William Allen White's Small-Town America

A Literary Prescription For Progressive Reform

by Edward Gale Agran

Throughout the twentieth century a long line of American social commentators have couched their views within the confines of the "small town." They have used this rhetorical device both to praise and to abuse American values and norms. As people moved from farms and small towns to medium-sized cities and metropolises, and as they blended into the rapidly expanding middle class, a small-town rhetoric came to encapsulate a homogenized, idealized set of values. It can be argued that the idea of the small town, epitomized by a middle-western sense of community, came to be the yeoman myth of the twentieth century. While declining in relative demographic stature, the small-town community, as an idea, came to loom large over the modernizing nation.

One of the earliest and most important twentieth-century purveyors of the small town as an idea was journalist, political activist, and novelist William Allen White. White strongly associated himself with the ethos of small-town America. He purposefully based himself in Emporia, Kansas, a slowly growing county seat of ten to twenty thousand denizens, and he preached the "gospel of Emporia" to a national audience for close to half a century. White spoke out on a variety of moral, social, and political issues, fashioning himself a progressive, and constructing a fairly consistent world view. Yet while he expressed this view in terms of small-town values, a closer examination reveals that he tai-

Edward Gale Agran, assistant professor of history at Wilmington College in Wilmington, Ohio, published "William Allen White and the Forging of Middle Class Identity in Depression America" in Mid-America, April-July 1991. Currently he is conducting research on 1920s culture.

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Aqua Pura was a western Kansas town, set high up, far out on the prairie. It was founded nine years ago... by honest, ambitious men and women.

"The Story of Aqua Pura"
The Real Issue
1896

White's role as a spokesman for the greater Middle American community, and his use of the small town to reach out to it, began to take shape in the Progressive Era—that period of intense domestic reform running roughly from the late 1890s to the end of the First World War. White had made a huge philosophical investment in progressivism, believing the country and the world had entered a revolutionary era of increased human understanding, peace, and prosperity. Like his mentor Theodore Roosevelt, White wrapped a pragmatic, flexible reform agenda in an enveloping rhetoric of human and communal regeneration, foreseeing a victory of spiritualism over materialism and the rise of the common man into a broadened middle-class order. He had learned that a language of community was an effective tool for rallying diverse interests to the broader progressive political cause. The small town proved to be a particularly evocative rhetorical device.

The purpose of this analysis is to explore White's literary use of the small-town metaphor. William Allen White was a popular early twentieth-century writer. The importance of his fiction today, however, lies less in its literary merit than in its increasing interest for White himself, as a medium to convey his reform philosophy. Understanding White's more important role as a post-World War I community spokesman entails better understanding Progressive Era White's use of the small town in literature. White's literary intent never was simply to convey the joys of village life, but to offer an expansive hope for a better world to all Americans—in towns, cities, and metropolises. In the small-town metaphor that dominates his short stories and novels, White discovered an effective rhetorical device with which to envelop his message of progressive reform and upon which to build his postwar reputation as a communal spokesman for Middle America.

Born in 1868, White grew up in El Dorado. Vestiges of the Old West still hung about this eastern Kansas small town in the 1870s and 1880s, but the predominant spirit was seen in the "civilizing" aspect of frontier development: the re-creation of eastern community life replete with schools, churches, and prospering businesses and farms. As a boy, White saw dream-laden wagons heading past El Dorado, carrying settlers westward to the lands.

1. Walter Johnson, William Allen White's America (New York: Henry Holt and Co., 1947) argues that by the 1920s White came to represent the "consummate American," a folk hero. White and the Midwest to many had become synonymous as middle-western values became a reassuring twentieth-century norm.

2. Daniel T. Rodgers, "In Search of Progressivism," Reviews in American History 10 (December 1982): 113–32, argues that a language of community, or social cohesion, was one of three rhetorical banners under which millions of progressives gathered to accomplish divergent aims. Thomas Bender makes the case for the evocative power of the small town in Community and Social Change in America (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1982), 6.
opening on the Kansas High Plains. These pioneers' experiences would contrast sharply with the settled growth of central and eastern Kansas. White knew full well the tragedy that occurred in the high country—the bountiful early years followed by a decade of drought, insect devastation, ever-increasing debt, and final abandonment of the land. He always would consider western Kansas an alien territory, not really part of his own beloved Kansas.

Distancing himself from the frontier calamity of western Kansas (and from the speculative mania that gripped thousands in central and eastern Kansas during the same period), White as a young man disassociated himself as well from the radical Populist politics bred out of the discontent of the 1880s and 1890s. His Kansas was Republican country. White was a child of reformers, and as such Republicanism made sense to him. In Kansas after the Civil War the Republicans stood alone as the established, if arguably short-statured, party of social justice. More important, the Republican Party stood as the fortress of Kansas political power—the eager youth easily grasped the advice of a mentor at the University of Kansas to affiliate with the party if he desired influence in public affairs.

Brought up in a civic-minded household, White had an early interest in political matters. At the new university in Lawrence he worked on a variety of newspapers and partook in college, town, and state politics. Leaving school early, he continued to gravitate to journalism and politics, working on a variety of Republican papers. Determined to run his own newspaper, in 1895 he purchased the meager inventory and scant subscription list of the Emporia Gazette. In his first editorial White made it clear his aim was to "represent the average thought of the best people" and to see that "their private opinions is public opinion." He wanted to build a strong community newspaper and a platform from which he could broadcast his beliefs to a far greater audience. He discounted politics as "so little," but he really saw it as essential to cultivating proper "public sentiment," a prosperous environment, and nurturing his own ambitions.
What White had to say soon changed dramatically. One year after the publication of “What’s the Matter With Kansas?” the Emporidian met Assistant Secretary of the Navy Theodore Roosevelt and immediately fell under his spell. The standpat country editor became a reformer. It took a few years for White’s progressive stance to develop fully, but once it did, he threw himself wholeheartedly into the cause. It is difficult to account precisely for the transformation: always a hero-worshipper, White was mesmerized by Theodore Roosevelt. At the University of Kansas White had been under the tutelage of teachers critical of the social order. The Populists, despite his attacks, had evoked some sympathy from him; similarly, raised in a reformist and Christian household, White may have been sensitive to the growing strength of the social gospel. In Emporia, the editor and businessman clearly had begun to sense the relevance of reform arguments. Finally, always politically abreast, White must have felt the swell of the progressive tide. Whatever the precise mix of factors might be, Roosevelt’s sudden rise to the presidency in 1901 drew the Kansan into the mainstream of progressivism.4

An intimate of the president and a ready publicist for him, sensitive to Roosevelt’s increasing sway of public opinion, White immersed himself in national politics. He was in regular contact with Roosevelt, and at home he rose to head the powerful progressive wing of the Kansas Republican Party. His journalistic career skyrocketed as magazines such as The Saturday Evening Post, McClure’s, The American Magazine, and Collier’s sought out the opinions of the influential “pol,” and newspaper syndicates contracted his reporting. White enhanced his reputation as a reform spokesman through the publication of his short stories and novels. By the end of the Roosevelt presidency in 1909, the small-town Kansas editor had become one of the nation’s most prominent progressives.5

White’s progressivism was as muddled as that of many of his contemporaries. His reform positions could often appear contradictory or compromising. One issue, however, was crystal clear: social harmony to Roosevelt and to White was the number one challenge confronting America. From their perspective, in a nation torn between the forces of plutocracy and mass unrest, Roosevelt stood before the people as a national arbiter, a grand harmonizer capable of leading the nation away from materialism and toward a more spiritual order. America had plenty of wealth. It now was necessary, in the name of social justice, to ensure a more equitable distribution of the riches and to sacrifice individual self-interest for the greater national welfare. The nation, as one great community, needed to act decently.


5. An example of White’s significant journalistic contribution to national reform is found in “The Partnership of Society,” The American Magazine 62 (October 1900): 576-85. Theodore Roosevelt termed it “A-1”: “By George, I would like to have that article circulated as a tract!” Quoted in Johnson, William Allen White’s America, 160. See also Agran, “Too Good a Town,” ch. 3.
neighborly, to be at peace with itself. In reestablishing relations of old within a more complex order lay a moderate solution to the contentious dilemmas of the twentieth century.

Theodore Roosevelt and William Allen White could be distinguished as "social progressives." Their message of social harmony offered more than a romantic return to "olden days"—they had a down-to-earth reform agenda. Social harmony, they believed, could be achieved by securing a more decent life for all citizens. Social progressives sought justice more than control as a solution to social, political, and economic ills. Traditional, moralistic, and Protestant, their idea of justice meant equal opportunity to achieve a satisfactory life—to be well fed and housed, educated, and lead God-fearing Christian lives. For nearly two decades White campaigned with Roosevelt and on his own (and for the remaining quarter century of his life) for a socially just legislative agenda, anticipating the creation of a broad middle ground within American society where the bulk of the citizenry would rest materially secure. Under these conditions the republic would remain forever safe from internecine destruction.6

With American entry into World War I, White's progressivism reached fever heat. Once committed to the cause, he followed Woodrow Wilson every step of the way to Paris and the Versailles Peace Conference and toward what he and tens of millions of progressive crusaders envisioned as a "new dawn" in human relations. White readily acknowledged that the battle to secure a "new order" would be rough and would take time. But he saw that great progress had been made at home, and he foresaw equal strides abroad to be made in Europe. People, he believed, were of two types—idealists and realists. The world had been revolutionized; the future now belonged to the idealists and to America. Looking toward the peace conference, he marveled: "It will be curious to see America, the world's hard-fisted practical money-grabbing dollar-worshipper of yesterday contributing her President as the leader of the idealists!"7

The world, of course, would prove not to be as revolutionized as White had imagined. It was a bitter disappointment. The Kansan had undergone a radical transformation in perspective. He had thrown himself wholeheartedly into the war effort: he went to France in 1917 as a Red Cross observer; he lobbied intensely to attend the peace conference as a delegate; failing in this, he traveled to Paris for a newspaper syndicate and again for the Red Cross. Returning home, he fought hard for Wilson, the Versailles Treaty, and the League of Nations. After years of disinterest in foreign affairs, White had significantly broadened his horizons, now considering international relations of utmost importance to himself and the nation. He saw it as impera-

tive that the United States assume its destined role as the leader of a progressive world community.8

Community had become the key to White's entire world view. Growing up in El Dorado, establishing himself in Emporia, pouring energy into the improvement of his hometown and state, the editor knew the importance of community life. He projected this view onto the national and ultimately the international scene, sensing the applicability of communal norms to a more abstract greater community. Progressivism had flourished; the middle class, new in composition, hopes, and fears, had come to prominence in the social structure; an urban, industrial culture had developed; a great power had stepped onto the world stage. White had a knack for tapping into the essence of closer relationships and broadcasting them to a wider social stratum. Early in his career he incorporated the idea of community into his fiction. At the same time he began to emphasize the idea in his social and political commentary, propagandizing for reform in the nation's journals. In the first two decades of the twentieth century, he grew to grasp the tremendously evocative power for Americans of the community ideal.

Community was a natural departure point for White as an aspiring writer and neophyte reformer. The small town was a time-honored literary device; multitudes of progressives campaigning for a kaleidoscope of reforms easily rallied to the rhetoric of social harmony. In fiction White portrayed comforting havens for

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6. Arthur S. Link and Richard L. McCormick, Progressivism (Arlington Heights, Ill.: Harlan Davidson, 1983), ch. 3, draw a helpful tripartite distinction between "social progressives," "reforming progressives" who applied their expertise to relieving social disorders, and "concrete progressives" intent on imposing their native culture upon racial and ethnic minorities.

7. "Realists or Idealists?" Emporia Gazette, February 1, 1919.

8. To further grasp the Kansan's rise to an international perspective, see William Allen White, "The Peace and President Wilson," The Saturday Evening Post 192 (August 16, 1919): 57-58.
troubled people. In journalism he explored the underlying meaning of communal norms for an industrializing, urbanizing nation. Through fiction and journalistic commentary, White developed a greater understanding of community and an ethical paradigm, the small-town milieu, to embody the hopes of millions of Americans. In the Progressive Era he first discovered the idea of community and sensed its rhetorical power; in later years, abandoning fiction and focusing solely on social commentary, he exploited it to the hilt. The story read well to a wide and sympathetic audience.

Having read good literature as a child, and as a young man set upon a career in letters, it was natural for White to be influenced by the literary currents of the second half of the nineteenth century. He seemed intent, as did many authors of his generation, to write "the great American novel." He came closest to this goal with the publication in 1909 of A Certain Rich Man. The book was exceptionally well received by the public and the critics. A Certain Rich Man approached the aim of the great novel to unify, resolve conflicts and contrasts in the nation, and develop an American character and place. Although hardly great literature, A Certain Rich Man did reflect White's ability to pull upon a number of literary genres, each in its own way defining an aspect of American character and place.

At base White was a regionalist. Ascendent in the late nineteenth century, regionalism was an attempt to locate the national identity within the composite sections of the country. For more than twenty years, in short story and novel form, White worked up a middle-western character. Moving beyond regionalist purists, he sought to impose his section's identity upon the nation as a whole. This hardly proved a difficult task as increasingly in the early twentieth century the Middle West was becoming a synecdoche for American values and norms.

As would any regionalist, White recorded negative as well as positive characteristics of the Middle West. He was not a young Ed Howe savaging the region, nor was he a latter-day, aging Hamlin Garland romanticizing it into mythology. When he wanted to indict he could use bare-bones realism, even naturalist techniques. He tended, however, to emphasize the good over the bad, and as most regionalists, to use realist techniques within a romantic structure. The courtly lover, happy family, and angelic-child figure always are present in White's work as he details their environs, society, and speech. Intent on conveying a positive image of the Middle West, White's romanticism tended to dominate his fiction.

Within the romantic structure of his stories, White embedded a powerful message. Vigorously campaigning for progressive reform, he incorporated history and politics into his regionalist perspective. White used history to portray the development of the Middle West, its manners and mores, and to emphasize the democratization of its people. Seemingly influenced as were so many social commentators of the era by Frederick Jackson Turner's frontier thesis, he conceived the region to be the seedbed of American reform, and he looked to it to nurture progressivism. He used politics to depict the need for reform. He drew upon the stock cast of the genre—young knights, bosses, distressed damsels, and designing dames—and moved them about on a corrupt political stage. The underlying literary


10. By the 1920s a middle-western identity had become so pervasive that it served as the primary device for raising criticism upon American culture. See Frederick J. Hoffman, The Twenties: American Writing in the Postwar Decade (New York: Viking Press, 1959), especially 204–70.
Within his literature, White used the small town to both recognize and remedy society’s problems. This 1906 scene of small-town America is in White’s hometown of Emporia.

theme was the quest for morality in an amoral world. 12

What better force than the ethos of the small town to cleanse an amoral world? White’s most significant addition to his literary repertoire was the small-town genre. Looking to his own background and influenced by the work of writers such as Howe, Garland, Joseph Kirkland, and James Whitcomb Riley, White turned to the village to bear his message of progressive reform.

The middle-western small town came to be his model for national communal regeneration. 13

At the turn of the century the small town still occupied a lofty position in American literature. It had come to stand for all that was supposed to be good and right in the nation. When the critics turned on it with a vengeance in the 1920s, the target loomed large before them. Anthony Channell Hilfer, in his study The Revolt from the Village 1915–1930, explains the position of the rebels: “What they opposed was not an actual village existing in time and space but a mental conception of the village existing in the mind of a great number of Americans.” The town differed from the farm and the city; it alone, in literature as in myth, stood for an elusive community sought by Americans caught up in a complex society. Small-town writers, arguing that the ideal really existed somewhere distant, possible of attainment, had long held a large public. Choosing the middle-western small town as an exemplar for communal regeneration in the


early years of the century, White knew full well the stature of the model. 14

Leaning heavily upon the genre, White tumiled headlong into its pitfalls. What critic Ima Herron calls the “indispensable goodness, happiness, democracy, and heroism” of romanticized provincial life permeate his work as do “the gospels of conformity, thrift, industry, . . . and boundless optimism.” 15 Still, White’s work reads well. In 1906 he published his clearest evocation of the small-town ideal—In Our Town. Mark Twain wrote White:

Howells told me that “In Our Town” was a charming book, and indeed it is . . . Pages . . . are qualified to fetch any house of any country, caste or color, endowed with those riches which are denied to no nation on the planet—humor and feeling. Talk again—the country is listening. 16

Twain was right. In Our Town was a commercial as well as a critical success.

In Our Town was good local-color work. Most of White’s small-town literature packed a stronger charge. Hilfer points out that the small town often would be presented as a “refuge from the complications and intensities of life.” Many novelists offered an escape into the perfect community, the ideal gemeinschaft in which the class barriers and economic conflicts that jar actual human society are dissolved into a primal universal togetherness.” 17 White’s work indeed offered gemeinschaft, but not as an escape; rather, it was presented as the progressive alternative within the modern order. White invited his readers not to join him in small-town America but to use the small town to cast reform upon their own communities and the greater community; to mold an American culture incorporating the best of gemeinschaft within an emergent gesellschaft order.

Here then is White’s small-town metaphor, the hallmark of his literature. As his interest in progressiveism intensified so did his use of the small-town genre. Here lay the best definition of American character and place. Communal regeneration was the end, and the small town was the means to reach it. As White’s recognition of society’s problems broadened, so the town literally grew to incorporate his progressive remedy. He first used the small town as a reactionary device to excoriate the Populist menace within Kansas and then expanded it to speak to the problems of industrial America. Ultimately it became America itself, a guiding beacon for all the citizens of one great, allied, international community. Fighting the conclusive battle for progressive regeneration in the Great War, the town for White soared to its zenith as a city upon a hill.

In The Real Issue published in 1896, White first tapped the literary wellsprings of community. A collection of fifteen succinct and at times powerful stories, The Real Issue also was the journalist’s first substantial prose work. Coming on the heels of his meteoric rise to national attention with the searing “What’s the Matter With Kansas?” the volume was a commercial and critical success. Realism and naturalism permeate the tales as White explores the vagaries of community life. Boyhood, business, politics, pioneering, and town development all are subject to criticism, generally negative. White’s primary interest in this work is western Kansas: he wants to uncouple the troubled region from the greater prospering state to which he has hitched his star. 18

White makes the initial break as he introduces “The Story of Aqua Pura”:

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15. Herron, Small Town, 334.
17. Hilfer, Revolt from the Village, 17.
People who write about Kansas, as a rule, write ignorantly, and speak of the state as a finished product. Kansas, like Gaul of old, is divided into three parts. . . . Eastern Kansas is a finished community like New York or Pennsylvania. Central Kansas is finished, but not quite paid for; and Western Kansas, the only place where there is any suffering from drought or crop failures, is a new country—old only in a pluck which is slowly conquering the desert.

White considers pluck admirable, but alone it cannot contend with the power of the desert to destroy civilization. Community must be built upon rock-solid virtues, not upon the shifting sands of extravagant hope. To draw the distinction between this wild land and civilized Kansas, White uses the naturalist’s pen. In *Aqua Pura* he depicts a town settled in the flush of the mid-1880s speculative fever that swept across the Kansas High Plains. *Aqua Pura* quickly meets its fate as drought strikes the land. All the amenities of civilization brought in by its Ivy League and Inland University founders—the school, library, opera house, new houses and businesses, electric and water works, and new roads—come to naught in the desert sun. The citizens scurry back east, leaving one deranged founder behind. Years later the rains return; a five-day deluge, symbolic of the boom-bust economic cycle, washes the town. It is too late—left in the storm’s wake are a lonely dead man and a town drained of its last speculative hope. The neighboring commu-

ty of *Maize*, with its rough-hewn native element (and aboriginal name), survives to write the town’s epitaph.20

Those who remain in western Kansas are a calloused and troubled lot. In a series of stories in *The Real Issue* dealing with Willow Creek, whose residents bear a strong resemblance to Sherwood Anderson’s gnarled inhabitants of latter-day Winesburg, Ohio, White portrays men and women ravaged by an uncivilized environment. In “The Reading of the Riddle” the author is scathing toward the town:

> In Willow Creek where they scoff and haggle over sordid things, in Willow Creek the hard, the arid, the barren, they say—no matter what—but in and out of the narrow ways, turning the sharp corners with the rest, with tired feet, and timid, unsure hands, there goes a woman whose womanhood came to her as a dream—in the night.21

The woman is one of many repressed townspeople. Chief clerk Hawkins, first appearing in “The Chief Clerk’s Christmas,” is yet another. Hawkins escapes Willow Creek, but remains scarred by its ingrained ways. White depicts Hawkins as an all-business, emotionless man who finally bursts forth his agony to his mother, only to endure her imminent death and a hasty retreat into his own spiritual entombment. Lonely, closed, and mean, Hawkins ultimately must confront the meaning of his life. In “The Story of a Grave,” White takes the chief clerk, similar to Frank Norris’s later sojourn with *McTeague*, to a tuberculosis sanitarium in the “Great American Desert.” Hawkins moves away from his fellow-sufferers battling for their lives on the veranda—away from the skeletal vestiges of life—and finds a contorted happiness crawling out to a desert grave. “There they found Hawkins at the close of day, grim, repellent of feature, apart from his kind, alone in his very death. Men said it was a fitting end for him.”22

This view of life as miserably scarred applies only to western Kansas in *The Real Issue*. White’s stories of central and eastern Kansas in the collection, while critical of fraudulent boosters, narrow-minded businessmen, double standards of morality, malicious gossip, and restrictive small-town respectability, primarily portray a satisfying world. Life is stable, the people are fundamentally good, and the future is promising. The best example lies in “The Homecoming of Colonel Hucks.” The old soldier is a town classic: a Civil War veteran, pioneer, and lovable curmudgeon. After years of struggle and enterprise, the colonel and his wife journey “home” to verdant Ohio. Disappointed with the old community that has gone to seed, the disen- chanted couple returns to the grandeur of Kansas. As they gaze out of the railway window, little towns dot the landscape and op-

19. Ibid., 22.

20. “A Story of The Highlands” carries a similar message as an optimistic pioneering couple faces tragedy when a High Plains drought drives the woman to madness and death. White again distinguishes between the trauma of this section of Kansas and the good life of central and eastern Kansas. Ibid., 75–86.


In Sycamore Ridge every one knows Watts McHurdie, and every one takes pride in the fact that far and wide the Ridge is known as Watts McHurdie's town.

A Certain Rich Man
1909

portunity abounds. This is truly home, where community lushly prospers.²³

To locate a better life, a finer community, was White's greatest concern. With the passing of western Kansas' climatic and Populist traumas, the ambitious author directed his literary energy toward more fully embossing the positive aspects of Kansas life. Severe realism and naturalistic technique gave way to a still accurately detailed but romantically glossed portrait of community life as found in central and eastern Kansas. White sought to portray towns of commendable attributes and rectifiable failings. As he became concerned with progressive reform and the concomitant goal of community regeneration, the idyll and the ideal became irrevocably entangled.

The idyll is laid out in The Court of Boyville and In Our Town. The Court of Boyville, a popular collection of short stories published in 1899, projects into the small-town milieu an enchanted childhood full of pranks, play, evolving relationships, and youthful crises. The innocence and freedom of youth are identified closely with the town as both are set in a timeless, immutable state. While this world is impenetrable for adults, White in his concluding story makes it clear that the maturing boy can take much of the romance of the town of Boyville into the wilds of adult life.²⁴

The romance is located seven years later in the anthology In Our Town. "It is 'Boyville' grown up," one critic wrote.²⁵ In In Our Town, White neatly plotted the idyll:

Ours is a little town in that part of the country called the West by those who live east of the Alleghenies, and referred to lovingly as "back East" by those who dwell west of the Rockies. It is a country town where, as the song goes, "you know everybody and they all know you," and the country newspaper office is the social clearing-house.²⁶

The town editor knows most of all, and as storyteller he depicts a snug community of homey but not provincial people. The folks of In Our Town rise above their failings to be generous, charitable, and merciful human beings; at bottom they all are neighbors, and no one is alone. The townpeople really are a family; enclosed, satisfied, and self-satisfied. Vices, biases, and idiosyncrasies naturally exist, but not the uncivilized horrors found in The Real Issue. All can be and is worked out within the fundamentally classless, casteless community. Rules of life are to be followed; temperate and moral living is the maxim. In In Our Town humanity basically is good, but all stray, and the community has the responsibility to keep townspeople in line. The worst violators pay the heftiest price for their sins—social ostracism. The town cleans itself up and always improves; the best citizens triumph as they banish liquor and gambling, and build schools, libraries, and municipal works.²⁷


²⁶. White, In Our Town, 3.

The idyllic community of *In Our Town* ostensibly is apolitical, but White's interest always lies in politics. Indeed, five years earlier in 1901, the emergent reformer had published a collection of lengthy political stories. *Stratagems and Spoils: Stories of Love and Politics* was built around the theme that the political arena is a paradigm of life's struggles. The highest goal in life is to be brave, truthful, and kind. The political community, as the small town, had to be purged of its greatest sinners and forced to follow higher communal laws: despotic plutocrats had overthrown popular democracy; public opinion was mocked; corrupt officials reigned in Washington. Reform had to be enforced, but not too radically—demagoguery only exacerbated the evil. White's indictment was critically well received, although its sales were mediocre. William Dean Howells hailed *Stratagems and Spoils* as "a substantial body of political fiction, such as we have so long sighed for." More was to come.\(^\text{28}\)

To remedy the nation's ills White prescribed "evolutionary progressivism." Human nature had to change. The world moved slowly, but inexorable progress clearly was at hand. People were working together, a majority opinion developing, rich and poor alike seeking a better order. Caught up in Rooseveltian reform, wrapping his political agenda within a rhetoric of human and communal regeneration, campaigning for that victory of spiritualism over materialism where the common man rose into a broadened middle-class order, White set out to lay the grid of the reform state. Two novels, *A Certain Rich Man* and *In the Heart of a Fool*, presented the ideal progressive community—the idyllic small town writ large over America and, in the end, the world.\(^\text{29}\)

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This work had taken Henry and me from our quiet country newspaper offices in Kansas and had suddenly plunged us into the turmoil of the big war.

The Martial Adventures of Henry and Me

1918

would represent the pinnacle of his literary career. The critics hailed the work, and sales soared. The New York Times wrote that A Certain Rich Man "holds the mirror up to more that is truly native and characteristic in American life than has been reflected by any other storyteller who has essayed the task." A year after the book's publication The Craftsman declared: "Everybody knows this book... for it grips the very roots of American life and shows the beginnings and growth of the great social and industrial problems that we are grappling with today." The Nation made it clear that this was no provincial novel: "Mr. White has shown a surprising power of relating his Sycamore Ridge to the national past, present, and future, and of making it mirror in some sort the developing character of the entire country." The Graphic concluded that White had made "the nearest approach yet to the great American novel, so long looked for." The Outlook agreed: "It is, above all, American through and through in its spirit, its intimate knowledge of every-day American life, its dialogue, its fun, and its pathos; it would be hard indeed to name a story of the last ten years that so positively deserves to be called a novel of American life."

Evolutionary progressivism, fictionally charted in A Certain Rich Man, followed a straight path toward a new dawn in human relations. Realpolitik progressivism as directed by politicians and diverse cadres of reformers across the nation and as opposed by multitudes of entrenched interests ran a decidedly more skewed path. In 1918, nine years after the release of A Certain Rich Man, White published In the Heart of a Fool. The earlier novel embodied the spirit of the heady years of progressivism; the second possessed the eleventh-hour desperation of the reform struggle. The wheels of industrialism had ground on, wealth had accumulated, and problems remained unsolved. Reforms had aided and hindered progress, and world war now eclipsed all other concerns. For White, as for many reformers, evolutionary progressivism suddenly catapulted onto a revolutionary world stage.

The middle-western community of Harvey is the protagonist of In the Heart of a Fool. Towns, White informs his readers, are like people, formed generation by generation, layer by layer, each with a distinctive character. Harvey has forsaken its Puritan past for materialism. Enriched by gas, oil, lead, coal, and zinc, the ungainly town has

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spread its pipes and rails over the surrounding countryside. The old town, elm-lined and tranquil, houses the entrepreneurs, comfortable and remote from South Harvey, the industrial wasteland. The workers of South Harvey live in degradation. The community has reached a crisis: divided between the rich and exploited poor, it must make the choice between further materialist degeneration or Christian regeneration.

The workers of South Harvey have struck the mills. Their Christ-like leader preaches a non-violent “religion of democracy,” a call for Harvey’s middle class to share its wealth and its security with the workers, to raise the wretched to its own comfortable standard of living. The hope of communal regeneration lies in establishing a higher quality of life for all the residents of Harvey and South Harvey, in resurrecting the old community virtues of neighborliness and kindliness. Materialism, however, has been so defied that the residents of Harvey are blind to communal virtue. Vigilante crowds are sent out to crush the strikers and martyr the leader. An early prophecy in the novel approaches fulfillment:

And so it shall come to pass that when the day of reckoning appears it shall be a day of wrath. Then will the vicious poor and the vicious well-to-do, each crippled by his own vices, the blind leading the blind, fall to in a merciless conflict, mad and meaningless, born of a sad, unnecessary hate that shall terrorize the earth, unless God sends us another miracle of love like Christ or some vast chastening scourge of war, to turn aside the fateful blow. 31

Where Christian love failed to save Harvey, war succeeds:

Then the new epoch dawned, clear and strong came the call to Americans to go forth and fight in the Great War—not for themselves, not for their own glory, nor for their own safety, but for the soul of the world. And the old spirit of America rose and responded. 32

Swept up in the progressive crusade to save humanity, Harvey’s battle has become part of a greater struggle. The divided city of Mammon, in its hour of despair, has risen to be one city upon a hill for all the world to behold.

In Harvey, as all across war-time America, White believed he saw the fruition of the spiritual destiny of the nation. The regenerative role of the saved community in “The Great Crusade” was summed up in The Martial Adventures of Henry and Me. In 1917 White and progressive Wichita editor Henry Allen traveled to France on a Red Cross mission. In 1918 White published the half-fictional account of the experience:

So it really is not of arms and the man that this story is written, nor of Henry and me, and the war; but it is the eternal Wichita and Emporia in the American heart that we shall celebrate hereinafter as we unfold our tale. 33

For White the war had become a tale of community as he knew it best. The book portrays the journey across the Atlantic. The ship and its passengers represent Emporia, and a small-town spirit is omnipresent once landed in Europe. White later explained: “Now of course Emporia was only put in as a symbol—a symbol of all America—all middle class, with no particular beginnings and with no pride of ancestry, but a vast hope of posterity.” 34 The allied world had entered into a great progressive trust. A democratized order marched—countries, classes, peoples joined together as a unified community, as Wichita or Emporia, as “a thousand replicas of Wichita and Emporia” back home in America. 35 Watching the allied parade across Europe, White believed he could see the progressive promise coming home.

White’s vision of allied progressive community, the triumph of “the eternal Wichita and Emporia in the American heart,” was well received in 1918. Francis Hackett, reviewing The Martial Adventures of Henry and Me in The New Republic, wrote of White and Allen’s

In the Heart of a Fool as the peacemakers gathered at Versailles, Hackett lambasted White’s reformist tract as a severely tattered piece of propaganda cloaked in dated romantic garb: “Progressivism did well enough in a way and for a while. But where are the Progressives of yesteryear?” Hackett found particularly troubling White’s vision of Harvey as a regenerated Puritan community. Progressivism premised upon charity, mercy, and kindliness had become a mockery as nationalistic greed and animosity reigned in Paris. Roosevelt’s program, his “square deal,” declared Hackett, was dead.

Hackett ended his review of In the Heart of a Fool with a plea to White:

You are an artist. When you are not an ambassador or an editor or a reporter or a publicity man or a Progressive, you are an artist—sometimes, even, when you are one or all of these. But In the Heart of a Fool was not written with its eye honestly on the human object. It was written by the romantic Puritan, with propaganda behind it. Think of giving to stale propaganda what was meant for the great American novel!

Amidst the mounting disillusionment of 1919, White’s progressive philosophy had become stale, as evidently had his fiction. Hackett was not alone in his criticism. Earlier the Chicago News critic found In the Heart of a Fool “about the dullest and most unentertaining reading that I have done in two and one-half years reviewing for this department.” Randolph Bourne scathingly summed up: “Mr. White has become a sort of symbol of everything intelligent, progressive, ‘folksy,’ characteristic, in Kansas. The more I see of a mind like his the less I understand it.”

White took the reviews to heart; save for one short story for The Saturday Evening Post in 1920, he never published fiction again. In the Heart of a Fool, ridiculed in the atmosphere of postwar cynicism, placed the seal on White’s literary career and clearly seemed to many an aptly titled epitaph for his progressive philosophy.

In the Heart of a Fool and its author were casualties of the times. Progressivism had borne its final fruit, and the harvest proved bad. For more than two decades White contributed to a powerful literary movement. Always focusing on community, and particularly on small towns, gradually bringing the expansive communities to the forefront of his work, White made his fiction resonate with the growing thunder of progressive reform. He utilized an effective metaphor for interpreting change in American society. He slighted issues, and he glossed over many problems. Nevertheless his idyllic

36. F.H. [Francis Hackett], “The Voice of Kansas,” The New Republic 16 (August 17, 1918): 81–82. Hackett was not alone in his praise in the headline review of The New York Times Review of Books, April 7, 1918, sec. 6, p. 145. White’s brand of an all-American, tolerant, and good provincialism was set against Germany’s reactionary, vicious, and catastrophic offering. It was no contest as Henry and me, Wichita and Emporia (“which means America”) prevailed, expressing “the American spirit in this war as simply and as poignantly as it could be expressed.”


39. The Chicago News critic is quoted in Johnson, William Allen White’s America, 516.

Randolph Bourne, “Morals and Art from the West,” The Dial 65 (December 14, 1918): 556–57. The reviews were not all bad. For example, see The Publishers’ Weekly 94 (December 28, 1918): 203; The Outlook 120 (December 18, 1918): 640; New York Times, November 10, 1918, sec. 3, p. 4.
and his troubled towns reflected primary communal concerns of a good many people. Even in the end, verging into utopian visions of an ideal world community, White only projected what the vast majority of Americans anticipated in the Peace of Versailles.

White would take the literary lessons of the prewar era and apply them to his journalistic commentary for the remaining quarter century of his life. Despite attacks on the values and norms of small-town America, the vast majority of Americans tenaciously clung to their “village mentality.” Having grasped the small town’s evocative power in literature, and having effectively incorporated it into his journalistic commentary, White increasingly turned to it as a metaphor for interpreting social, political, and economic problems. He particularly focused on his hometown of Emporia. In his evolving postwar role as the widely hailed, mellow, tolerant “Sage of Emporia,” he spoke a language of community. In editorials, magazine articles, speeches, and books he reached out to the citizens of Middle America, the middle class and those aspiring to it, living in larger urban communities, to help them make their way in an evolving social order. He spoke for small-town values, not for small-town America. In a language millions could understand, a language he honed as a fiction writer, the progressive Kansas editor continued to campaign for a regenerated American order, a broadly-based middle-class society, tolerant, neighborly, and kind.

In 1918 White (left) published The Martial Adventures of Henry and Me, the half-fictional account of his travels to France with Wichita editor Henry Allen (right).