



American Nightmare: Donald Ray Pollock's Knockemstiff as Midwestern Gothic

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American Nightmare: Donald Ray Pollock's *Knockemstiff* as Midwestern Gothic

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Abstract

Critic David Pichaske has pointed to a crisis of identity in Midwestern literature, claiming that an influx of diverse voices has drowned out the cultural distinctiveness of Midwestern writing. Using the short story cycle *Knockemstiff* by Donald Ray Pollock, this thesis posits that – while a crisis does exist – it is not inclusivity and diversity that is the culprit, but rather the failure of the American Dream and the toxic nature of the Dream itself. A Gothic lens serves as the methodological framework through which I analyze *Knockemstiff*, with specific attention being paid to the tropes of isolation and cyclical hauntings. By using a writer that fits Pichaske’s definition of what a Midwestern writer should be, I highlight how the crisis is still present, as viewed through Gothic tropes, and illustrate how regressive nostalgia can only make the issue worse. Finally, I suggest historical alternatives to “the good old days” upon which the Midwest can fall back to build a better future informed by the past.

Author's Biographical Sketch

Keriann Kaufmann was born and raised in Naperville, IL. Like many Midwesterners, she was overcome by the urge to escape when young and moved to Ireland at the age of 18. She studied at Trinity College Dublin where she learned to love language and writing. Next, she moved to Zhengzhou, China to teach academic English to students looking to go to university in the West. Throughout her travels, Keri developed a fondness for the place of her birth. Now she wishes to use her experience around the world to bring Midwestern Literature the attention it deserves. It seems she has learned that you can take the girl out of the Woods of Bailey Hobson, but you can't take the Woods of Bailey Hobson out of the girl.

Dedication

I dedicate this work to my parents, Tom and Mary Kay, who have supported me through this whole process. My sister, Katie, also deserves recognition for calming me down and talking me through my insecurities. Of course, none of this would have been possible without Oliver. Don't worry, Mom. I didn't delete the whole thing.

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Chapter I.

Introduction

Donald Ray Pollock's *Knockemstiff* is part of a proud tradition known as the short story cycle. Situated in small town Ohio, there are obvious comparisons to be drawn between it and the great *Winesburg, Ohio* by Sherwood Anderson; but *Knockemstiff* is a different text born of a different time. Unlike in *Winesburg*, there is no "normal" George Willard to ground the grotesqueness of the other residents. *Everyone* in *Knockemstiff* is damaged. There is no Winesburgian desperate respectability in *Knockemstiff*; instead, its residents seem to wallow in their depravity. The stories are loosely connected by place but also by some characters that make cameo appearances in each other's stories as well as some characters who are featured in more than one piece. The *Knockemstiff* of the stories is a bleak place with little economic development, social mobility, or entertainment. The people presented are shallow and self-serving but with a depth of pain that can be truly shocking. The abuses leave no one whole and no one innocent. The transgressions mount, from the second story in the cycle in which the narrator finds two children committing incest. The narrator's reaction is to kill the boy, rape the little girl, and then kill her as well before leaving them both to a watery grave. This is far from the only instance of rape in the work, not to mention the theft, murder, drug use, and violent beatings that plague the cast of characters.

There is relatively little Pollock criticism. I will focus on the work of three: Lane Neeper, Jochen Achilles, and Robert M. Luscher. These critics offer the most scholarly

look at the text, frequently citing similarities with Sherwood Anderson's *Winesburg, Ohio* who – all agree – is the most direct ancestor of *Knockemstiff*. To better understand where my argument fits into the ongoing critical conversation surrounding this work, a summary is in order. Neeper's "Appalachian Apocalypse: Pollock's *Knockemstiff* and the Unredeemable Underclass"- written in 2013 – traces the inspiration for Pollock's writing to Sherwood Anderson and Flannery O'Connor while still emphasizing that Pollock's work is bleaker, meaner, and more desperate than either predecessor. According to Neeper, *Knockemstiff* lacks both Anderson's baseline normality which grounds the reader and O'Connor's moment of grace which redeems the character. 2020's "Community and Social Disintegration in Anderson's *Winesburg, Ohio* and Pollock's *Knockemstiff*" by Jochen Achilles also draws the line between *Winesburg, Ohio* and *Knockemstiff* using the condition of the former to reflect on the moral decline of the latter. Achilles draws from Rob Nixon's theory of "slow violence" – the idea of violence that happens so gradually over such a long period of time, it encourages inattention and apathy in most observers despite lethal consequences (e.g. climate change). He suggests the writings of Pollock and Anderson serve to fictionalize and therefore highlight the slow violence that leads to a community's disintegration. Finally, Luscher's "Down the Road from *Winesburg*: The Spatiotemporal Aesthetics of the Short Story Sequence in Donald Ray Pollock's *Knockemstiff* and Laura Hendrie's *Stygo*" (2013) addresses the paradoxical macrotext created by the short story sequence that is simultaneously fractured and whole. In essence, Luscher finds that the macrotext of the work, the overarching story told when looking at all the short stories as a unit rather than separate entries, tells a whole story about the souls in *Knockemstiff*, even as each entry fractures that story by re-rooting the

reader to new characters and times. To Luscher, this macrotext becomes especially relevant when paired with the macrotext of *Winesburg*.

Most Pollock critics focus only on the relationship between the two works. I believe that there is more to the text than its relation to Anderson. Pollock's *Knockemstiff* stands as a portal into the minds of those forgotten by the American Dream –the belief that upward economic mobility is possible through sheer hard work and devotion to a Capitalist society, regardless of birth or station but also that the lack of success is a symptom of laziness and moral failing– and in doing so allows the reader to experience by proxy and exorcise the ghosts that haunt us still.

By fictionalizing the experience of the white, rural working class, Pollock creates a means by which people outside of that group can understand the problems such people face. It also gives a different look at something like the American Dream. It is easy to believe that the Dream is real when living in a nice house with a well-paying job or an inheritance to fall back on but getting inside of the mind of someone without those advantages is a lesson in empathy and sonder. *Knockemstiff* does just that by showing the degradation and trauma produced by those trapped in the clasp of the Dream. While it may seem aspirational, the power of the Dream is based in the protection of the status quo. The thinking goes that one should not fight to make the world a more equitable place because there is a chance that one will end up in the privileged class; attacking them would be the same as attacking your future self. Of course, it is never addressed that someone could just as easily – if not more easily – find themselves in the oppressed class, despite advantages, due to unforeseen circumstances such as medical debt.

All three of the Pollock critics deepen the conversation around *Knockemstiff*, but what they fail to account for is how the work interacts with the real world instead of its predecessor. Rather than focusing on the relationship between Pollock's work and *Winesburg, Ohio*, I believe that *Knockemstiff* should be allowed to stand on its own as a text that is haunted by its predecessor but not defined by it. In fact, *Knockemstiff* has more to say about the region of its birth than previous critics have claimed. If read through a Gothic lens, Pollock's short story collection can shed light on the anxieties and psyche of the Midwest writ large. A region predominantly ignored by those not born of it, the American Midwest deserves critical contemplation, and Pollock offers exactly the text necessary for the job. By examining classic Gothic tropes given the Midwestern treatment, such as isolation and cyclical trauma, it is possible to connect the cultural dots that make up the mind of the modern Midwest.

The Gothic serves as the perfect perspective through which to observe *Knockemstiff*. Though not writing about Pollock's work, Steven Bruhm states that "the Gothic has always been a barometer of the anxieties plaguing a certain culture at a particular moment in history" (1) and as *Knockemstiff* serves as a slice of life depiction of the Midwest in the 1960s-1990s, the two are perfectly matched. Through the Gothic lens, we can learn more about the Midwest and its psychological landscape as represented in Pollock's work. Bruhm mostly focuses on the issue of the contemporary Gothic as it pertains to media from the 1950s onward, placing Pollock well within his purview. One of the key points of the contemporary Gothic is the idea of the "lost object," Bruhm writes:

What makes the contemporary Gothic particularly contemporary in both its themes and reception, however, is that these unconscious desires center on the problem of a lost object, the most overriding basis of our need for the Gothic and almost everything else. That loss is usually material (parents, money, property, freedom to move around, a lover, or family member), but the materiality of that loss always has a psychological and symbolic dimension to it. (3)

The loss experienced within the pages of *Knockemstiff* is one that permeates the entire country: the death of the American Dream. Knockemstiff is a town that goes from in decline to outright dying through the course of the cycle, and its inhabitants are left to deal with that decay. Pollock describes the denizens in a comparable way, likening them to “a toadstool stuck to a rotten log” (25). Death and decay are the order of the day in Knockemstiff, Ohio, and that all comes down to the broken promise of the American Dream. The result is the psychological turmoil and despair that is on display throughout the text.

Now, this is a somewhat tall order. Can the people of an entire region, millions of souls, really be identified as a single “mind”? To answer this question, I will look at the criticism that exists about the Midwest specifically. If you ask critic David Pichaske, the answer is yes. His 2006 work “Where Now ‘Midwestern Literature’” opens with an explanation of bioregionalism and the importance of landscape in developing character. He claims that “Midwesterners have a recognizable style, a favorite material, a characteristic slant on that material” (Pichaske 102). He creates a list of rules that the true Midwesterner follows: “Midwesterners are traditionally skeptical of theory, look to experience as the touchstone of knowledge, react with simple pragmatism,” “Midwestern humor – it exists – is wry, understated, offhand,” and “stylistically, Midwestern writers prefer a simple plainspeak” (110). While acknowledging “dissenters and variations” Pichaske still claims that this imagining of the region and its literature will be the correct

definition “for the foreseeable future” (111). Pichaske takes a turn in the second half of his essay, particularly when it comes to his criticism of *Illinois Voices: An Anthology of Twentieth-Century Poetry*. Pichaske pines for the “lost Swede towns” of his Midwest as he slams the *Anthology* for including “feminism, Afro-American, Latino/Latina, and Asian American voices, gay and lesbian poetry” within its pages (114). He laments that, according to the *Anthology*, “Illinois poetry has become all things from all people to all people” and sneers at Illinois writers who have the audacity to now live in California, New York, or Texas (114). In the first half of the essay, he makes a clear list of what is Midwestern and in the second he highlights what is *not*. By Pichaske’s view, surely there is a universal Midwest that can be analyzed through literary works. He puts importance on connection to place as the basis for writing, and *Knockemstiff* is certainly centered on the town and place more than anything. He complains that “if Midwest writing is now an elitist art practiced by someone else for someone else, is Midwest writing still Midwest at all” to which he would almost certainly find Pollock a breath of fresh air (118). A straight, white, solidly working-class man who didn’t so much as look at a university until his 50s, Pollock is what Pichaske claims the Midwestern writer should be.

Pichaske is not the only voice in the field. The late David D. Anderson, long time editor of *MidAmerica: The Yearbook of the Society for the Study of Midwestern Literature*, takes a different approach. In his 1976 essay “Notes Toward a Definition of the Mind of the Midwest” he writes:

The more I probe the elements that make up whatever can be called a "Mind of the Midwest," the more it becomes evident that the reality consists of variety, of unpredictability; of paradox, of a rejection of orthodoxy, that the reality is alive, dynamic, and perverse; that in all its variety it is its own best and most eloquent refutation of whatever stereotypes have been imposed on it, that, as Lincoln observed more than a

hundred years ago, this is the heartland, that whatever else exists as part of the nation has its only identity in relationship to it. (16)

To the man who has spent most of his life studying what it means to be Midwestern and - more specifically – what it means to write like a Midwesterner, Pichaske's claims to Midwestern sameness is a fiction, a stereotype denounced by the vibrant diversity that makes up the region. It is true that Pichaske was writing decades after Anderson and so perhaps the Midwest has changed in the 30 years between essays. More likely, Pichaske has allowed nostalgia to cloud his sense of "place." Willa Cather, a staple author of Midwestern fiction, brought her own feminist Darwinism to her works. Toni Morrison used the genre to tell the stories of "Afro-American" voices. Sherwood Anderson's greatest work may have focused on small town Ohio, but it was written in Chicago and features the act of leaving the sheltered hamlet behind as an inevitable part of growing up. Pichaske misses that these are not new experiences brought into the region by outsiders and transplants, but that diverse peoples have *always* made up the Midwest since its colonization, no matter how many times he claims "open skies, open fields, straight roads from one lost Swede town to the next, reducing the prairie to a checkerboard. That's my Midwest" (Pichaske 104). So where does that leave Pollock?

Pollock actually falls into another category entirely, a sort of historical fiction seen in Midwestern Literature last in *Raintree County* by Ross Lockridge Jr. Critic Joel M. Jones writes about *Raintree* in his essay "The Presence of the Past in the Heartland: *Raintree County* Revisited" in which he describes "a new genre of historical fiction, one of confrontation rather than escape, confrontation of both self and society, of both past and present" (113); I would argue that *Knockemstiff* falls into this genre. It is bleak and confronts its reader with how low a person can go when pushed past the point of poverty

and into desperation. So rather than the entirety of the Midwest, Pollock offers a glimpse into the mind of a subset of the Midwest, the traditional Midwest of Pichaske's fantasies. White. Rural. Male. Working class. It is what the outsider perceives and what men like Pichaske wish to portray. *Knockemstiff* offers a look into *that* Midwest and the crisis it faces. Unlike in Pichaske's essay in which that crisis is attributed to diversity, connectivity, and globalism, I would argue that it is the failure of the American Dream that is the root. It is not the inclusion of gay people that has diluted what makes the Midwest great but rather the poverty caused by a social safety net with far too many holes to slip through. Knockemstiff isn't dying because the internet has usurped its residents' "sense of place"; indeed its brand of decay is seen in the 60s far before the internet was invented. Nor is it travel that is killing the small town. It is the lack of personal connection and cyclical trauma that hold the murder weapon. Using a Gothic lens, I will argue that Pollock suggests it is the death of hope and the false American Dream that is killing Knockemstiff and the "traditional" Midwest.

Chapter II.

“Rotten to the Core”: The Want of Personal Connection in Donald Ray Pollock’s

“Knockemstiff” and “Gigantomachy”

The failure of the American Dream – if it was ever successful to begin with – can be tracked through the short story cycle between Sherwood Anderson and Donald Ray Pollock. Where the people of Winesburg, Ohio still have a desperate respectability around them, that hope is all but dead in the town of Knockemstiff. Pollock may be indebted to Anderson both in terms of form – the short story cycle – and subject matter – small town Ohio. Nevertheless, there is a stark contrast between the two when it comes to hope and normalcy. In what critic Lane Neeper calls “normative stasis,” Anderson presents a relatively stable environment (47). Add that to a staunch pillar of normality such as George Willard and the structure becomes clear. Willard serves as the “normal” onto which the grotesques of the town are thrown into contrast. Willard acts as the eyes and ears of both the town and the reader, standing for comparison to the likes of Anderson’s more colorful characters such as Wing Biddlebaum and his flapping fingers. Neeper argues that Pollock breaks away from Anderson in the sense that there is no normal in Knockemstiff. Neeper claims, “Pollock’s George Willard is just as depraved as anyone” which deprives the reader of solid ground upon which to find equilibrium (48). In interior decorating, it is suggested that one leave room for the eye to rest; Pollock leaves no resting points, no place to take a breather from the desperation and loathsomeness that permeates Knockemstiff. That being said, Neeper fails to identify the source of the rot in the little town of Knockemstiff. Two short stories within the cycle, “Knockemstiff” and “Gigantomachy” illustrate how isolation permeates the town of

Knockemstiff and serves as the root of the rot that Neeper identifies. It is important to understand why Knockemstiff is dying in order to look deeper at the mind of the “traditional” Midwest. To examine what Pollock posits is the true danger to the town and its folk is to understand his perspective on what is happening to the aspects of the Midwest that the town represents. Unlike Pichaske – who places the blame of decline on diversity of thought and experience – or Neeper, who remarks on the decline but does not identify it, I will show how the lack of human connection creates the desperation that drives so many of the characters within Pollock’s pages.

The American Dream is by nature an isolating force. Because people banding together is an inherent threat to a capitalist system, the Dream necessitates that people “pull themselves up by their own bootstraps” and “make it” on their own. Individualism is the key feature of the American Dream, and it pushes people to try and go it alone both by creating an environment in which needing help is related to weakness and depravity and framing success as a private endeavor. If people are constantly trying to project an air of isolationist success, it prevents them from being genuine with each other and building connections.

Pollock uses the rural Midwestern town of Knockemstiff as a canvas for stories that are ripe with longing, desperation, and vile acts that come together to paint a picture of humanity that is both stark in its portrayal and poignant in its pathos. As a direct inheritor of the Winesburg short story cycle tradition, Pollock creates something darker than its predecessor but no less real. In the case of Hank, the protagonist of the eponymous short story “Knockemstiff,” his life is defined by isolation that is expertly conveyed through his longing for Tina Eliot which, in turn, is highlighted using food

imagery and the objectification of the women around him. Food imagery is important to this story because food is associated with failure first. By then connecting food imagery to people, he passes along the connotation of failure.

“Knockemstiff” follows a day in the life of Hank, a gas station employee stuck in a rut. Throughout the day, he considers his life and his longing for a girl from the holler – the oft used colloquialism for town seen in Knockemstiff – named Tina Elliot. Tina will be leaving Knockemstiff for good with a new boyfriend, and Hank feels her imminent absence decidedly. As he is working at the gas station, a wealthy couple from California pull up. The wife – a photographer – is putting together a book of pictures of the exotically desperate. Tina drives by with her boyfriend and sees the camera. She insists on getting into the picture as it may be her “last chance to get [her] picture took [sic] with a dumb hillbilly-” referencing Hank (Pollock 37). Despite her poor treatment of him, Hank still loves Tina and requests that the photographer send along the picture of him and the girl in lieu of the few dollars she offered him as payment.

The very first words of “Knockemstiff” point to what Hank finds most important in life, namely Tina Elliot: “Tina Elliot is leaving tomorrow, heading off with Boo Nesser to shack up in a trailer next to a Texas oil field, and I feel as bad as the time my mother died” (24). Hank’s feelings for Tina are immediately thrown into sharp relief when he compares her leaving to the death of his mother – a comparison that becomes weightier as the story proceeds and the reader is clued into the fact that his mother appears to be the only person he doesn’t associate with some sort of personal failure. In the case of his father, Hank recalls:

‘You done ruined him,’ he said to my mother when we got back to the house. He must have told the poor woman a thousand times before he

died. Sometimes it scares me to think I will probably spend the rest of my days wishing I'd blown a rabbit's guts clear across Harry Frey's orchard when I was six years old. (25)

Hank's father hints at the relationship the man had with his mother when he claims she "ruined" him, presumably by making him too "soft" to kill a rabbit. It is implied that, as a boy, Hank was coddled by his mother, at the very least in the eyes of his father. Notably, this also begins the association between human relations and food. It is in an orchard that Hank loses his father's respect, hunting a rabbit potentially for food. Hank emphasizes it as one of the great regrets of his life as that served as the termination of even the potential for a mutually respectful and loving relationship with his father. Even on their good days, Hank is belittled by his father for "looking like a preacher boy" when he gets his picture taken (36).

The through line between human connection and food continues in Hank's life, from the orchard and hunting as a way to relate to his father, to an almost business-like ordeal when Tina "said she'd give [him] a kiss for a Reese's Peanut Butter Cup" when they were both teens (25). This sets up the transactional nature of relationships for Hank, after his mother has died, as well as illustrating how creating those relationships comes to mean more to him than almost anything else, including money and goods. The food imagery continues to Tina herself when Hank refers to her as "rotten to the core" even as he professes his love for her to the reader (24). In this moment, his stillborn romance with Tina is related back once again to the orchard in which his relationship with his father died. This becomes even more clear when Hank finds himself "next to the woman that I covet, my head buzzed with all the things I want to tell her before she leaves, but I don't say a word. I might as well be following my old man's ghost around in that orchard, afraid to kill a rabbit" (38). He cannot separate his failure to connect with his father from

his failure to connect with Tina, both of which are related through food. Hank develops a complex around eating and the idea of food, particularly around the thought that he eats the same thing every day.

Unlike Tina, who is related to fruit, rotten though she may be, or the fresh meat he could have procured with his father, Hank makes his breakfast of an RC Cola and potato chips which has been his breakfast “every morning but Sundays for the past twelve years” (27). Normally there would be nothing concerning about a routine, especially one necessitated by poverty, but Hank himself seems disturbed by the sameness as when he remarks that he tries “not to think about us eating the same damn thing every day, and what that might mean to a head doctor” (30). Clearly Hank sees eating the same meal not as a simple reality of his situation but as a failing that can be picked apart by psychologists. Most notably, Hank admits that “even if I was to go away with Tina, I’d probably keep eating the same thing,” which implies his habit is not purely out of necessity but rather a quirk within himself, one of which he appears to disapprove (27). Later in the text, he comments that Tina “smells like bacon grease” once again relating her to food, food that he decidedly does not get to eat (37). Whether someone would like to be told they smell of bacon grease is up for debate, but – in the context of Hank, his food insecurity, and the fact that he thinks less of himself because he eats the same, low effort food (RC Cola, potato chips, slightly off deli meat) every day – I believe it is a sign of Hank’s longing. It is clear that Tina is outside of the routine in which he imagines himself to be trapped and that he thinks himself lesser for it – there is no real human connection in his life, only prepackaged relationships of convenience. But it is not only Hank’s life that lacks connection; the problem is endemic within the town.

“Knockemstiff” also presents the tale behind the rough name of the town. When the visitors to town stop by to fill up at the gas station, Hank explains to the wealthy Californian that “supposedly these two women got in a fight over a man up there in front of the church. One was the wife and the other was the girlfriend. The preacher heard one of them swear she was going to knock the other one stiff” (32). This story suggests that the lack of genuine connection that permeates the town dates back to its founding. Not only are the women in such a fight that death threats are being hurled, but that fight is over a relationship with a man. It could be argued that this is an example of one man having perhaps too many connections, but the man is not the central figure of the anecdote. Instead, it is the two women who seek to validate their relationships gladiatorially. They are so desperate for their ties to the man to be true, to be real, that they resort to physical violence with each other rather than turn their ire on the one who wronged them. It is also notable that this altercation took place in front of a church and its pastor, neither of which served as a sufficient deterrent to prevent violence. In this sense the traditional values represented by the holy man prove woefully inadequate to soothe the ache of a connection falsified for, indeed, such a connection is prized more highly than propriety or faith within Pollock’s world.

It is not only women of the past who are desperate for connection, but also Hank’s neighbors.

Ever since his wife died back in the spring, the old man has kept his front door open, even at night. Animals and insects congregate there like fat people at a free dinner. Some people claim he’s gone off the deep end, but Whitey says he likes the company. Hell, I can surely understand that. (34)

Hank seems to personally identify with Whitey and his reasoning at the end of the passage, showing that loneliness is something that connects the two men to each other.

This idea of unification through lonesomeness is important to Hank. More generally, he feels a companionship with his television when he is surrounded by “all the lonely little sounds of the night,” saying that “it always gives me a comfort, watching the TV late at night, thinking about all the other people around Ohio watching the same old movie, maybe even thinking the same old thoughts” (25). He imagines connection on the shakiest of grounds – watching the same television program – and it brings him comfort in his isolation. He projects his loneliness onto the entire state of Ohio as he hopes that it is something that he can, at last, share with his fellow man. The scene ends with him getting “choked up... when the movie flickers to an end and the Columbus station signs off the air,” showing the depth of which he craves having something – anything – that he can share with other people (25-26).

Hank seems to have an especially hard time relating to women. Maybe it is the transactional nature that Tina introduced to their relationship at the very beginning, but Hank tends to objectify women, breaking them down into their component parts rather than seeing the individual as a whole. We see this with the photographer, who has Hank so flustered that he is “afraid to look her way” even when she is not paying him any mind. Hank focuses on pieces of the woman, commenting “the pink polish on [her] toenails is the same color as her lips. All of her parts match perfectly” (32). Rather than a whole human being, Hank focuses in on her lips and toes, a humorous mirror of how the photographer sees only Hank’s poverty and not the person underneath. Hank continues to experience her in bits and pieces, “she steps a little closer and I get a faint whiff of her perfume. A trickle of sweat runs down her neck and disappears beneath her silky blouse” (35). In this moment he focuses on her scent as well as the actions of her body, but not on

her. He may be desperate for human connection, but he fails to recognize the women around him as people. Similarly, the photographer strives for authenticity but comes away with a staged photo that sells a relationship that doesn't exist. Even though the photo does not portray reality, Hank values it higher than the couple of dollars the woman tries to give him "for [his] trouble" (38). The story ends with Hank saying, "instead I asked her to send me one of those pictures. 'One with me and the girl,' I told her, and she promised that she would. When it comes, I'll stick it up in the store through the day so that people can see it. And then at night, I'll take it down" (38). It is noteworthy that Hank is only paid 30 dollars a week at his gas station job, so a few dollars is nothing to scoff at. Instead, he chooses the totem of a relationship he covets – a picture that shows him happy with a woman who, in reality, holds him in disdain – and the opportunity to show off his fiction to others. The photo serves as the perfect embodiment of his relationship to others: at once visible and false.

Hank struggles to find meaning in his everyday life. He isn't making sufficient money to move up in the world or to save in any meaningful way. According to the Dream that makes him lazy and bad so meaning to be found there. Similarly, he cannot connect with others, leading to his Gothic isolation, which means he cannot see meaning through his impact on others. He views himself as stuck in a rut and trapped in the undertow of a town that has never seen a successful relationship, let alone a healthy one. Even if he feels he can never leave the holler, he can't find any redeeming qualities in it to live for. Instead, he chooses to imagine connection wherever he can but even this does not fulfill him. The moment that his picture is taken with Tina perfectly encapsulates the sense of hopelessness that he feels. "Then we say it together–Knockemstiff–and it almost

sounds like it means something”: in this moment Hank is not alone, he has a partner in his delusion (37). Both he and Tina are playing into the lie that there is something between them – smiling broadly and holding each other closely. It is only in the company of another person that Knockemstiff seems to “mean” something. Hank knows it is a fiction, but the lie is something that he and Tina share, if only for a moment. Fortunately for him, that instant is captured forever and so, in a way, the lie can live forever as well.

While many critics like Pichaske argue that the true signifier of Midwestern literature relies on ties to place and environment, they fail to recognize that stories, even those focused on places like *Knockemstiff*, are actually about people. It is the *people* of a place that shape each other more so than the landscape ever could. Hank is formed by his isolation – not in the sense that he lives alone in a trailer but rather the isolation one can find in a crowd. It is not that Knockemstiff is a spread-out community, but rather that the people who live there have a stunted social life that keeps them separated emotionally from each other. That is the source of the disintegration seen throughout the text and it is only possible due to the staunch individualism pushed by the American Dream. The Dream may have abandoned Knockemstiff, but the people have not abandoned the Dream. Like the prosperity gospel, the Dream equates hard work with success; therefore, if you are not successful, it is because you do not work hard enough. By creating a false equivalency between wealth and decency, it leaves characters who are not wealthy to feel that they are equally unworthy as a result. Part of the reason Hank cannot connect with Tina is because he does not see himself as good enough – and neither does she. He is ashamed of the marks of his poverty: his repetitious meals, his trailer “the size of a prison cell” (32), his inability to pack up and chase riches in Texas. He does not have the means

to remedy any of those things, and the American Dream would posit that that is the result of an almost moral failing. This idea of the poor being somehow *less than* is the dark side of the American Dream, which specifically uses individualism to isolate people, because if people work together to better their lives, it can lead to labor organization and other threats to a capitalistic system. The truly insidious part is that the Dream works to separate people while never following through on the promise of a better life, as seen in *Knockemstiff*.

This isolation is not only affecting the adults in the holler; the children also struggle to find a way to connect. Just like Hank's picture tells a made-up story of connection between himself and Tina, "Gigantomachy" is filled with characters interacting with a fiction rather than with each other. The abuse faced by two young boys serves as the platter on which hope dies, even when they put on a brave face. The two children featured in the story have no idea how to connect to other people because of the dysfunctions of their respective families. "Gigantomachy" is told from the perspective of nine-year-old Teddy. He lives alone with his single mother, who forces him to play with the boy next door, William. William's father is highly abusive towards his family and Teddy describes him as "some kind of maniac" (63). The two boys' most common game is destroying the ant hill that sits between their two properties, each time imagining different scenarios for the destruction. Teddy wants to play Vietnam, but William always has other plans. Teddy also reflects on his life with his mother in comparison to that of William and his family. Teddy's mother is a "devout dreamer" (64) who constantly wraps her son up in her fantasies. Most notably, Teddy's unnamed mother gets a kick out of being afraid and has Teddy role play as different serial killers coming to kill her, her

favorite being the Boston Strangler. One day, while playing, Teddy and William pretend they are gods fighting against giants trying to take over the Earth (the ants). As they drip scorching melted plastic onto the ant hill, William's sister Lucy comes out and claims their mother is locked in the basement. The children hear a scream and a crash. Teddy asks William if there is anything he can do, to which William replies that they (the boys) are gods and can do anything before running into the house to help his mother. Later that night, Teddy is standing with a knife pressed to his mother's throat, and she asks him who he wants to be tonight. After a long pause he says he just wants to be Teddy.

The title of this story presents an interesting conundrum. "Giganthomachy" is not a word though it does bear striking resemblance to "Gigantomachy" (without the h), which refers to the war between the Olympian gods and the giants in Greek mythology. It is not clear to me if this spelling is a purposeful choice or a mistake; in either case the resemblance between the words and the resonance of a gods versus giants war with the game the boys play with the ants is too clear to be accidental. According to an article on the Brown University Classics Department's website, written by critic Amanda Bauer, depictions of Gigantomachy frequently are used to portray the success of order and civilization over lawlessness and barbarism. It should also be noted that the gods were not guaranteed a victory, but instead had to have the aid of a mortal, in this case Heracles, to emerge triumphant. While Bauer only writes on the Greek myth and not on *Knockemstiff*, I believe that the parallels are clear. The boys represent civilization in their play as they decimate the wild ants because they seek to order their own lives. William's home is constantly thrown into disarray by an abusive father and Teddy is emotionally turbulent due to his unorthodox relationship with his mother. Both boys wish to make

sense of their lives, which are confusing and painful. In this sense, the task at hand is life or death: their idea of normal versus the wild, unknowable world of the damaged adults in their lives. As William puts it, “This is serious business. There are fucking giants planning on taking over the world, not stupid movie monsters” (66); to them, the danger is real, not make believe.

In this story we see two different types of abuse: primarily physical and primarily emotional, though it should be mentioned that both forms of trauma include elements of the other. In the case of Teddy, his relationship with his mother colors his relationship with himself. Her insistence on dreams and fantasies transfers to him, especially since she drags him into that world. As a result, Teddy has a tenuous connection with reality. Like a typical child, he enjoys make believe, but he lacks the ability to separate himself from the fantasy of those around him. He is inclined to do and be as he is told. He does not have a defined sense of self as is perpetuated by his mother. On the other hand, William has a very clear sense of himself: it is how he interacts with others that is stunted. He is a bully, bossing others around and threatening violence, not to mention his relentless attacks on the ant hill. He is a classic case of the adage: hurt people hurt people. By watching how his father relates to the world through domination, so has he learned to be.

The story opens with one of the most important images: the ant hill. While classically, the giants are representative of chaos, in this case it is the ants. Far more orderly than the abusive lives the boys lead, the ant hill is an ever-returning symbol of what they cannot have: functional community. As such, the boys destroy this community again and again as they lash out at the supposed villains in their lives, but ultimately the ant hill returns. “It had rained hard during the night, and in the morning everything along

the fence line was bright wet green except for that brown ant hill. Even though we'd flattened the shit out of it just the week before, the damn thing was already the size of a bushel basket again;" this description represents the contrast of the world around them, verdant, and their lived experiences, dyssynchronous but insistent (62). No matter what the boys do, the ant hill always returns, unfazed by their attempts to break away from it. William even goes so far as to say the hill is "taunting" them with its existence despite their attempts at destruction. The ants in the hill take on different roles in the boys' imaginations, from a those living in a Vietcong strong hold as Teddy had "waited all goddamn summer to wipe out a Communist village," (63) to victims of the atomic bombs, to "African pygmies," (65) to finally giants. While it is in and of itself disturbing that young children would find such destructive and racist scenarios fun, it is also telling. The boys create an us-versus-them mentality to justify the action they take against the ants and, in a way, dehumanize the victims of their country's atrocities. The play also allows them an area of control in their own lives; Teddy may not understand what he does with his mother, but he can understand destruction. William may be at the mercy of a "maniac," but he always has the ant hill to release his pain upon. The tenacity of the ants serves as both a frustration and a salvation for the two children as it gives them a consistent source of relief while also making their efforts seem trivial. In this way, ant hill creates a cycle within the story of pain, destruction, and rebirth.

All the information the reader gets about William is second hand, as Teddy is the one narrating, but a good amount of information still makes it through. We know that he "walked around with a bitter scowl and a constant migraine" from the many beatings he received from his father who "was the cause of it all" (62). According to Teddy, "there

were nine kinds of hell raised over at their house every night” (63). Interestingly, the reader never actually sees Mr. Jenkins, we are instead treated to the consequences of his actions in the descriptions of William. At two separate points in the seven-page story, Teddy takes note of William’s physical condition: “the bruises on William’s skinny arms were the color of a bum banana. All my life I’d wished for a father, but living next to Mr. Jenkins was making me have second thoughts” (63). When William suggests that the two pretend to be gods, “I looked down at William’s feet. Crooked toes were poking through the ends of his rotten tennis shoes. The scars on his legs glistened like snakeskin in the morning light. Gods? He was the closest things to a dead person that I’d ever played with” (66). In both descriptions, the signs of abuse indicate the passing of time, showing that the violence has stretched over at least enough period for wounds to scar and bruises to yellow. William is not the only one who bears the reminders of Mr. Jenkins’ abuse. Teddy recalls one incident, “last Christmas, right after they moved in, Mr. Jenkins beat his wife so bad that her left eye still drooped like a wilted blue blossom” (67). It is interesting that William uses natural imagery to describe Mrs. Jenkins, relating back to the green world surrounding the ant hill (and the cycle of abuse they are undergoing) but at the same time, as a part of that world that is also dying. She may be described like a flower, but it is wilted.

The reader sees moments of Mr. Jenkins reflected in William not just physically but also in his behavior. During one instance when Teddy tried to bring their play back to Vietnam and napalm instead of the atom bomb, William flew into a rage: “he cocked the stick back as if he were going to sling the bottle on me. His whole body was quivering. A drop of sputtering plastic landed on his forehead, but he never flinched” (66). William is

clearly preparing to physically attack Teddy, a result of him having no healthy examples of dealing with adversity, even if the adversity is as minor as not getting his way. Presumably, he is modeling after his father who uses violence to express his emotions. He also had his face burned by liquid hot plastic but remains unfazed, which makes the reader wonder what his father had done to him the time “you could hear his screams all the way to Foggy Moor” (67). We also see William trying to break this cycle. He does not, in fact, attack his friend, and Teddy recalls that “the last time he had gotten all excited like this, he chopped himself in the leg with a hoe, all because I refused to admit that my blue marble was really his green one” (67). Clearly, he still uses violence to express himself, but unlike his father he turns that violence onto himself. This is emotionally manipulative towards Teddy, but it is not physically abusive. William is trying to find a way to deal with his emotions; he just hasn’t found the right way yet. When William’s sister comes to tell them about the most recent episode of violence, William shows just how deep his trauma goes: “‘He’s got Mother trapped in the basement’ she panted. ‘I think he’s killed her this time.’ William looked grimly toward the house. ‘Good,’ he said. ‘Maybe he’ll kill us all. We’d be better off’” (67). A nine-year-old with a death wish is a striking image that both disturbs and depresses, but it illustrates the isolation that the boy feels. What should be his most stable connection, family, is toxic and violent. He in turn creates toxic and violent relationships with others, such as Teddy. He has no good connections to this place or this world.

William is not the only one subjected to abuse. Teddy’s ability to connect is also stunted by the trauma he faces. His relationship with William is based on pressure from his mother. He explains that “I was the only kid in Knockemstiff that would even talk to

him, and that was just because my mom kept insisting that I play the good neighbor” (64). Teddy’s mother believes in the fake-it-‘til-you-make-it way of life. She emphasized that if Teddy “just keep[s] *pretending* that William’s [his] friend, and before [Teddy] know[s] it, he will be” (64). The reader does not have to speculate on Teddy’s mother’s devotion to pretense as Teddy himself supposes that “maybe the reason my mother loved pretending so much was that she had such a hard life” (64). This is a worryingly perceptive take from such a young child, who should be focusing on playing with his friends, but Pollock shows that he has been forced to grow up faster than he should. The grind of the American Dream leaves little room for childhood especially since Teddy’s caretaker is herself trapped in a childish state of make believe. It begins innocently enough, with the mother sharing her passion for true crime with her son; “the first time it happened, she’d been telling me about Richard Speck over dinner, going into detail about the eight dead nurses while we ate bologna sandwiches and potato chips” (64). One could argue that such topics are inappropriate for children; however, Pollock imbues that scene with a sense of normalcy by describing their dinner and how plain it is, which stands in sharp contrast to the horrific murders that are being described. Things take a turn from there as Teddy’s mother begins to draw him into semi erotic role play surrounding the murderer. After dinner, Teddy’s mom comes to him in bed and draws tattoos on him with a ball point pen saying, ““now what I want you to do is come in my bedroom and play like you’re [Richard Speck]. Just for a minute.’ ‘How do I do that, Mom?’ ‘I don’t know. Just spit on the floor maybe, talk like a drunken sailor,’ she said. ‘Hurt me, but don’t really hurt me’” (65). She is drawing on Teddy, both literally and figuratively to fulfill her fantasy, forcing him to inhabit the mind not only of an adult but of a killer. This

becomes a regular occurrence in their home; “sometimes, if she’d had a really bad day, I’d go outside and cut a hole through a window screen, then slip in and tie a fancy knot around her neck with a pair of her panty hose, all the while confessing that I was the *real* Boston Strangler” (65). Teddy picks up skills and improves at pretending to be a serial murderer all to please his mother. As he puts it, “because I wanted so much for her to be happy, I became a master at scaring the bejesus out of her” (65). Pollock also goes out of his way to add a sensuousness to these scenes, his prose lingers on Teddy’s mother’s perfume and her silk robe, the way her “moist skin glowed” and all of this is coming from Teddy’s perspective (69). He is being forced into adult situations and adult mind sets far too young, and even though he is never physically harmed, he is nonetheless traumatized by this behavior. This is most evident in the last page of the story: “then she tilted her head back and, taking my hand in hers, guided the kitchen knife to her soft throat. ‘Okay,’ she whispered, closing her eyes, ‘who do you want to be tonight?’” which once again emphasizes his mother’s body and the sensual impression it leaves on the young boy (69). This moment culminates with Teddy having a realization, “‘Teddy,’ I finally said, pretending it was true. ‘I just want to be Teddy;’ notice how Teddy is *pretending* it was true (69). He does not want to be himself, but he also does not want to be a part of his mother’s fantasies any longer. This reflects William’s claim that his family would be better off dead. Both boys, though going through very different experiences, wish to escape from the life their parents are forcing upon them.

The boys are failed by the American Dream. According to the Dream, both boys have the same chance as anyone else to live happy, productive lives – they just need to work hard. The Dream brushes aside the trauma that they have experienced and

recognizes any aid that might come their way as a “handout.” Even the systems in place that are meant to protect them – the readers told that Teddy’s mother calls the police on William’s father almost every night – do little to stop their abuse. These boys are left behind by the system, hurt by those who claim to protect them, and are left without the skills to develop meaningful relationships into their adulthoods. Despite having so much in common, William and Teddy still struggle to relate to one another. They bicker over the games they play – each wanting to be the dominant boy – and Teddy doesn’t view William as an actual friend; however, there is a moment where that begins to change when William calls Teddy his friend. Teddy thinks, “Friend? It was the first time William had ever hinted that I was anything but his dumb puppet. Maybe my mom was right; perhaps all you had to do was pretend something was true and then someday it would be, no matter how fantastic, no matter how fucked up” (68). In this moment, Teddy gives over to fantasy and his mother’s way of thinking, creating a world in which if he and William could be friends, maybe they could be gods as well. This idea is cemented by William a few lines later when he says with “his face suddenly breaking into a crazy grin, ‘we’re gods, remember? Shit, we can do anything.’ Then he turned and charged bravely into the house” (68). William acts the part of a valiant god, rushing in to save his mother and Teddy even, for the first time, speaks positively of him. Notice the use of the word “bravely” to describe the other boy. For an instant, they both transcend themselves and become something other than abused little boys; however, the moment does not last. After William has left, teddy notes, “All of the ants were dead. William had destroyed the entire colony once again” (68-69). Gone are the giants and gone is the depiction of William as a hero. Teddy comes back to reality and sees their actions for what they are:

futile and unnecessary. They are not saving the world, or even themselves; they've just killed an ant hill, one that – if the past is anything to go by – will rebuild itself in a matter of weeks. As mentioned earlier, later that night Teddy has a conversation with his mother in which he says he just wants to be himself, *pretending* that it was true. Teddy falls back in to fantasy once again, but unlike before, he is alone. He is isolated from reality, where maybe he could make a *real* connection with William and is instead retreats into solitary make believe. That is his tragedy.

In her article “Gothic and Hermeneutics of Isolations,” Angela Wright argues that Gothic “isolation speaks to the vulnerability of the protagonists”; but rather than a castle in the Italian Apennines as in Ann Radcliffe’s *The Mysteries of Udolpho*, I posit that the Midwestern Gothic represents isolation in a crowd. As I have already established, the characters in *Knockemstiff* are apart from each other not physically, but emotionally. This follows in line with the larger trope of American Gothic tending to take rapacious villains with lurid smiles and transforming them into ills of the mind. In the same way, Hank’s inability to connect with Tina isolates him just as thoroughly as “mouldering walls of dark grey stone” (Radcliffe 264) ever could. How this isolation manifests can vary from text to text, but the Gothic isolation remains the same; the fact that it tends to be at least partially self-imposed is what marks it as Midwestern.

Viewing “Knockemstiff” and *Gigantomachy* through a Gothic lens reveals this isolation as an example of what critic Rob Nixon calls “slow violence.” In his book *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*, Nixon writes, “In a world permeated by insidious, yet unseen or imperceptible violence, imaginative writing can help make the unapparent appear, making it accessible and tangible by humanizing drawn-out threats

inaccessible to the immediate senses” (15). This is what *Knockemstiff* accomplishes when viewed through a Gothic lens. It creates a clear warning about social, rather than physical, isolation that can be perceived more easily than the slow creep of everyday life. This is what Pichaske misses. Connecting with community does not mean shutting out the voices that make up a solid portion of that community because they don’t fall into the “lost Swede town” category. The things that tear us apart are not our surface level differences but rather the slow violence of a system that oppresses those without access to power. In fact, given the bona fide left-leaning labor roots found in Midwestern history, focusing on what makes us similar and fighting for the betterment of *everyone* is much more in line with traditional Midwestern thinking than whatever regressive nostalgia Pichaske is selling. I believe that *Knockemstiff*, despite being everything that Pichaske believes Midwestern writing should be, implicitly refutes his stance on Midwesternness, and this becomes most clear when viewed through a Gothic lens.

Chapter III.

“Like Dinosaur Blood”: Cyclical Trauma in Donald Ray Pollock’s “Discipline” and “Real Life”

Isolation is not the only Gothic trope that receives a makeover when placed in the hands of Midwestern writers. In the book *The Cambridge Companion to Gothic Fiction*, Jerrold E. Hogle (et al.) introduces more elements to help define the Gothic tale, stating that it “usually takes place (at least some of the time) in an antiquated or seemingly antiquated space” and that “within this space, or a combination of such spaces, are hidden some secrets from the past” that “haunt the characters, psychologically, physically, or otherwise at the main time of the story” (2). The idea of the past haunting the present can be found throughout the Midwestern Gothic, it just looks a little different. Rather than an antiquated space, sometimes the characters are haunted by an antiquated mindset. Inherited trauma haunts, and parents pass on their pain to their children along with the behavior that pain promotes. This Gothic trope can even be seen in the criticism of Pichaske, who is so fixated on the “lost Swede towns” of *his* Midwest that any work he reads must portray that vision or forfeit its Midwesternness. The mind that Pichaske projects onto the Midwest is haunted by a yearning for “simpler” times of glory at the expense of a bright future. This haunting is clear in *Knockemstiff*.

The American Dream is also obsessed with the past in the modern era. As economic mobility becomes increasingly hard, the focus shifts to a nostalgic past in which everything was as it *should* be. Funnily enough, this fixation on a preferable past

never acknowledges that it was not preferable for everyone. The Dream posits that mobility is attainable, as it was in the past, which is demonstrably untrue – Eunji Kim writes “absolute intergenerational mobility rates—the fraction of children who earn more than their parents—have fallen by more than 40%” by 2022 (39). There must be a reason for this disparity. Critics like Pichaske who pine for the good ole days blame social progress. It is harder for those “lost Swede towns” to prosper, not because the social safety net has failed, and the American Dream was propaganda but because of diversity killing what made the region unique. The problem here is that, by rejecting progress, the Dream stagnates in the present, creating a view of the past as better. This creates a cycle of nostalgia that rejects new ideas and voices in favor of those who have already had their time. The reader watches this pattern play out on an individual level within the pages of *Knockemstiff*.

“Discipline” takes the concept of cyclical trauma to Ouroborosian extremes. Narrated by Luther Colburn, this story follows the tragic tale of father and son. Luther was a body builder in his youth and entertains hopes of his son being named Mister South Ohio. To reach this end, he plies his son, Sammy, with steroids and puts him through a grueling diet and exercise routine. One day while driving in the car, they encounter Sammy’s main rival, Bobby Lowe, out showing off his routine in front of a wild crowd. Bobby approaches Sammy some days later to invite him to join him in a free competition in front of the McDonald’s. Luther is vehemently against the idea and works Sammy all the harder for entertaining it. Eventually, Sammy sneaks out to participate in the competition, suffering a fatal heart attack during it. Luther attempts to go back to his routine, but he mourns the loss of the Mister South Ohio title, and his son. Luther then

decides to follow Sammy's example, going out to perform a body building routine in the freezing cold on the spot where his son passed and ends up dying himself. In this way, Luther creates and concludes a cycle in which son follows father in his ambitions, and father follows son into the grave.

"Discipline" is haunted by its past, down to the very setting. Most of the story takes place in Luther's gym, an old gas station. Luther goes so far as to comment that "on rainy nights the fumes raising out of the oil-stained cement smelled like dinosaur blood" (120). In a sense, Luther has a good bit in common with the oil. Both come from a past greater than their present and both find themselves contained and forgotten in an old, run-down gas station. Luther looks at his past as a thing of glory, despite never winning Mr. South Ohio – greatness with a tragic end, much like the dinosaurs themselves. The idea of a person or place being possessed by the past extends beyond Luther and the gym, in fact, it extends past one lifetime. Sammy is held captive, not by his own past, but by his father's.

Luther obviously sees Sammy as a reflection of himself, a second chance at living out his dream; but he also fears that his son takes after someone else: his wife. Luther worries that Sammy has a smaller frame, like his mother, telling the reader that "I kicked myself a thousand times for not knocking up some fat-ass Amazon with big bones" (121). The irony here is that he insists that Sammy sacrifice everything in pursuit of the Mr. South Ohio title, but Luther allowed himself to make a "subpar" decision in regard to relationships, likely because he had a preference for smaller women – if calling anyone who wasn't a "little bird of a thing" a fat ass is anything to go by (121). He did not sacrifice everything the way that he expects Sammy to. Indeed, when Sammy breaks

from Luther's routine, the latter rages that "the little faggot was going for the easier, softer way, just like his mother always did" (121). Clearly, Sammy is never his own person in his father's eyes. He is either Luther or his mother but never Sammy. No matter what he does, he is plagued by his parentage, doomed to follow either his mother "who kept sneaking cigarettes and coffee until the cancer got her" – a death defined by weakness in the eyes of Luther – or his father, a life dedicated to strength that inevitably leads to decay anyway (121).

Pollock shares very little about Sammy, which is odd for a character so integral to the story. He says seven words in the entirety of the piece, never really getting to establish himself as a character. Instead, Sammy serves as a kind of looking glass for Luther. He serves as the blank wall on which his father projects his hopes and dreams. The reader never finds out if Sammy wants to be Mr. South Ohio or simply to please his father. In fact, the story, told from his father's perspective, is set in such a way that any agency the young man does show is almost immediately punished. With the way Luther tells the story, Sammy's disobedience is what ends up killing him. By choosing to go and join Bobby Lowe, Sammy is struck down seemingly out of the blue. The reader can recognize that the doctor says that his "son had a heart attack ... and his cholesterol was ... 600 to be exact" (123). Luther, however, in the light of this discovery, simply claims, "No, he was healthy as a horse. Shit, you saw him" (123), showing that Luther cannot accept that Sammy's death is more related to the conditioning Luther had been putting him through than to his disobedience. When Luther describes Sammy's dietary regimen, it comes across as nothing short of abusive.

Every two hours I meted out creatine and fat burners and liquid protein.
For breakfast, he got a spoon full of oatmeal; for dinner, a sliver of baked

fish. At night, I gave him wooden clothes hangers to chew on. “Shit, son, we’re mostly powder anyway.” I’d tell him whenever he started to cramp. “South Ohio!” I screamed every time he puked. (121)

Sammy was barely fed. While he may have been 18 at the time of his death, he had been in training for years, meaning that Luther had been habitually starving his son. Considering Luther has a habit of bingeing and purging, it is miraculous that Sammy didn’t also have bulimic tendencies, if not full-fledged bulimia. When the doctor shares Sammy’s cause of death, Luther can’t comprehend that Sammy was unhealthy because he was so muscular. Like his obsession with external gratification – such as the Mr. South Ohio title – Luther cannot see beneath the surface in terms of his son’s health or even the relationship they have with each other.

There is nothing inherently wrong with seeing yourself in your child; however, Luther takes it to an extreme. He is haunted by his past of failure and projects that past onto Sammy, fulfilling the Gothic trope of haunting. In addition, he is fixated on one individualistic, narrow view of success, much like the American Dream. He fully views Sammy as a reflection of himself – the problem with that being that a reflection is not a person, it is an owned thing. Luther views Sammy as a kind of puppet that he can manipulate into achieving his dreams. The issue is that Sammy is a square block and Mr. South Ohio is a round hole which is a fact Luther feels he needs to remedy. In the first line of the story, Luther says, “I fixed up my son, Sammy, right there in the parking lot of the Gold’s, one cc in the hip” (117). Notice the words used there, “fixed” – he sees Sammy’s natural state as something that is broken and needs to be mended with steroids, maybe because of his smaller frame. Sammy as himself is not enough. This point comes to a head when they see Bobby Lowe flexing in front of the McDonald’s – Luther says, “I suddenly realized that Willard Lowe’s son was going to beat Sammy for the South Ohio,

him of all people in the goddamn state. Willard Lowe was my one true enemy; I'd hated that prick since we used to fight over the plastic weight set in fourth-grade gym class" (119). Here the reader learns that it is not just Mr. South Ohio that Luther craves but to beat a specific person for the title. We also see his insecurity with Sammy's ability to fulfill his dream. The interesting thing is that, just like Sammy, Bobby Lowe is defined by his parentage and not as his own person. Luther makes this even more clear when Bobby comes to his gym to suggest the competition.

"Hey, Dad," Sammy said, "I think-" "Shut up!" I yelled and then turned back to Bobby. "Look, I know what you're doing. Your old man was the same way, always fucking with me. Him and that goddamn stupid grin of his. Now get the fuck out of my gym!" (120)

We don't know what Bobby's intentions were but, because of who his father is, Luther immediately jumps to conclusions and shuts him down. Interestingly, he also shuts down Sammy in this moment, refusing to allow the young man to express his opinion on the matter. This is also more than half of the words Sammy says in the whole story, and he isn't allowed even a complete sentence. Reflections are to be seen and not heard, and as such Sammy doesn't get to have an opinion that differs from Luther's. He doesn't need to speak because Luther does all the talking for him.

Luther is convinced he never won Mr. South Ohio because he "looked like a starving rat clamping down on a chicken neck" when he smiled (119). As seen in the passage where Bobby visits the gym, Luther is maniacal about the smile. It is his one shortcoming as a body builder, and he envies Willard Lowe his smile. That makes it significant when, just before Sammy dies, Luther reports, "Then I saw it. It stretched across his face, gleaming like a toothpaste ad. I'd never realized Sammy could smile like that" (122). One might think Luther would take the time to reflect on *why* he had never

seen Sammy smile like that, maybe consider his son's happiness for a moment, but instead his mind goes straight to Mr. South Ohio. After the paramedics stop attempting to resuscitate Sammy, Luther exclaims, "'Jesus Christ, that boy's the next South Ohio,' I said, grabbing the man by the throat. 'He's got a smile that can beat the world. He can't be dead'" (122). It is not "That's my son, he can't be dead!" It is "That's Mr. South Ohio." It is tragic that Luther's first thoughts go to the achievement of his dream and not the wellbeing of his son, just as when he first saw the smile his thoughts went to the competition and not to how happy his son appeared flexing in the parking lot of a McDonald's. A page later, Luther does show some more feeling: "'He's only eighteen years old,' I said, kneeling down beside the gurney and running my hand over my son's dead body" (123). Acknowledging Sammy's youth is a step towards regarding him as a separate person. Notably, this is also the first time that we see Sammy's body referred to as his own. It is "my son's dead body" which hits hard both in the sense that a parent should never have to bury their child but also because the corpse belongs to Sammy. It is not an instrument for reaching Luther's goals or a reflection of the physical perfection that he strived for but rather simply what it is: a body that once belonged to a young man.

After Sammy's death, Luther still finds himself stuck in the cycle of hauntings. Like any good Gothic protagonist, he is unable to escape from the past. Luther's habits lead him to follow his son as he "went back to [his] routine" (123). Luther has spent more of his life single mindedly fueled by one thing, one goal, and with Sammy gone, so is the dream. He sees no other way to live than to continue as he had been, at his gym soaked in dinosaur blood. The notable exception here is that instead of being himself, he decides to reflect Sammy.

I pulled on some old sweats, ate some aspirin. After sticking a stack of Sammy's Megadeth CDs in the stereo and cranking it up, I just started doing set after set after fucking set. I pumped iron for eight hours straight, a personal best. Then around 2 AM, I took a scorching shower, shaved off all my body hair and greased myself down. (124)

He chooses to use Sammy's music to work out. He does the reps himself, not as a trainer but like a trainee, setting his own personal best from the days when he himself was a body builder. Then he acts, not as a coach but as a contestant, by shaving his entire body and applying grease to himself. He is behaving as though he is going to be in a competition. More specifically, he is roleplaying as Sammy. Continuing his Sammy impersonation, he heads to the McDonald's parking lot to the very spot where his son died. He then stripped down and "started off with some basics, going through them slowly, trying to warm up. Then I went into some secret stuff that I'd been working on for years, shit I was going to show Sammy when he was good enough" (124). In this moment, Luther reenacts Sammy's life as he foresaw it. From beginner to pro, he moves his body in the ways he taught his son, and in the ways he planned to teach Sammy. For a moment, he is the reflection of Sammy and Sammy lives through him.

As he goes through his routine, Luther transcends himself. Even more than an avatar for Sammy, he becomes an avatar of nature. "My muscles ground against each other like ice floes in the cold silence" he claims: the imagery he uses propels him to being more than a man (124). In his moment of dedication to his son, Luther becomes primeval. This cannot last forever; "as morning approached, I lifted my frozen arms for one more shot and a loud crack shook the entire valley. A white light exploded in my head and my body shattered into a thousand tiny pieces. Then I blew like flakes of dirty snow down the gray, empty street" (125). The crack of his body breaking doesn't just affect him, it rocks the very landscape. The parking lot is witness to the birth, and death,

of something visceral. Then, just as for an instant he was more than a man, he dissolves into less than. He comes to reality and presents himself as he sees it: dirty flakes of little significance. In a tick of dust-to-dust symmetry, Luther follows his boy to the grave and completes the cycle of trauma.

“Discipline” shows the middle and end of the cycle of trauma, but the first story of the series, “Real Life” shows the beginning. It is not only Sammy who finds himself following in his father’s footsteps. Bobby, the narrator and protagonist of “Real Life,” is traumatized by his father’s approval, which can only be won through acts of violence. “Real Life” shows the reader how Sammys are made. Dysfunction is achingly apparent in nearly every character, from a wife so desperate to entertain her husband that she’ll fellate a hotdog in front of her son, to a man who takes swigs of alcohol out of a used ash tray because drinking from the bottle would make him an alcoholic (2-3). “Real Life” follows Bobby on the night when his parents take him to the drive-in theater. Bobby nips at his fingertips throughout the opening of the show, a nervous habit that comes out in full force around his father. By the time the main feature – *Godzilla* – begins to show, Bobby’s father Vernon decides to take his son to the bathroom. While there, Vernon releases a string of obscenities that leads another man with his young son to demand that he watch his language. Vernon pretends to be cowed and then sucker punches the man, beating him viciously in front of his son. The other boy ends up attacking Bobby, much to Vernon’s delight. At his father’s prompting, Bobby beats the boy, breaking his nose. Vernon grabs his son, and they race back to the car, pulling out of the theater as sirens are heard in the distance. Vernon is pleased with Bobby, perhaps for the first time, and praises the boy for his violence. That night, Bobby lies in his bed, lapping the blood of

the other boy off his knuckles, and reflects that he wants more. More of what is not entirely clear, more blood, more approval from his father; the two are inextricably linked.

Bobby shows the reader what would have happened to Hank if he could go back in time and redo his “mistake.” Bobby does not disappoint his father; he proves that he had not been “ruined” by his mother – despite the fact that earlier in the story Vernon opines to Bobby that “you act more like your damn mother every day” (5). Bobby is the closest thing that *Knockemstiff* has to a George Willard. Appearing in three of the stories collected in the anthology, he is the only main character that the reader sees grow into adulthood, and he stands to represent the standard of normality. Therefore, it is telling that misogyny is so present in his stories as it reflects the cultural norm of the town. Even the title of this first story, “Real Life,” suggests the reality of Bobby’s experience and breaks the audience away from any expectation of fairy tale happy endings. Throughout *Knockemstiff*, multiple characters attempt to break away from the town, including Bobby, only to find themselves inexplicably pulled back in. Jochen Achilles highlights the trap of *Knockemstiff*:

Several stories demonstrate the holler’s attraction even if it is harmful. Jake Lowry in “Dynamite Hole” is a draft dodger in World War II. Having “never been more than two miles from Knockemstiff, Ohio” (14), his problem is not so much getting killed in the war as leaving familiar territory: “I wasn’t afraid of the fighting nearly as much as I was scared of leaving the holler” (15). In “Pills” Bobby and his friend Frankie plan to drive to California but go in circles and end up “back in the holler” every night instead. In “Schott’s Bridge” Todd Russell, although discriminated against by the community for his obvious homosexuality, seems also glued to Knockemstiff: “Todd discovered that he was afraid of leaving the holler, even if it was bad.” (107)

Even Agnes claims “I’d be outta this hellhole in a minute if it wasn’t for these kids” (3) when speaking to her sister on the phone. In many ways, *Knockemstiff* seems inescapable to the people who live there. But it is not some deep love of the land that

keeps them trapped, rather it is a learned and ingrained pattern of behavior that dates back to early days of every resident in Knockemstiff as well as for the sake of those still in the town, as is the case for Agnes.

As earlier established, Bobby is the closest Pollock comes to an everyman within *Knockemstiff*. He is the character the reader sees grow and who appears more than tangentially in multiple stories. His will be our sample of childhood in Knockemstiff. “Real Life” begins with the line “my father showed me how to hurt a man one August night at the Torch Drive-in when I was seven years old. It was the only thing he was ever any good at” (1). This immediately sets up the dynamic of the father and son relationship the reader will glimpse during the story. Bobby learns from his father, but he does not respect him as a person, merely as a vehicle for violence. For his part, Vernon is even more dismissive of Bobby, referring to his teeth as “dick skimmers” and telling him to get his head “out of [his] ass” (4-5). The disrespect becomes public humiliation when Vernon and Bobby enter the bathroom where “the smell of piss and popcorn hung in the hot dead air like insecticide” (5). Vernon encounters one of his friends and reports: “‘I shit you not, Cappy,’ my father was telling the man, ‘This boy’s scared of his own goddamn shadow. A bug’s got more balls,’” announcing his displeasure with his son in front of a crowded bathroom full of strangers (5). He also announces that “Bobby shoulda been a girl,” the highest of insults from a man such as Vernon (6). This is a relationship of belittlement and emotional abuse.

There is one aspect of Vernon’s personality that is hinted at but never explicitly stated: he cares far too much about what other people think. Of all the characters in *Knockemstiff*, Vernon is the one most consumed by the American Dream and outward

shows of wealth. He is constantly buying new cars: the one they ride in in the story is his “third set of wheels in a year,” all the while the family cannot pay their electricity bill (2). The American Dream is predicated on the idea that someone can “make it,” that they can amass enough goods to show the world that they are a success. Following the logic that wealth equals merit and poverty equals laziness, Vernon strives to show the world that he has merit according to the Dream. He craves the respect of those around him, which is why the way he chooses to punish Bobby most of the time is to degrade him in front of others, be it his mother or the men of the bathroom. He also drinks from the car’s ashtray because he refuses to pull from the bottle in case people see him as a “goddamn wino” (3). In the bathroom, “the biggest sonofabitch I’d ever seen” brusquely confronts Vernon about his language, both figuratively and literally belittling Vernon in front of a crowd (6). Even worse, he calls Vernon “a damn drunk” in front of everyone, the very thing he was willing to take a mouth full of ash to avoid earlier in the night (7). Vernon cannot take the insult lying down and so attacks the man while his back is turned, and his retaliation is brutal.

The room went quiet for a moment but when the man’s son started screaming, my father exploded. He circled around the man, kicking the ribs with his work boots, stomping on the left hand until the gold wedding ring cut through to the bone of his finger. Dropping to his knees, he grabbed the man’s glasses and snapped them in two, beat him in the face until a tooth popped through one meaty cheek. (8)

This is a personal assault taken to a degree that forces others to intervene and pull Vernon away. Vernon tries to make the man suffer beyond the physical, as seen when he breaks his glasses; he tries to break him down in any way that he can.

While his father is confronted by a much bigger man over his language, Bobby instead focuses on the son of the other man – “a boy [his] size;” noting “he looked happy,

and I hated him instantly” (6). Bobby expresses a stronger feeling of loathing for the boy than the father who has been abusing him since the start of the story, all because he is happy. The relationship he imagines the boy has with his father – a healthy one – fills him with such rage that he *hates* the boy. This hatred comes to a head when, after the larger man has been brutalized, the young boy attacks Bobby. Vernon yells ““You back down, I’ll blister your ass!”” leaving his son with few alternatives (9). Nature and nurture come to a head in Bobby when he thinks, “I didn’t want to fight, but the boy was nothing compared to the old man” and proceeds to fight back (9). He eventually gains ascendancy, breaking the other boy’s nose before fleeing along with his father from the scene of the crime.

Following the fight is the first time any tenderness is shown between father and son. Vernon “stopped and knelt down in front of me. He was gasping for air. ‘You did good, Bobby,’ he said, wiping the sweat from his eyes. He gripped me by the shoulders and squeezed. ‘You did real good’” (9). This is the only moment Vernon contacts another person without the express intent of doing them harm. Bobby has earned his father’s respect, if only for the moment, by being just like him. Vernon cannot wait to share the news that his son is tough, first gushing to Agnes about the experience – claiming that the boy was twice the size of Bobby – before yelling “This is the best night of my life!” out the window (10). It is interesting that even then he embellishes the story to impress his wife, as Bobby very specifically noted that he and the boy were the same size. She does not provide the reaction he wants. Agnes is concerned for her son and calls Vernon a “sick bastard,” and he responds in a familiar fashion; “I looked up just as he bashed my mother with his forearm. Her head bounced against the window. ‘You sonofabitch!’ she

cried, covering her face with her hands” (10). Vernon will attack anyone who threatens his standing, no matter who is watching. In fact, he seems to prefer an audience so that others know how big and tough he is. Nurture wins out in Bobby when he “scooted across the seat and sat behind my father as we raced home” symbolically aligning himself with the violence that he helped perpetrate and relinquishing whatever softness his nature contained (10-11). Indeed, the boy who acts “more like [his] damn mother every day” abandons her and that behavior when he scooches over to his father’s side. Notably, being on his father’s side may bring him closer to the man, but it also shields him from Vernon’s gaze, representing the protection he gains from appeasing and pleasing his father.

The cycle of abuse and trauma on display in this story takes on literal form in the mind of Bobby. On the ride home, he thinks, “*you did good*, I kept saying to myself, over and over. It was the only goddamn thing my old man said to me that I didn’t try to forget” (11). His thinking becomes a cycle in his own mind, repeating the lesson he had learned that night and cementing it in his brain – be like his father and life will be easier, his biggest abuser will approve of him. Bobby clings to the only positive reaction he has ever had from his father, burning the words into his mind and in doing so cementing the behavior. This idea is driven home when later that night, sitting alone in his room, Bobby licks the blood of the other boy off his hands and comments “I wanted more. I would always want more” (12). As the title of the short story suggests, this is real life. Bobby is not saved from an abusive situation, nor is his mother. Instead, he leans into what it takes to survive: being who his father wants him to be. He inherits Vernon’s bloodlust and is after more. Is blood the only thing that Bobby wants more of, though? Or is he after the

thrill of a relationship formed and acceptance given. He gives up everything in the story to gain his father's approval: the movie he has been waiting all summer to see, the connection he has with his mother, his gentle nature, his sense of right and wrong. Everything about Bobby has been thrown to the wind, and all he is left with is wanting more because if his father's approval is not kept, he has lost all those things for nothing.

Throughout "Real Life," the reader is shown the way that a Knockemstiff resident is warped by his upbringing to eschew all the skills he needs to build meaningful relationships. The auto-diegetic format of Pollock's writing – as opposed to the heterodiegetic nature of Anderson's – offers a greater insight into what Robert Luscher calls "the personal degeneration and spiritual emptiness" of the townsfolk (199). We get an opportunity to know exactly how Bobby feels and what he is thinking in any given moment. We have front row seats to the decisions he makes that will shape his future self. This mode of writing also takes the onus of the benefit of the doubt off the reader. Unlike *Winesburg*, Knockemstiff's inhabitants do not get an affable George Willard who simultaneously contrasts them with his normality while offering an often-generous look at their shortcomings. Instead, the reader knows there is no nobility behind their poverty, just desperation, substance abuse, and PTSD. Folks of the holler are meaner than their Winesburgian counterparts; they murder, rape, and steal on more than one occasion all for the reader to see.

Layne Neeper compares Pollock to one of the most famous figures in American Gothicism: Flannery O'Connor. Neeper describes O'Connor's formula as "grotesque character X encounters violent act Y and is ironically redeemed by grace even in the moment of extreme circumstance" (48). Grotesques abound in both Knockemstiff and

Winesburg, and in the case of the former, there is no shortage of violent acts, so all that is missing is a moment of purifying Christian grace. But grace has no place in Knockemstiff, for “even the church had fallen on tough times” and women threaten to kill each other in front of the pastor (Pollock 157). Rather than redemption, the order of the day in Knockemstiff is, according to Nepper, “deterministic degeneration, irrevocable decline into corruption and loss” (48). This degeneration does not stop with the individual but rather forms a cycle of trauma in which the present is stalked by the past. The meanness of the people of Knockemstiff is not born of a vacuum but rather a learned trait passed from, in this case, father to son. This reflects the Gothic trope of hauntings though they are psychological reiterations of the past rather than spiritual.

Focusing on the Gothic trope reveals a pattern on display in *Knockemstiff* that leads to the decay of the town – a lack of growth and an obsession with the past that leads to its resurgence. To return to Pichaske’s take on the region, it is not diversity that is killing Knockemstiff and the traditional Midwest, but rather the lack of it. With no new blood and quiescent hearts, the people of Knockemstiff molder in place; this is the danger of viewing the world through a nostalgic lens and wishing to replicate the past – stagnation. In an odd way, Luther’s fatal flaw is reflected in Pichaske’s assessment of Midwestern Literature – an obsession with attaining some former, semi-mythical glory and preserving it at the cost of new ideas and perspectives, growth.

All of this comes to be because of the American Dream. Both Luther and Vernon are obsessed with status and glory, with external shows of success that can be levied into social currency. One desires for his son to be an award-winning body builder, measuring his worth through his hard work and ability to achieve; the other craves respect from his

community which he attempts to earn through fancy cars and grandstanding, seeing his son as just another facet of life by which to find glory. Neither man views his child as a separate person, but rather as a reflection of himself and his success. In the same way, the American Dream works to convince people that outward signs of success are the only kind that truly count and that failing to attain those signs of success makes someone unworthy of the gentler things in life. When poverty and loss become moral failings – after all, only hard work is required for success, so anyone who has not “made it” is simply lazy – the path towards abuse is laid. This mind set is like a virus, replicating itself from father to son, one generation to the next, creating a cycle of abuse in which the present is constantly being molded into the shape of the past.

Chapter IV.

Conclusion

The classic Gothic tropes of isolation and temporal haunting certainly take on a different hue when applied to Midwestern writing. At a glance, the idea of applying Gothicism to Midwestern writing would seem antithetical to both. One, known for elaborate writing styles and literal specters, the other for “plainspeak” and realism; it would seem the two cannot mix. By giving Gothic ideas a Midwestern slant, it not only expands what we can view as Gothic, but it also casts a light on the psychological aspect of the Midwest. While it is true that the Midwest is not a monolith that can be said to have one mind, subsets of the region can still be analyzed. Represented in the criticism of David Pichaske, the traditional spin of the Midwest – rural, white, male, working class – is currently experiencing a crisis. This crisis is best portrayed in Donald Ray Pollock’s *Knockemstiff*, which depicts a small town slowly dying over the course of decades. But what is the cause of this crisis? Is it that – as Pichaske would have us believe – diversity and the inclusion of non “traditional” voices has eroded the identity of the Midwest and its community? Looking through a Gothic lens, the answer is no.

The decline of the traditional Midwest as presented in *Knockemstiff* is caused by the American Dream and its failure. Both Gothic tropes that I explored in this thesis – cyclical trauma and isolation – can be tied back to the American Dream. With the focus on Individualism native to the Dream, the characters end up isolated and without the help of each other. Every person is left to their own devices to try and improve their lives and, with the disadvantages each character faces, it proves impossible to do alone. The way

that poverty is equated to moral failing means that the people of Knockemstiff can't even relate with each other on a real level through their hardships. They are alone and struggling. In addition, the modern Dream's preoccupation with the past creates a whirlpool that sucks denizens into stagnation. With one generation repeating the mistakes of their predecessors, the town fails to progress into the future, choosing instead to try and attain a mythical former glory. This obsession with the past – and the way it pushes into the present – hobbles the youth of Knockemstiff and prevents them from becoming their own people. Rather, they are drones repeating their roles in a never-ending race to the bottom with the false promise of the Dream to keep them pushing.

The decline seen in *Knockemstiff* is not the result of an influx of immigrants but rather of the isolation of its denizens from each other. This is not a physical isolation, though the town is spread out, but rather the loss of interpersonal relationships. This can be seen in "Knockemstiff" where Hank pines for connection with anyone, especially Tina, but settles instead for a photograph that suggests a fictional relationship. Hank demonstrates how the shame of poverty, created by a system which highlights wealth and status as indicators of decency, keeps him isolated from those around him. Similarly, Teddy and William in "Gigantomachy" are incapable of relating to each other or the world around them in a real way. Instead, both boys play pretend to escape their lives but they cannot agree on what to play. As a result, Teddy resents William despite all they have in common, only coming to a grudging respect at the end of the story. Teddy and William will grow without the skills necessary to relate to others or the world and will be just as isolated as Hank, even while living in a community. The American Dream encourages this isolation by pushing the idea of rugged individualism as the ideal. The

problem in *Knockemstiff* is one of lack of connection and community caused by a shame of poverty and cyclical trauma that leads one generation of damaged people to make another.

The cycle of trauma is just another way that the past haunts the present in this Midwestern work. An obsession with the past goes hand in hand with the American Dream, in which the past is presented as simpler and better. *Knockemstiff* shows the ways in which the past was neither of those things by displaying the 1960s as equally susceptible to abuse and isolation as the present. In addition, Pollock illustrates the ways clinging to the past can be detrimental to the present, as is the case with Sammy and Luther in “Discipline.” Luther is so fixated on reliving his dreams through his son, Sammy, that the boy ultimately dies because of his grueling diet and exercise regime. Obsession with the past literally kills the present. In the same way, the American Dream’s fixation on the past and reclaiming former glory kills the opportunity for a better future with solidarity and community building. A fixation on the past is also self-replicating, demonstrated by Bobby and his father. Vernon works to break Bobby down so that he can rebuild him in his own image. He belittles his son and can only bring himself to praise Bobby after the boy has acted just like his father. In doing so, Vernon condemns Bobby to a life just like his own with no chance for a better future. Notably, Bobby’s future is only improved through the help of his Alcoholics Anonymous sponsor, a Black man, in the final story of *Knockemstiff*. The only hope seen in the entire short story cycle is at the very end, when Bobby chooses to break away from his father and become his own person.

While other critics have written about *Knockemstiff*, they focus on the existence of decline and macrotexual formatting. Even Jochen Achilles, who does discuss slow violence and the cause of community disintegration, does not address the connection between fiction and the larger world. I believe that *Knockemstiff* can be used to view a subset of the American Midwest and the crisis it faces. While there is certainly merit to what these other critics have written and I have used their scholarship to build my own, I have taken the argument to the real world to address the wider scholarship around the Midwest and its culture. The study of literature should go beyond analysis for analysis' sake and make an impact on how we view the world. It should color the way the reader perceives those around them, and that is the step I take beyond other critics. The lens I used to explore this text made it possible to view Pollock in a different light and highlight the ways his work reflected on the real world.

The Gothic tropes found in *Knockemstiff* bring to light what is killing the town. The folk of the holler are held captive by the mindset of the American Dream which separates people and traps them in past-obsessed cycles. Critics like Pichaske claim that the crisis the "traditional" Midwest is facing results from inclusion and diversity, but I suggest that the real problem is a capitalist system in which people are on their own and social progress is rejected. Not to say that nothing can be learned from the past. Pichaske and his ilk could learn a lesson or two from critics like Nathan Tye who, in his essay "Recent Developments in Midwestern Labor History", acknowledges that "the so-called 'better days' were complex eras defined not only by racial, religious, and political contests, but also by remarkable efforts of interracial solidarity, political radicalization, unionization, and community building" (197). The Midwest has a history of strong labor

organization and collaboration throughout the Nineteenth Century. While the region may be known for the grid-like roads that break up the cornfields, novelist Neal Stephenson explains that:

when those grids were laid out, a schoolhouse was platted at every other road intersection. In this way it was assured that no child in the Midwest would ever live more than [roughly 1.4 miles] from a place where he or she could be educated. (273)

This shows a decidedly egalitarian spirit with education at the forefront of planning.

Beyond simply educating children, critic Phil Christman claims, “many of these schools were founded as centers of abolitionist resistance, or even as stops on the Underground Railroad” (94). While it is true that the Midwest has a history of segregation and riots, it also is a place that, by design, valued education, community, and freedom from oppression. Perhaps *that* is the past we should be trying to recreate.

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