at night and replace the plants that did not live. "It's fair enough," he explained to Ed. "A hundred things can cause the plants to die, but if they die it'll be blamed on the machine. What will become of the town if we don't believe in the thing we're going to manufacture here?" (126–27)

Hunter's fraudulent promotion of the cabbage-setting machine results from his stated desire to make the town "believe in" the cabbage-setter

and suggests that Anderson entrusts communal well-being to Bidwell's male industrialists. At this point in the novel, the life of the town is presented as primarily economic in nature and tied to incorporation's inherent organizational growth; here, Hunter attempts to create the conditions necessary for that growth.

In this instance, men stereotypically access the town's socioeconomic hierarchy via quantifiable notions of economic success. But Anderson also indicates the limits of economic achievement as a descriptor of usable masculine identities. Specifically, in *Poor White*, masculinity seems to rest on the ability to participate broadly across social groups, balancing many groups' demands alongside enduring expectations of quantifiable professional success. Steve Hunter's command to replace dying cabbage plants indicates an attempt to satisfy both "skeptical farmers" and "town enthusiasts" (126) about the machine's performance. The machine's failure is immaterial to Hunter, however, as he is more concerned about the machine's reception than its successful performance. This decision may be read as Hunter's creating his own usable present by engaging the various forces and demands at work on him to fashion the conditions for his and his business's positive growth. Notably, Hunter's actions designate a shift away from figures such as Wainsworth the harnessmaker, a "vastly independent" "tradesman of the old school" (51), who is more concerned about quality craftsmanship than widespread acceptance.

Hunter promotes modernization and economic growth as a means to improve his socioeconomic position in Bidwell, an action largely in keeping with arguments made by masculinity studies theorists that the construction of modern masculinity is based on homosocial competition. Historian George Chauncey suggests that men in the early twentieth century did not define themselves solely by attempting to obtain power over women, but rather expressed masculine anxiety by concerning themselves with their "relative virility compared to other men's."¹⁷ *Poor White* includes a literal application of Chauncey's argument, in terms of competition for women seen via various attempts to court Clara Butterworth, but it is secondary to the novel's metaphorical treatment of the concept of competition for socioeconomic place in a changing economy. Women's entrance into the factory system is absent from this competition, eliding the workplace experiences of Midwestern women

and potentially losing a great deal of attendant social complexity. But in terms of masculine experience, Chauncey's theory of competitive virility neatly matches Hunter's behavior throughout the novel. Hunter's argument regarding the complex possibilities for the cabbage plants' death suggests a concern for advancing his position relative to other men, which he attempts to do by eliminating organic instability and taking control over every element of the machine's production and reception. His attempt reveals two key concerns for this essay: first, that Anderson does not present a unified theory of the land's place in rural modernity, and second, that this novel tracks a transitional moment of gender definition. In this period, gendered conceptions of labor were unstable, particularly in terms of masculinity, which transitioned from a "self-made" ideal into other forms. Self-made manhood valued control—especially self-control—and developed within the context of relative autonomy in the workplace. Along with the growth of centralized industrial capitalism, however, that control became less attainable for most men.

Hunter attempts to eliminate the land's effects on the cabbage plants, an ethically suspect attempt to control his community of investors by controlling environmental factors. In this situation, even the soil becomes embroiled in the corporate economy: rather than a relationship in which the land and its tenders are mutually constitutive, Anderson suggests a more fragmentary approach to modernity in rural settings. Prior to the cabbage plants' replacement, Hugh brought concerns to Hunter that the machine was "too heavy to be handled by one team . . . would not work when the soil was either too wet or too dry, . . . [and] worked perfectly in both wet and dry sand but would do nothing in clay" (121). While rural people and products are essential to *Poor White's* conception of modern rurality, this is not the modernized version of a pastoral idyll. Instead, rural production relies upon industrial production, but the land is occasionally at odds with the factory.

Anderson queers the countryside by merging the socioeconomic structures and normative gender identities of a smaller, ruralized community with the new ones developed in the process of industrial urbanization. Bidwell residents therefore experience modern social and identity fragmentation, which can be seen in the farmworkers' terror and in Clara's disappointment in returning to the country. As a result, Anderson depicts a still-rural community that also corresponds to char-

acteristic descriptions of modernity. The difference between Bidwell and standard definitions of modernity, of course, stems from its comparatively rural location and economic structure. The very representation of this community may then be seen as an act of modernist fragmentation, upending urban-oriented definitions of modernity and removing a single assumed narrative in favor of plurality. The result is that such ruralized Midwestern representations become central to literary modernism, with locations such as Bidwell providing authors and audiences both a counterpoint and a growth point. Anderson represents Bidwell, in particular, as an exemplar of this kind of rural modernity, as the people "rush[ing] pell-mell into a new age" (128) are the ruralized residents of farms and small towns across the Midwest.

I argue that one of *Poor White's* key projects is to explore how the "pell-mell" chaos of the region's changing socioeconomic structures affects male characters' abilities to construct workable modern identities across gender, racial, and geographic lines. In his responses to the novel's other characters, the Bidwell community, and the broader socioeconomic changes at hand, Hugh McVey becomes Anderson's prime example of an individual male's attempt to construct a usable rural masculinity. He attempts to ameliorate perceived faults in his personality and gender identity, for instance, by turning to "the study of mathematical problems . . . to relieve his loneliness and to cure his inclination to dreams" (55). Furthermore, Hugh's measured, solitary study of mechanics indicates how he negotiates Bidwell's "rush . . . into a new age" of manufacturing. Anderson suggests that the key challenge and strategy for many Midwesterners was to attempt to balance competing discourses and incorporate elements of each of them into a usable, present-oriented identity that was reactive and synthetic. Here, a key problem for Hugh is that his rational reaction, rather than providing balanced usability, places him on a path to the incorporated identity definitions common to narratives of modernity. Indeed, from Hugh and his father to Hunter and Wainsworth, Anderson's strategy for representing the difficulty of this historical moment can be seen in the stories of *Poor White's* men: while an individual white male can take action to improve his class standing, economic success in this environment presents a danger of conflating personal and communal benefits, which makes him more likely to fail at attaining a usable identity.

Contingency, Mobility, Balance

Throughout *Poor White*, the economic and affective transitions exemplified by a character such as McVey are tied to his travels throughout the Midwest. The novel emphasizes mobility and changeability as means to a usable masculine identity, suggesting that, for men, creating and manipulating a usable present in the modernizing Midwest requires not only balance and flexibility but also a willingness to change perspective. For Hugh, changing perspective means, variously, his migration from Mudcat Landing to Bidwell, his career shift from telegraph operator to inventor, and his tendency to wander when puzzled. For Bidwell, the major spatial and socioeconomic shifts are due to the effects of incorporation on both the community and its individuals. For the novel, "Hugh's first inventive effort stirred the town of Bidwell deeply" (70), creating slippage between individual and community by constructing both Hugh and Bidwell as inclined toward attempts at a usable rural present. But despite Hugh's willingness to revise his social and spatial position, Anderson ultimately writes him as failing to sustain a usable present. Hugh's successes are always contingent, which suggests that the attempt to create and sustain a personal usable present remains challenging even in a regional environment that is conducive to it.

Throughout the novel, Hugh's personal challenges are frequently mental obstacles of some sort—related to work, relationships, or his past. His response to those challenges is to wander, changing his position by walking the roads and countryside in an attempt to better comprehend and react to his situation. The following passage, in which Hugh attempts to think through the difficulties in his marriage to Clara, suggests how the spatial experience of rural modernity affects and is informed by modern gender experiences:

For hours he walked blindly, but it did not occur to him that as he waited, hating the waiting, Clara also waited; that for her also it was a time of trial and uncertainty. To him it seemed her course was simple and easy. She was a white pure thing—waiting—for what? for courage to come in to him in order that an assault be made upon her whiteness and purity.

That was the only answer to the question Hugh could find within himself. The destruction of what was white and pure was a necessary thing in

life. It was a thing men must do in order that life go on. As for women, they must be white and pure—and wait. (316)

Despite the novel's marginalization of women, Hugh's and Clara's gender experiences posit a fundamental similarity between masculine and feminine experiences of modernity. However, while similarities in their concurrent "waiting," and their "trial[s] and uncertaint[ies]," may be read as an interest in improving equality between the sexes, it does not seem to enhance relationships between individuals of different genders. In this passage, the reason that misunderstandings remain between people having otherwise equal experiences appears to be that Hugh is operating with outmoded gender role expectations. He assumes that Clara is a figure of purity rather than the educated woman and participant in modernity that she is presented to be.

That Hugh walks to assist his thinking while Clara sits at home underlines certain conflicts between them: namely, while they have similar modern relational anxieties and temporal experiences, their differences in gender role experiences and expectations affect their relationships to hierarchies of capital and power. Hugh's attempts to comprehend the difficulties of his relationship therefore focus on balancing the various influences on his conception of his personal identity and his prescribed social role. Anderson signals the act of balancing by showing Hugh walking, which indicates Hugh's attempt to change his position and his relationship to those discourses—in other words, using mobility to revise the spatial component of his experience. However, Anderson undercuts Hugh's potential success first when he indicates Hugh's blindness in the endeavor. Each step seems ill-fated as Hugh attempts to create a usable present for himself. Though Anderson spatializes Hugh's experience to provide him the ability to balance multiple discourses, Hugh remains blind to the ways in which those discourses interact, suggesting that the attempt will end in failure. Anderson also undercuts Hugh's potential success through his hatred of the experience of waiting for the courage to approach Clara. That hatred constitutes an affective exclusion of normatively and nostalgically defined gender roles such as courageous masculinity and submissive femininity and signifies Hugh's inability to balance the gender and socioeconomic discourses in which he participates.

Notably, Hugh's mobility does not follow the incorporation narrative's developmental teleology. Rather, his blind walking, his travels throughout the Midwest, and his choice to settle in Bidwell suggest a more circuitous route reincorporating rural elements—from working on farms to settling in “Pickleville” (59) to farm labor inspiring his invention—alongside the urbanizing manufacturing economy.¹⁸ Hugh walks to stimulate his thoughts, but his walking usually fails to generate any sustained thought and instead results in a formless musing. Another passage in which Hugh “left his shop and went for a walk” (352) demonstrates how Hugh's economic rise limits his and the novel's resistance to incorporation. While wandering, Hugh reflects on his life from the time “when he was striving to come out of the filth, the flies, the poverty, the fishy smells, the shadowy dreams of his life by the river” to his inability to negotiate “a problem that could not be solved in wood and steel” (352). Here, Anderson taps into the Horatio Alger myth of a young man made good through hard work, assisted by a successful man's altruistic act to remove him from the slums.

Drawn into the world of modern industry by stationmaster Shepard and his wife, Sarah, Hugh is largely separated from his father and the filthy, shadowy culture of his birth, eventually working up—in his unconscious, dreaming way—to a more lucrative and powerful economic position. Anderson does not end Hugh's story on this Alger-style economic up-note, however, as this passage indicates his engagement with another prevalent literary narrative of the late nineteenth century—the fall of the great man, of the character whose ethical or moral failings cause him to fall from a successful socioeconomic position, as seen in W. D. Howells's *The Rise of Silas Lapham* (1885), Booth Tarkington's *The Magnificent Ambersons* (1918), and Theodore Dreiser's *Trilogy of Desire* (1912–1947).¹⁹ But unlike the characters in these novels, Hugh does not fall prey to greed or overextension; rather, he gets caught up in a modern corporate economy that has asked him to approach his work differently.

In *Poor White*, Hugh's inventions are inspired by local farmworkers, not by profit-oriented machinations of the corporate economy, and Hugh struggles when he is forced off of his chosen developmental track. Hugh's dreaminess has merged with the Shepards' work ethic to create a working style that synthesizes many elements of his background and current environment. Early in *Poor White*, Steve Hunter capital-

izes on Hugh's inventive talents, but at this point has asked him to shift his work into reverse engineering in an attempt to get around an Iowa inventor's patent on a hay-loader. However, because Anderson has positioned Hugh as a successful inventor by constructing Hugh's creativity as a synthesis of the many discourses at work on him, Hugh's talents are unsuited to Hunter's profit motive. Hugh believes that “he had lived but little in the life of the imagination, had been afraid to live that life, had been warned and re-warned against living it” (352), suggesting that he is so limited in regard to abstraction that he is unable to be productive in his new economic position.²⁰ If Hugh's imaginative productivity is predicated on his ability to balance influences, however, then Anderson might be seen in this passage as actually criticizing Hugh for passively accepting the task. As Anderson's prototype of modern Midwestern masculinity, Hugh must reincorporate rural influences and inspirations into his work; accepting a profit-oriented reverse engineering task means that he loses part of the synthesis that originally enabled his success.

Hugh's apparent passivity and modified economic position demonstrate the tensions within Anderson's representation of normalized masculine economic roles. As Hugh wanders, while “he should have been making new parts for the hay-loading apparatus,” his thoughts turn toward “the shadowy figure of the unknown inventor in the state of Iowa, who had been brother to himself, who had worked on the same problems and had come to the same conclusions” (352–53). Describing the Iowa inventor as “shadowy” recalls Hugh's birth culture and the “waving uncertain light” of the cabbage field (81), and it also emphasizes the tension within the Iowa man's position as both brother and competitor to Hugh. As his rurality-inspired brother, the Iowa man evokes Hugh's greatest personal and professional successes—seeing some problem in the life or work of people around him and addressing that issue, thereby tapping into the communal life in which he desires to take part. As a competitor, however, the Iowa man's invention of the hay-loading machine suggests that he has beaten Hugh and, according to Chauncey's argument about masculine competition, positioned himself as more masculine and capable. But, along with Hugh's changed position, their parallel problems of comprehension—Hugh's inability to clearly envision the Iowa man just as, earlier, the farmworkers in the cabbage field could not comprehend Hugh's appearance—suggest that perhaps we

should not read their relationship as being solely competitive. In this way, Anderson seems to be critiquing the boundaries of masculinity even as he reinscribes their effects on the individual.

In the above passage and throughout the novel, Hugh's mobility might easily be explained using a pattern of American masculinity that Michael Kimmel contends was prevalent from the nineteenth century forward: "American men try to control themselves; they project their fears onto others; and when feeling too pressured, they attempt an escape."²¹ For Kimmel, flight is a normative response to masculine anxiety, enacted in response to failures of self-control or of economic self-improvement. But Hugh's consideration of the men of his past does not demonstrate an attachment to normatively defined imitative or competitive masculinity. Rather, when "thinking of the Iowa man, Hugh began to think of other men. He thought of his father and of himself" (352). Hugh's thoughts about masculinity skip among himself, his father, the station master, and the Iowa inventor. Kimmel's idea of escape inadequately explains this mental parallel to Hugh's physical wandering.

Rather, Hugh's directionlessness seems designed to help him find a queer space—that is, to negotiate the novel's complex, "shadowy" network of thoughts and emotions. According to George Chauncey, "many middle-class writers" used "light and shadow . . . to characterize the different class worlds and moral orders coexisting in the city."²² Anderson draws on images of queer urban sexuality to indicate the moment's complexity and suggest the multiple ideas and identities available to Hugh. In *Poor White's* rural setting, shadows are variously associated with the passage of rural time, the factory economy, and individual thought processes. Therefore, when "the shadows of the trees lengthened" (196), when "in the corners of the old building shadows lurked and distorted thoughts began to come into his head" (97), or when Hugh contemplates "the shadowy figure of the unknown inventor" (352–3), *Poor White's* shadows do not signal queer sexualities. Instead, they suggest possible gender identities and uses of space exceeding what is available in Bidwell's brightly lit thoroughfares. Despite his attempt to negotiate his emotions, Hugh appears unprepared to balance the various historical influences and present demands on him: "Hugh tried to think of himself and his own life. For a time that seemed a simple and easy way out of the new and intricate task he had set for his mind. His own life was a matter

of history. He knew about himself" (353). Hugh nominally resists normative definitions of masculinity, but he cannot engage in the balanced incorporation of multiple discourses that Anderson suggests is a condition of usable, modern rural masculinity. His literal and figurative mobility instead devolve into a meandering, anti-teleological quandary and result in his retreat to a simple solution predicated on personal history.

Shadowy Figures, Rural Ambiguities

At the end of *Poor White*, Hugh returns home to Clara, and they stand outside amidst the sounds of farm and factory. This passage has received a good deal of critical attention, much of it addressing the novel's moral and narratological ambiguities. Irving Howe, for example, finds the novel's ending "most unsatisfactory" because of Anderson's "curious aversion to dramatic conflict."²³ Robert Morss Lovett also criticizes the ending but places fewer moral and structural demands on the novel: "*Poor White* does not end—it merely stops [but] . . . no ending is better than a false one, and perhaps any emphasis would be misplaced in Mr. Anderson's cosmos—or chaos."²⁴ This essay intervenes in the shadowy middle ground between Howe's criticisms and Lovett's sense of the novel's universality (benevolent or malignant, depending on "cosmos—or chaos"). I read the novel's ending as shadowy, indeterminate in how it resists reduction to a single defining element of masculine, economic, or spatial experience. Moreover, I contend that the ending's ambiguity, and the reason Howe points out a lack of conflict between the characters, is due to the intensified importance of Bidwell as a modern rural space that juxtaposes the urban futurity of a factory whistle with the gently nostalgic "sounds of farm animals stirring" (363).

That indeterminacy demands the reincorporation of a wider range of concerns, which suggests the methods and challenges of Anderson's and Hugh's attempts to create a usable present in and with the novel. Leo Marx notes the challenges of balancing multiple influences—in other words, of creating a usable present—by reframing critical discussion of literary shortcomings in political terms: "the inability of our writers to create a surrogate for the ideal of the middle landscape can hardly be accounted artistic failure."²⁵ In the phrase "middle landscape," Marx refers to a Jeffersonian ideal of mechanically improved agrarianism, "a happy

balance of art and nature.”²⁶ He suggests that nineteenth- and twentieth-century American writers have failed to update that ideal but attributes their failure to the displacement to the literary realm of what is primarily a sociopolitical problem. Building on Marx’s point, I accept Anderson’s failure in creating a usable present, but resist the attribution of utopian ideals to *Poor White*. Rather, I argue that the novel’s ambiguity—its shadowy-ness—is a solution in itself, albeit imperfect, an attempt to create a usable present that does not rely exclusively on one temporal, spatial, or generic element. Anderson’s engagement with modern rural masculinity thus requires reincorporating nostalgic, ruralized values alongside the future-oriented visions of economic modernization, of rural spaces and production alongside urban factory towns.

As a result, Anderson’s greatest success in imagining a usable present lies not with Hugh McVey, Clara Butterworth, or modernized gender roles, but in Bidwell’s potential to accommodate queer spaces. Throughout the novel, Anderson provides broad sociocultural descriptions of Bidwell that would not be out of place in sociological studies of the period, and the novel’s broad strokes undeniably contribute to a generic confusion typifying widespread anxiety about the social experience of modernity.²⁷ Anderson fancied his novel to be a sociological document anticipating the documentary turn of Depression-era social fiction, and he claimed in a 1934 letter that *Poor White* was “‘a kind of classic’ illustrating ‘the destructive influence of present-day uncontrolled industrialism.’”²⁸ Attaching a high level of social importance to his novel, Anderson theorizes the artist’s relationship to society as revelatory and even prophetic; the Great Depression seems only to have emboldened his self-fulfilling claims on the novel’s descriptive and predictive powers. Coupled with Anderson’s description of *Poor White* in his introduction to the 1925 Modern Library edition, in which “the town was really the hero of the book,”²⁹ we begin to see a theory of ruralized geographic and social spaces as intimately incorporated into modern conceptions of socioeconomic order. In *Poor White*, the connection between characters and the land is not simply a preordained harnessing and directing of the land’s power by those characters; nor is it a Marxist abstraction of the fall of capitalism. Rather, reading the town as the novel’s main character suggests that it has a potentially unpredictable narrative arc much as any other character. It also indicates that Anderson’s use of geography and

collectivity is spatially oriented but not ultimately fixed to an outcome generated by the area’s past.

Uncertainty permeates *Poor White*, at least partly because of the constant adaptations of Bidwell’s manufacturing economy. For a time, Hugh’s inventions energize Bidwell, its socioeconomic shifts allow the community to develop a usable present, and Hugh achieves his desire to become “a man among men.” Still, his masculine ideals retain their shadowy ambiguity, and eventually Hugh is marginalized within his community and from the company of men. Although Hugh finds a balance between Upland Southerner and migrant Yankee, and between ruralized inspiration and urbanized manufacturing, he becomes a by-product of the system for which he served as both catalyst and most visible success. Hugh’s exclusion joins other byproducts of a usable rural present, including the labor shift from farm to factory, the demise of characters with residual identity definitions such as harness-maker Joe Wainsworth, and the challenges posed by shifting gender roles. While Anderson presents an optimistic reading of the possibilities for rural spaces, *Poor White* also demonstrates the profound instability of a usable rural present for individuals as well as communities. In queering the countryside, then, this novel explores the costs and opportunities of doing so. It offers the normative and declines it, both for people and for places. As a result, *Poor White* proposes that we read the countryside itself as a “shadowy figure,” one that includes all the chaos of modern industrial America alongside elements of a nostalgic agrarianism.

NOTES

1 *Poor White*’s main representative of LGBT sexualities is Kate Chancellor, Clara Butterworth’s college friend and love interest, whose sexuality (and socialism) is relegated to urban Columbus, Ohio. She disappears from the narrative prior to Clara’s college graduation.

2 Anderson, *Poor White* (1993), 54. Further references to this edition of *Poor White* will be in the form of in-text parenthetical citations.

3 During U.S. westward expansion in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the two major groups settling the Old Northwest came from northeastern and southern states. Many scholars have addressed the sociopolitical and economic conflicts that developed out of this combination of “Yankee” and “Upland Southerner,” including Power, *Planting Corn Belt Culture*; Adams, *The Transformation of Rural Life*; Etcheson, *The Emerging Midwest*; Wilson, *Yankees in Michigan*; and Gray, *The Yankee West*. Scholars who have explored similar issues of intra-American cultural conflict between

"Puritan" and "Pioneer" include Brooks, *Van Wyck Brooks, the Early Years*, and Hegeman, *Patterns for America*.

4 For further reading on definitions of and challenges to normative masculinity in this period, see Chauncey, *Gay New York*; Kimmel, *Manhood in America*; Bederman, *Manliness and Civilization*; and Rotundo, *American Manhood*. For the concept of "male homosocial desire," I am drawing on Sedgwick, *Between Men*.

5 Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet*, 11.

6 Halberstam, *In a Queer Time and Place*, explores "queer spaces" within "metronormativity," the standardized narrative of individuals' urban migration.

7 Discussion of Anderson's sentimentality and nostalgia for rural and small-town life is widespread among literary critics, ranging from Fiedler, *Love and Death in the American Novel*, to more recent scholarship such as Hegeman, *Patterns for America*; Clymer, "Modeling, Diagramming, and Early Twentieth-Century Histories of Invention and Entrepreneurship"; Farland, "Modernist Versions of Pastoral"; Gelfant, "A Novel of Becoming"; and Hogue, "From Mulberries to Machines." For a counterargument, see Van Doren, *Contemporary American Novelists, 1900-1920*.

8 Recent work in literary studies explores modernism and modernity in ruralized U.S. settings, challenging long-held assumptions of urbanity as the default location for scholarly definitions of modernism and modernity. See Herring, *Another Country*; Co-mentale, "The Possibilities of Hard-Won Land,"; and Farland, "Modernist Versions of Pastoral." For urban-oriented definitions of modernism and modernity, see Parrington, *Main Currents in American Thought*; Giddens, *The Consequences of Modernity*; and Berman, *All That Is Solid Melts into Air*. Berman calls rural-to-urban migration the "archetypal move . . . for young people" in modern society (18).

9 Trachtenberg, *The Incorporation of America*, 3-4.

10 *Ibid.*, 7.

11 For urban-oriented discussions of the diminishing importance of economic self-determination, see Chauncey, *Gay New York*, and Kimmel, *Manhood in America*. A notable, rural-focused exception to the scholarship on masculinity at the turn of the century can be found in Ownby, *Subduing Satan*.

12 Examples of twentieth-century historical narratives in which American rural and urban economies develop in relation to each other can be found in Cronon, *Nature's Metropolis*, and Hamilton, *Trucking Country*.

13 Williams, *The Country and the City*, 297.

14 See "On Creating a Usable Past" in Brooks and Sprague, *Van Wyck Brooks, the Early Years*, 219-26.

15 Spencer, "Sherwood Anderson," 4.

16 *Poor White* problematically marginalizes its female characters, evoking common historical and representational concerns about the treatment of rural women. See Casey, *A New Heartland*; Murphy, "Journeywoman Milliner"; Neth, *Preserving the Family Farm*; Holt, *Linoleum, Better Babies, and the Modern Farm Woman, 1890-1930*; Hampsten, *Read This Only to Yourself*; Fink, *Agrarian Women*; and Adams, *The Transformation of Rural Life*.

17 Chauncey, *Gay New York*, 80.

18 "Pickleville," an area outside of Bidwell where a cucumber factory formerly stood, likely is patterned after "Sauerkrautville," a nickname for Anderson's hometown of Clyde, Ohio, according to Rideout, *Sherwood Anderson*, 1:135. These, alongside Ohio towns Celeryville, Wheat Ridge, Wheatville, and Farmersville, indicate a kind of local pride in rural production.

19 This trope falls in line with a broader concern in literary realism over the effects of increasing wealth on individuals and the moral challenges of a changing socioeconomic order, which has been explored in Kaplan, *The Social Construction of American Realism*; Martin, *Harvests of Change*; and Berthoff, *The Ferment of Realism*.

20 According to Tichi, *Shifting Gears*, Anderson's writing is nostalgic and broadly anti-technology. While I agree that Anderson underscores the losses and the hardships that coincide with Bidwell's new-built factories, he also notably details the excitement of the time alongside benefits to a variety of individuals.

21 Kimmel, *Manhood in America*, 9; emphasis in original.

22 Chauncey, *Gay New York*, 44.

23 Howe, *Sherwood Anderson*, 82.

24 Lovett, "Mr. Sherwood Anderson's America," 37.

25 Marx, *The Machine in the Garden*, 364-65.

26 *Ibid.*, 226.

27 See Berman, *All That Is Solid Melts into Air*. In considering generic confusions, James Agee and Walker Evans famously walk the line between documentary and fiction in *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* (1941). Furthermore, a sociological study of a small Midwestern city that shares several narrative and descriptive characteristics with *Poor White* can be found in Lynd and Lynd, *Middletown*.

28 Quoted in Rideout, *Sherwood Anderson*, 2:193.

29 Anderson, *Poor White* (1926), vi.