Steeltown Roots: Duality, Detachment, and the Search for Identity in Postwar Pittsburgh Literature

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Steeltown Roots: Duality, Detachment, and the Search for
Identity in Postwar Pittsburgh Literature

by

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A Master’s Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of
Montclair State University

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

For the Degree of
Master of Arts in English

May 2007

College/School: CHSS

Department: English

Dr. Mary A. Papazian, Dean
College of Humanities & Social Sciences

4-25-07

Date

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While the city is a common topic in American literature, if you were to Google "Pittsburgh literature," chances are, rather than finding a list of stories about the Steel City, you would be linked to the Carnegie Library or the University of Pittsburgh. Inspired by its lack of attention, I have directed my efforts toward making a case for Pittsburgh’s modest yet significant role in American literature, particularly during its “postwar” period. The “postwar” sequence of events that occur between the city’s industrial prime following World War II and its transformation into an academic and cultural center for medicine and technology upon the decline of its steel industry in the nineteen eighties, is in short, an American story of survival. Two American writers, both previous residents of Pittsburgh, significantly portray their narratives of duality, detachment, and identity in congruence with the city’s urban landscape. By identifying Pittsburgh’s presence in Annie Dillard’s post-World War II memoir, *An American Childhood* (1989) and in Michael Chabon’s modern fiction novel, *Wonder Boys* (1995), I intend to emphasize the parallels between the characters and their city. Specifically, I will discuss the way in which Pittsburgh’s postwar story is reflected in the lives of the characters through a consistent theme of duality, in which detachment is required in order to redefine identity. By illuminating the parallels between the characters’ duality and the city’s postwar urban transformation, I hope to secure the notion that few writers have conveyed in literature—the American search for identity is embodied in the story of Pittsburgh’s renaissance.
STEELTOWN ROOTS: DUALITY, DETACHMENT, AND THE SEARCH FOR IDENTITY IN POSTWAR PITTSBURGH LITERATURE

A THESIS

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in English

by

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May 2007
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Introduction:
Pittsburgh’s Postwar Prime & Decline in American Literature

“To be from somewhere is permanently important. It's like the color of your eyes or whether you are left-handed or right-handed. Like any birthmark, it never leaves you.”

-Samuel Hazo (Lorant 8)

When people think of Pittsburgh, most do not think of advanced healthcare, high technology, or competitive colleges and universities. Pittsburgh’s reputation will forever be engraved in steel, and perhaps rightly so, as its legacy was established by the city’s industrial foundation. The Steel City’s history of endurance, transition, and revitalization between its prime during World War II and its industrial decline in the early eighties, portrays a striking example of an American city redefining its identity. Pittsburgh has weathered its failures and navigated new endeavors in an effort to carry on the powerful legacy of its predecessors and to establish stability and direction for its future. Its story serves as an example to other American cities struggling to overcome economic decline and determined to steer their industries in a new direction. In short, Pittsburgh’s story is quintessentially American, embodying the challenges and desires of every American who strives to survive, despite the past and in honor of the future. This is a concept few writers have recognized and have managed to capture in their work. Two authors in particular, both previous residents of Pittsburgh, have situated their stories in the midst of the city’s postwar momentum and following its industrial decline, advocating that Pittsburgh’s role in American literature, while modest, is significant.

In both, Annie Dillard’s memoir, An American Childhood (1989) and Michael Chabon’s modern fiction novel, Wonder Boys (1995), Pittsburgh plays a significant role in the lives of the characters who, like the city, strive to detach themselves from
preconceived urban expectations in order to redefine their identities. Dillard’s memoir reflects Pittsburgh in the years following the end of World War II, while Chabon’s novel presents the city in 1995 during the renaissance that redefined its industry. Both stories capture a time of dramatic urban change in the city between 1945 and the mid-nineties, which herein, I identify as “postwar” Pittsburgh. This era includes the city’s industrial boom at the end of World War II; its revitalization efforts during Renaissance I (1946-1973); the decline of the steel industry in the eighties; and its transformation through Renaissance II into the nineties (Lorant, “Great Transition” 593). This postwar snapshot of Pittsburgh is a rollercoaster of failures and successes, all of which have contributed to the city’s efforts to build on it past and transform its identity to adapt to the needs of the future.

The significance of Pittsburgh’s role in Dillard’s memoir and in Chabon’s novel, while evident in the experiences of the characters, is also accentuated in the concrete urban elements that anchor the city’s presence in both texts. Through close readings of An American Childhood and Wonder Boys, I intend to illustrate the way in which the characters’ search for identity parallels Pittsburgh’s struggle to define its future. In doing so I hope to emphasize the notion that the city is entwined in the text and that the two cannot be separated or substituted. My intention is not to critique the progress and pitfalls of postwar Pittsburgh as an American city. Rather, I intend to demonstrate the way in which two Pittsburgh writers situate their characters’ stories in the context of a crucial time of social, economic, and cultural transition unique to the city’s history.

My research is in no way a comprehensive approach to the study of the city at large, nor does it attempt to make theoretical claims encompassing the variety of studies
done by urban historians on the subject. Rather than providing definitions of the city, I will discuss the role of the urban and non-urban elements described in each work and the representations that emerge through the close reading of the characters. The one claim that I suggest with bold certainty is that observing the role of the urban in American literature, particularly during the “postwar” era, provides valuable insight into the symbiotic relationship between American people and their cities. By focusing on Pittsburgh specifically, I hope to demonstrate the way in which its postwar transformation has influenced Dillard and Chabon to draw a parallel between the history of the Steel City and every American’s desire to honor the past, secure the future, and establish an identity refined by failure and success.
Chapter One: Pittsburgh's Postwar Presence in Annie Dillard's An American Childhood

Annie Dillard was born on the day that Hitler died at the end of April in 1945, a pivotal day in history, signaling the end of World War II and marking the beginning of a new era for American cities, particularly for her hometown of Pittsburgh (Dillard 16). In her memoir, An American Childhood, Dillard recounts her life as a girl growing up in the Point Breeze neighborhood of Pittsburgh, providing a perspective of the city in its prime as it transitioned after the war. Unlike most postwar American city writers, whom David R. Weimer describes as having an “intimacy” with the urban “so complete as to deprive them of the capacity for saying anything much about it,” Dillard is uniquely detached from her subject (144). Forty-two years after the war, literally separated by time and place from the period of which she writes, she speaks intimately of the urban in the hindsight of adult recollection. In doing so, she situates herself in her earliest memory as a child in the 1950s surrounded by a city in the midst of transition. Stamped with a postwar urban childhood, she roams her house, her neighborhood, and her city piecing together the story of her given identity. Elizabeth Wheeler accurately sums up in one sentence the transition that was Dillard’s childhood: “It was a rough commute from World War II into the eerie calm of the 1950s” (48).

Pittsburgh plays a significant role in the memoir, as Dillard suggests that she and the city emerge from the end of World War II into a surge of urban expectations that bury the past and drive the future. The war’s end ushered in an era of prosperity and a desire for change in cities. Pittsburgh in particular was in its prime during wartime, producing “95 million ingot tons of steel” between the strike on Pearl Harbor and 1945, the year of Dillard’s birth (Lorant, “Between Two Wars” 371). After the war, the city continued to
produce “40 million tons of steel” per year, an amount impressively equal to “the combined output of Germany and Japan during World War II” ("Great Transition" 593). While the industrial boom provided economic security for cities, it also triggered plans for mass urban renewal causing a “binge of postwar building” across the country (Teaford 36). As a result, postwar expectations defined American cities as havens for industry and opportunity in the years that followed. Meanwhile, having grown up in Pittsburgh, Dillard suggests the city’s postwar identity became a product of urban indulgence, while its history was buried beneath the new layers. In her memoir, she recounts her attempts to find elements of the original city, finding instead that aspects of class, culture, and history emerge from the rubble of renaissance, revealing urban expectations that define the city and divide its inhabitants.

As Pittsburgh moves forward after the war with plans for social and cultural renaissance and rejuvenation, Dillard peels away layers of the city’s history, each time awakening to her own presence. Gaining consciousness of the buried past and of the urban world in progress around her, she begins to separate herself from her surroundings. Finding detachment through books and non-urban escapes, she discovers the outside world and gains perspective of her socially-constructed urban life. In an attempt to avoid being swept up in the social progression that buries the city, Dillard attempts to disconnect herself from her given postwar urban identity and desires escape from Pittsburgh. Distancing herself from the urban, she is able to distinguish her own identity from the social and cultural expectations imposed by society. Distinction enables her to separate her place in Pittsburgh from Pittsburgh as place.
Pittsburgh: History & Urbanization

Prior to discussing the memories of her childhood in her memoir, Dillard begins with an image of transition, contrasting Pittsburgh’s earliest settlement with its booming years following World War II. By beginning with a detailed physical description of the natural Pittsburgh river valley, she emphasizes its transformation into a bustling urban center. It becomes evident that the city is defined and driven by the successes, failures, and expectations of its people. Emphasizing the roots that gave the city its wings, Dillard begins with the natural origin of Pittsburgh’s resources—its three rivers:

The three wide rivers divide and cool the mountains. […] The Allegheny River flows in brawling from the north, from near the shore of Lake Erie, and from Lake Chautauqua in New York and eastward. The Monongahela River flows in shallow and slow from the south, from West Virginia. The Allegheny and the Monongahela meet and form the westward-wending Ohio. Where the two rivers join lies an acute point of flat land from which rises the city. (Dillard 3)

Pittsburgh became what it is because of its “position vis-à-vis the juncturing rivers,” in addition to its “large deposits of bituminous coal in the area,” which fueled the industrial success of the steel companies and inspired the growth of its urban center (Hazo 26). By centering on the natural features of the city, Dillard emphasizes the significance of its location, which inspired the transition of its natural resources into the urban fortunes, from which Pittsburgh emerged.

Piecing together a natural image of Pittsburgh’s past, Dillard presents the detailed description of its landscape in a context that excludes the presence of civilization. In order to do so, she imagines a future time when everything she knows has disappeared.
She says, "When everything else has gone from my brain, [...] what will be left, I believe, is topology: the dreaming memory of land as it lay this way and that" (Dillard 3). By removing all social and cultural aspects of identity, all that remains in her mind is the physical landscape. When all else is gone, she says she will see the city "poured rolling down the mountain valleys like slag, and see the city lights sprinkled and curved around the hills’ curves" (3). The entwined images present the urban city fusing together with the non-urban environment, removing all boundaries between them. For example, she describes "Calm old bridges" as they "span the banks and link the hills" and the tall buildings as they "rise lighted to their tips" illuminating the "narrow city canyons below" (3). By weaving urban images throughout her descriptions of non-urban topography, Dillard presents a picture of the city drained of its cultural identity and merged with the natural landscape from where it began.

Dismantling the urban image even further, Dillard describes the city lights fading, leaving only the physical features of the land (4). When the city lights fade, the landscape returns to nature, which leads to her next description which reflects on "those first days" when the city was not yet a city and "there was not even a settlement, not even a cabin" (4). In her description, Pittsburgh was a "forest-blurred" wilderness before George Washington arrived in 1753 to survey the land for the English (4). Ten years later and before her transition into the postwar city, Dillard describes a final image of early Pittsburgh when men and women "lay exhausted in their cabins, sleeping in the sweetness, worn out from planting corn" (5).

By immediately quieting the bustle of the industrious city that comes to mind and removing the social, cultural, and economic elements that identify its urban development,
Dillard presents the Steel City in its most natural and idyllic setting. Describing Pittsburgh as a shell without its contents, she separates herself from the city distinguishing its identity from her own. By doing so, she provides a balanced transition from Pittsburgh as it was, to her version of the city as she knew it as a child. The life that she imbues into the empty landscape is her own. The dramatic change from nature to settlement in the Pittsburgh hills is presented as modest in contrast to the vast urbanization that progresses as we fast forward to the city in 1950, following the end of World War II when Dillard was five years old.

Postwar Pittsburgh

The end of World War II marked a time of adjustment for Americans who were inundated with mixed feelings of relief, anxiety, and hope. In the city, Dillard describes an atmosphere of comfort: “The war was over. People wanted to settle down […] blow their way out of years of rationing […] bake sugary cakes, burn gas, go to church together, get rich, and make babies” (16). Rationing goods during the war that were “out of stock for the duration,” resulted in an overflow of investments for the future (Chafe 10). A stable economy meant money was available to purchase homes, cars, and appliances that were previously restricted during the war (10). As a result, the economy was booming, and postwar consumers were eager to spend their money (30). In addition to enjoying the renewal of a recently-depressed economy and the successful end to the brunt of war, changes inspired uncertainty (28).

During the war, the home front faced new responsibilities and experienced social and economic shifts that toppled traditional American roles and expectations. Women in
particular experienced “more change as a consequence of the war” than any other class of people (Chafe 11). Wartime reversed traditional roles as the draft required men to leave their jobs and families, opening up opportunities for homemaker women to go to work (Casdorph 6). Over six million women joined the work force during the war, increasing the number of women workers by 57 percent (Chafe 11). Most of the women who worked for the duration originally assumed they would “joyfully resume the traditional life of homemaker” when the men returned from war, but by 1945, “they had changed their minds” (28). According to Chafe, “A Women’s Bureau survey of ten areas showed that 75 percent of the women who had taken jobs wished to continue working” after the war (28). As a result, peace brought a mixed feeling of relief and hope for those that experienced a sense of freedom during the war—hope that the wartime experience would not prove to be a “temporary hiatus in a long-term pattern of continued oppression” (16).

Consistent economic growth during wartime proved that efforts on the home front were as influential as they were on the battlefield for the future of American cities (Chafe 7). Still, “Uncertainty clouded the economy,” as the home front considered the impact of eleven million soldiers returning home (29). It was a time of “anxiety and fear,” but according to Chafe, it was also “a moment of possibility” (30). Women writers in the fifties reiterated this notion in their literature, that “women and families were war veterans along with the men” (Wheeler 7). When the war ended, roles reversed, and the neighborhoods grew quiet again:

Oh, the great humming silence of the empty neighborhoods in those days, the neighborhoods abandoned everywhere across continental America—the city residential areas, the new ‘suburbs,’ the towns, and villages on the peopled
highways, the cities, towns, and villages on the rivers, the shores, in the Rocky and Appalachian mountains, the piedmont, the dells, the bayous, the hills, the Great Basin, the Great Valley, the Great Plains—oh, the silence! (Dillard 15)

Dillard describes the streets and sidewalks of her neighborhood as “empty” with no cars or people passing by, and the brick and stucco houses as “still” (18). When the men drive away to work, she watches the “unselconscious trees” outside until their branches, “like fins waved away the silence” (16). Left behind in the “forgotten houses” in all of the “abandoned neighborhoods,” she says, “the day of waiting and silence had begun” (16). Using words like “forgotten” and “abandoned” suggests a sense of neglect or loneliness. As the neighborhoods “emptied” every morning, Dillard and her sister, Amy were left alone with their mother most of the day waiting for a sense of vitality to return to their residential neighborhood (15).

The dramatic social, economic, and cultural forces that carried cities through wartime gave women a glimpse of the industrial working world, which compared to the quiet of the empty neighborhoods, inspired a sense of vitality in their lives. For minorities and women especially, wartime meant a “loosening of the shackles,” in which traditional roles were exchanged for a new life of responsibility, providing a feeling of freedom from “antiquated traditionalism” (Casdorph ix). War offered a bittersweet opportunity for the “housewife’s voice” to be heard in an era that Wheeler says is “often regarded as one of the most masculine phases of American literature” (6). According to Wheeler, the reference seems a contradiction in terms because the housewife is often ridiculed as “unable to think or speak for herself” and stereotypically stands for “conformity, unreality, boredom, suburbia” (6). Briefly, the war changed that.
The war served as a “catalyst” for independence and financial stability in America, “freeing women from age-old bondages” and invigorating life into the city for those who were left behind (Casdorph 6). In those days, Dillard says, a woman was “alone in her house [. . .] like a coin in a safe” supposedly to preserve the American family (16). Particularly for a woman like her mother whose “energy and intelligence suited her for a greater role in a larger arena,” perhaps “mayor of New York”—being contained stifled the imagination (115). Her mother followed politics closely and saw how things “should be run,” but according to Dillard, “she had nothing to run but our household” (115). Though she says her mother is “smarter than the people who designed the things she had to use all day,” her role following the war was at home (115).

Personifying women’s postwar role, Dillard describes a dark image of a woman who appears “in silhouette against the sky” pushing a black baby carriage as “tall and chromed as a hearse” (18). An image of death, the description of the carriage suggests a shadow of a life resigned to the role of mother, driven by the carriage to her social demise. The somber image of the woman reiterates the “self-conscious and stricken silence” that Dillard says overtook the neighborhood (16). Roaming the quiet house and waiting, she asks herself, “Am I living?” (16).

Women were not alone in their adjustment to life on the home front after the war. Dillard’s father, who was “4-F,” or unfit for military service during the war because of a collapsed lung despite his “repeated and chagrined efforts to enlist,” was also restless with postwar city life (Dillard 16). Five years after V-J day, her father still went out once a week as a volunteer to the Civil Air Patrol and “searched the Pittsburgh skies for new enemy bombers” (16). Like her father searching for life in the empty neighborhood,
Dillard yearns for action or even war, “I was hoping the war would break out again, here [. . .] hoping the street would fill and I could shoot my cap gun at people instead of at mere sparrows” (18). The naïve desire for war suggests the urge to restore vitality into the postwar city and to escape the monotony of her neighborhood, even as a young girl.

Anticipation for a season of renewal is evident as Dillard describes a woman on the radio singing, “What will the weather be? Tell us Mister Weather Man” (18). In the midst of transition and in the hopes of a social renaissance, Dillard’s autumn descriptions imply a bittersweet period of change upon the city of Pittsburgh. For example, following her dark image of the shadow of a woman pushing a baby carriage, she notes that the leaves of the deciduous “Lombardy poplars” are “turning brown” (18). The image suggests the change of seasons, which Dillard confirms indicating that the “separated neighborhood trees lost their leaves, one by one” (18). On the weekend, she watches the men rake the fallen leaves into “low heaps at the curb,” which they try to ignite with matches (18). When a match fails, Dillard watches her father retrieve a can of lighter fluid from the house (18). Burning the leaves, the men remove all traces of the time they once hung colorfully from live branches. Signifying a sense of hope for renewal, the chapter ends with the arrival of winter and Dillard roaming the “darkening snowy neighborhood, oblivious” until the streetlights come on and wake her “like a noise,” reminding her that she is alive (19).

**Urban Expectations**

Inspired by postwar stability, Pittsburgh’s leaders worked to physically transform the city from its original identity “forged by the Industrial Revolution” into a revitalized
urban center (Hazo 26). Pittsburgh’s smokestacks, while symbolizing “prosperity” and “employment,” blanketed the city in soot, a problem addressed by the Allegheny Conference during the war (Lawrence 386). Renewal projects included plans for a smoke control ordinance, stipulating that measures to clear the air would not go into effect until after the war (386). When peace time arrived, leaders gathered to “remake” Pittsburgh, changing the environment of the “old nineteenth-century technology” into the “sleek new forms of the future” (373). Pittsburgh invested billions toward projects for renewal and expansion in the decade following the war, assuming physical renovation would “erase the existing flaws in urban life” (Teaford 7).

Pittsburgh’s physical transformation following the war was an extremely significant moment in the city’s history as its democratic and republican leaders joined efforts to provide a cleaner and healthier atmosphere. According to Dillard, Pittsburghers “breathed in optimism—not coal dust—with every breath” after the war (168). During the first renaissance, she remembers the city being cleaned up by “a few business leaders and Democratic Mayor David L. Lawrence” as the first step in a continual process to improve Pittsburgh’s reputation (73):

The air in Pittsburgh had been dirty; now we could see it was clean. An enormous, pioneering urban renewal was under way […] The Republican Richard King Mellon had approached Pittsburgh’s Democratic, Catholic mayor, David L. Lawrence, and together with a dozen business leaders they were razing the old grim city and building a sparkling new one; they were washing the very air. (169)
According to Lawrence, the city “welcomed tomorrow,” and focused full force on the future, “because yesterday was hard and unlovely” (373). Once an industrial capital, Pittsburgh was being held to new standards of social, cultural, and technological advancement. Failure to achieve such advancements was to be branded a “has-been city”—the threat of which inspired a momentum in city development that took precedence over restraint (Teaford 2).

While efforts to improve the city’s reputation were successful, Dillard begins to notice that leaders of the Pittsburgh Renaissance were “racing time” with “no inclination to look back” and with “no nostalgia for the past” (Lawrence 373). Anxious to rid the city of its history tarnished with soot and smog, city planners erected buildings of stainless steel and aluminum with “little time” for the “niceties of architectural criticism” (373). This is evident in Dillard’s description of playing among “Millionaires’ encrusted mansions” that she says are “now obsolete and turned into parks or art centers” (75). She describes the moguls’ houses as “restful as tombs” and describes Henry Frick’s daughter in her “proud, sinking mansion” (76). These images portray an era of icons fading and forgotten, implying that Pittsburgh’s legacy and identity are being buried in its renaissance.

The dynasty of Pittsburgh’s founding fathers, though a mark of pride, was of little concern to city leaders who were “racing time” with money in their hands to meet the standards of the postwar American urban center (Lawrence 373). According to Dillard, the city’s “galleries, universities, hospitals, churches, Carnegie libraries, the Carnegie Museum, Frick Park, Mellon Park,” all of which stand to commemorate the achievements of the nineteenth-century industrialists, are “absolute artifacts of philanthropy” (75).
Dillard repeatedly suggests that Pittsburgh’s prime is its past and implies a sentimental resistance to change. For example, as a child she takes pride in the founding fathers, “those fabulous men” who had lived in her neighborhood and had roamed her “stomping grounds” (75). Now, everywhere she looks, she says, “it was the Valley of the Kings, their dynasty just ended, and their monuments intact but already out of fashion” (75). As a result, Dillard is left with reminders of the city’s past and of her childhood, which lead her to dig, believing “if you dug far enough,” you would find the “old Pittsburgh” where it lay “beneath the new city” (73). Just as her mother “continually remodeled” their houses, knocking out walls and discovering “brick walls under the plaster” and “oak planks under the brick,” the image of digging implies discovery and an attempt to recover the city’s past (73).

Digging is a consistent image in Dillard’s memoir, which signifies her efforts to uncover a version of Pittsburgh untouched by urban planners. A poem that she memorizes at school reinforces her notion that history is hidden beneath the city layers: “Where we live and work today/Indian children used to play—/All about our native land/Where the shops and houses stand” (Dillard 123). Convinced that there are secrets to be uncovered, Dillard suggests she must dig to rescue the real identity of the city:

Who knew what lay inside the streaked hillsides under the high-porched workers’ houses, under the streetcar tracks, under the flat or sloping greens of the country-club golf courses, under the dancing-school building, the trout-stocked streams in the highlands or the dried-out stream under the bridge in Frick Park, under the sled-riding hills, the Ellis School, the stained opened cuts on the boulevard roadsides into town—who knew? (146)
With each discovery, Dillard suggests that renaissance leaders “took pleasure in the swing of the headache ball and the crash of falling brick,” a notion reiterated by Pittsburgh historians (Lawrence 373). In the process of implementing plans for renewal, city planners single-mindedly “counted the gains and shrugged off the losses, not worshipping, not even respecting landmarks” (373). Bridges were torn down “without a second thought,” and a tunnel through a mountain was rationalized as “the most natural kind of highway in the world” (373). In an effort to expose and preserve the secrets of Pittsburgh’s history, Dillard digs in a “half-forbidden, forsaken place far removed from the ordinary comings and goings of people who earned salaries in the light” (Dillard 41). By shedding light on the risks of renaissance, she suggests that Pittsburghers are oblivious to what is being lost in the wake of progress.

For Dillard, the flaw of urban renewal was the tendency to recklessly bury Pittsburgh’s past in the process of reinventing the city. Consistently throughout her memoir, she suggests resistance to displacing familiarity with urbanization—on both physical and social levels. For example, she defends the “orange, clangy, beloved” streetcars on Penn Avenue, even though they were “loud, jerky, and old” (Dillard 103). Her description of the streetcars as “powerless beasts compelled to travel stupidly with their wheels stuck in the tracks below them” resembles the city on its road to renaissance (103). Like a horse wearing blinders, each streetcar has “one central headlight,” which shines “fixedly down its tracks and nowhere else” (103). When the tracks turn a corner, like the city, “the witless streetcar had to follow” (103).

In the early twentieth century, Pittsburghers arranged their businesses where the “web of streetcar lines was densest” (Teaford 4). Following the war, city streets
converted to accommodate new transportation, burying streetcar tracks with asphalt to make way for cars. Dillard defends her city and suggests resistance to burying its history in her description of the streetcars' encounter with cars that blocked their paths:

> Every day at a hundred intersections they locked horns with cars that blocked their paths—cars driven by insensible, semiconscious people, people who had just moved to town, teenagers learning to drive, the dread Ohio drivers, people sunk in rapturous conversation. (Dillard 105)

The description suggests the "insensible" and "semiconscious" people who just moved to town, who just learned to drive, or who are simply preoccupied, are oblivious to the tracks that lie beneath their tires. The only indication of the streetcar's presence is the "mournful bell" that sounds when a car blocks its path (103).

Attaching a history to every change, Dillard attempts to salvage the memory of the city layers. When city workers pave cobblestone streets and cover the streetcar tracks, she extricates their history from the blanket of asphalt. For example, seeing the buried cobblestones, she recalls that in the nineteenth century, "children had earned pennies by dragging them" from the riverbeds and "selling them to paving contractors" (Dillard 104). Above the paved streets, she describes the "overhead network of wires" forming a "loose-roofed tunnel" over Penn Avenue as a reminder of the streetcars that used to run on the tracks below (104). From the author's perspective looking up, the wires cut the sky into "rectangles inside which you could compose various views as you walked" (104). Echoing the "bygone dependence on the streetcar," the image portrays Dillard looking up from below the newest layer of Pittsburgh (Teaford 4).
Suggesting that Pittsburgh is built on a noble past and a rich history that is being buried in renaissance, Dillard compares the Steel City to “Rome, or Jericho,” where only remnants of the original landscape are revealed with each reinvention (73). Similarly, she says, in Pittsburgh “If you dug, you found things” (73). Like an old piece of parchment that has been etched and erased, Dillard calls Pittsburgh “a palimpsest,” describing its layers of history as a “sliding pile of cities built ever nearer the sky, and rising ever higher over the rivers” (73). Skeptical of the city’s renaissance, she digs in an attempt to preserve Pittsburgh’s identity from the pull of blind progression. In doing so, she identifies with the city in its struggle against urbanization, saying “It was your whole body that knew those sidewalks and streets,” and “Your bones ached with them” (104). While attempting to protect the history of the city from postwar urbanization, Dillard realizes she must also detach herself from social expectations in order to escape being defined by the city.

Class & Gender Expectations

By 1955, ten years had passed since the end of World War II, since Mayor David L. Lawrence took office, since Dillard’s birth, and since the declaration of Pittsburgh’s rebirth. In her memoir, Dillard consistently refers to moments when awareness dawned on her during her ten years of childhood. Looking back on her discoveries as a child, she describes herself as “just waking up then, just barely” (Dillard 10). At first, she says she “woke in bits,” then her intervals of waking “tipped the scales,” and she was “more awake than not” (11). Fearing the day when she would be “awake continuously” without ever being “free” of herself again, suggests her hesitation to confront the reality that she
is defined by her urban environment (11). Just as she discovers Pittsburgh's history buried beneath the new layer of renaissance, she finds that "The great outer world hove into view and began to fill with things that had apparently been there all along" (11). As Dillard becomes aware of herself and of the changes around her, she realizes life is already in progress, and like Pittsburgh, her future is defined by expectations.

On several occasions, Dillard suggests a sense of betrayal, realizing she was oblivious of her surroundings and her past. In hindsight she says, "Children ten years old wake up and find themselves here, discover themselves to have been here all along" (Dillard 11). Suggesting a sense of deceit, she asks, "is this sad?" (11):

They know the neighborhood, they can read and write English, they are old hands at the commonplace mysteries, and yet they feel themselves to have just stepped off the boat, just converged with their bodies, just flown down from a trance, to lodge in an eerily familiar life already well under way. (11)

Prior to awakening, Dillard compares life to that of a sleepwalker that wakes "in full stride" or "like people brought back from cardiac arrest or from drowning" (11). Comparing the dawning of her experiences to rude awakenings suggests her desire to learn everything there is to know that to her is still unknown.

Suddenly aware of time and her place in it, Dillard refers to her past and the city's history as a time when she was asleep, which suggests her heightened sense of awareness has replaced her childhood propensity for acceptance. Now that she is awake, she realizes she "breathed the air of history all unaware, and walked oblivious through its littered layers" (Dillard 74). As each experience dawns on Dillard, she is torn between gaining full awareness of her identity and escaping herself altogether to avoid the torment
of discovering something else she does not know. At the same time, she says the “heart-stopping” transition from childhood to awakening becomes an intriguing shift between “seeing and knowing you see, between being and knowing you be (17). The transition leads to a desire for discovery and identity, one that she says “drives you to a life of concentration,” a life in which “effort draws you down so very deep that when you surface you twist up exhilarated with a yelp and a gasp” (17). For Dillard, awareness means claiming her own identity and detaching herself from the pull of urbanization and expectation imposed on her while she was “sleeping.”

According to Dillard a child is “asleep” and must shed her childhood in order to identify herself as separate from the environment in which she lives (74). By recognizing her own identity, she gains an understanding of “the nation, the city, the neighborhood, the house where the family lives” as the setting of her life or as a “project living people willed” into existence (74). Dillard’s revelation of consciousness suggests she has a new perspective of the city and of herself, which recalls her vision of Pittsburgh in its natural setting, in which she subtracts the social and cultural aspects that bring it to life. Disconnecting her own identity from her urban setting, she realizes that Pittsburgh is not just a physical landscape of buildings, hills, and rivers but is a “project” willed into motion by the social, cultural, and economic forces steering its direction and development (74).

As elements of Pittsburgh’s history and identity emerge, Dillard begins to realize that, like the city, she is an empty landscape that will be defined by urbanization unless she embraces her awareness and begins to question what the “project” has in store for her
Upon making her own discoveries of the city’s history, she becomes skeptical of what she is taught in school:

Outside in the neighborhoods, learning our way around the streets, we played among the enormous stone monuments of the millionaires—both those tireless Pittsburgh founders of the heavy industries from which the nation’s wealth derived (they told us at school) and the industrialists’ couldn’t-lose bankers and backers, all of whom began as canny boys, the stories of whose rises to riches adults still considered inspirational to children. (74)

Here, Dillard acknowledges (in parentheses) that her version of history is potentially biased or perhaps inflated since it is based on information given to her at school rather than on her own experiences. Old monuments suggest millionaires existed, yet whether or not the Pittsburgh founders were “tireless” or if they began as “canny boys” is questionable as far as she is concerned, because at the time she was asleep (74). Her tone suggests that she recognizes the motive behind the stories of the millionaires and their “rises to riches” (74). She says adults “still” consider the stories to be “inspirational” but implies that she is aware there are expectations affixed to the hope of inspiring sleeping children (74).

In the details of Dillard’s memoir, it becomes evident that adults are preparing the next generation to be leaders responsible for the future of urban development and success. This is evident early on as Dillard refers to the adults who are in charge of the city now, saying in some sense they “owned us,” just as they “owned the world” (24). She suggests children are conditioned in an effort to maintain the social class and expectations of their parents. For example, the life prescribed for Dillard includes
dancing school, then eventually, the “Sewickley Country Club subscription dinner dance” where she mingles with boys of high society (186). Private school and dancing class were not uncommon for boys and girls privileged enough to attend, however, it becomes apparent through Dillard’s observations that the social roles they are expected to fill are defined by gender.

Dillard and her girlfriends experience a different version of the prescribed urban life than that of their male classmates. For example, she says she and her friends are not concerned with “The life of Pittsburgh” or “the United States” or “assorted foreign continents” (Dillard 91). In contrast, she says the boys held a greater responsibility and must have known they would “inherit corporate Pittsburgh, as indeed they have” (92). She says, “These were boys who wore ties from the moment their mothers could locate their necks” (92). Conditioned by their parents, teachers, and dance school instructors, she says the boys are expected to navigate Pittsburgh’s future:

They must have known that it was theirs by rights as boys, a real world, about which they had best start becoming informed. And they must have known, too, as Pittsburgh Presbyterian boys, that they could only just barely steal a few hours now, a few years now, to kid around, to dribble basketballs and explode firecrackers, before they were due to make a down payment on a suitable house. (92)

According to Dillard, the boys are the successors of Pittsburgh and would one day be responsible for providing a home for their wives and children. While women hoped for change in postwar America, she affirms that gender expectations continue to steer the future under the assumption that the world belonged to the boys by their “rights as boys”
Echoing the projected forecast of parents and teachers, she says the boys would soon “enter investment banking” and assume their positions in the “management of Fortune 500 corporations” (92). Having to spend their spare time serving on the boards of “schools, hospitals, country clubs, and churches,” Dillard says it is no wonder the boys “laughed so hard” as children (92). Their time was limited.

Surrounded by the future leaders of Pittsburgh at dancing school, Dillard questions whether the boys are aware of the life being assigned to them. She wonders if the “oddball boys” who have not inherited Pittsburgh long to “star in the world of money and urban power”—and if those who have inherited it long to escape (Dillard 93). Whether or not the boys are aware, Dillard suggests that their paths bear a striking resemblance to their father’s footsteps. For example, she comments on the wealthy boys who attend the prestigious Shady Side Academy just like their fathers did in the “area of fine houses, expensive apartments, and fashionable shops” (161). To Dillard, Shadyside is a neighborhood where people like her were “expected to settle after college, renting an apartment until they married one of the boys and bought a house” (161). While she seems to be aware of her assigned role in her small urban world, she suggests a sense of envy for the boys who constantly make reference to the “larger world” where they dwell and where the girls “longed to go” (186).

Perhaps envious of the boys’ role in the “larger world” or impervious to the likes of social conditioning, Dillard resists the boys from the wealthy neighborhoods of Fox Chapel and Sewickley calling them “overbred as a collie” (188). This is evident in her attraction to a wealthy boy who rebels against social constraints by hanging around in the Hill District, Pittsburgh’s “cruelest and coolest black ghetto, where more babies died than
anywhere else in the United States” (189). In the Hill District, the boy goes to
whorehouses—which she describes as “bold, evil, original” and says, “Our own boys
would never think of that” (189). Suggesting her own desire to escape the role mapped
out for her by society, Dillard prefers the daring and uncivilized behavior of the
rebellious boys compared to the less interesting manners of the boys refined by their
fathers.

Children are not the only people conditioned to fill specific slots in the urban
world. Dillard suggests everyone in the city is assigned a social slot which they are
expected to fill as determined by sex, color, and status, though some overlap based on
gender. For example, she says during her childhood most women “volunteered,
organized the households, and reared the kids; they kept the traditions, and taught by
example a dozen kinds of love” (Dillard 215). The irony is there were no instructions for
the assignments, “No page of any book described housework, and no one mentioned it; it
didn’t exist,” yet some women assumed the role, and others did not (216). In Dillard’s
house, “Mother polished the brass, wiped the ashtrays,” and “Margaret Butler,” their
family help, “washed the windows” (215). In contrast, she says a woman at their country
club and “a prominent figure” at their church, “never washed her face all summer, to
preserve her tan” (216). Dillard says those women are married to “pale men” who are
rarely seen since they are off “pulling down the money on which the whole scene
floated” (216). Capturing her image of high society men and women, Dillard says most
wealthy men come home “exhausted in their gray suits to scantily clad women smelling
of Bain de Soleil, and do-nothing tanned kids in Madra shorts” (216). Dillard says, “This
was the known world” (215).
Social slots extend beyond the boundaries of the country club and become evident to Dillard in church. Contrasting the image of a “rural” Christ above the nave of the church with the women below in their “mink and sable stools,” she suggests hypocrisy in the privileged display of urban success and old money (Dillard 194). The contradiction emerges among familiar faces as she realizes, “I knew these men; they were friends and neighbors” (193). Now that she is aware of her surroundings, her new perspective illuminates the lines of class and gender separation and reveals the pressure both men and women endure as a result. She says, “Always, the same old Pittsburgh families ran this church,”—the men “for whose forefathers streets all over town were named” and whose wives “ran the Christmas bazaar” (193). Church, she realizes, is as much a spectacle as her high-society dances, a place where men make “business connections” while their high class families “saw and were seen” (197). Realizing the families are there “to display to each other their clothes,” Dillard becomes infuriated with the display of wealth in front of her (197).

Under the mink coats and behind the close-mouthed faces, Dillard imagines the families burning with desire to escape the expectations of their urban society. Adults in particular, she says “accumulate dignity” by being seen every Sunday at church, just as they maintain their status at “club luncheons, dinners, and dances” (Dillard 194). Suggesting status is a chore, she says the adults maintain their urban dignity by “gracefully and persistently, with tidy hair and fitted clothes, occupying their slots” (194). Dillard reiterates this in her description of the business men in church with their “shoulders and knuckles tight” and their laughter “high and embarrassed” as if they are “looking around for the entrance to some other life (194). Believing they are all
“trapped,” she imagines the boys “struggling foredoomed to raise the stone and walnut weight of this dead society’s dead institutions” (192). In their battle for “liberty, freedom of conscience, and so forth,” the children silently resist conformity by escaping to their imaginations (192).

**Non-Urban Escape**

Throughout Dillard’s memoir, escape to a non-urban realm, whether physical or imaginative, proves to be effective in providing freedom from the constraints of the urban world and influential in presenting a new perspective upon her return. Regardless of the means of her escape, whether books, a day at the park, or a weekend in the country, she returns to the urban world with greater insight into its progression. Escape is a notion that she introduces early in her memoir through a story about her father, Frank Doak, but does not come to fully understand until she experiences it for herself. She describes her father’s passion for books and how his reading “went to his head” (Dillard 6). For example, after reading *Life on the Mississippi* for years, he quits his job as a young executive working in the family firm and leaves the city via the Allegheny and Ohio Rivers, Mark Twain-style on a cabin cruiser headed to New Orleans, home of his favorite Dixieland jazz. Carried away by his imagination and his desire to experience the worlds he discovers in books, Dillard’s father follows in Twain’s footsteps and escapes with his expectations preceding him.

Inspired by *Life on the Mississippi*, Doak’s journey suggests that, like Twain he struggles with the transition from an “agrarian to an urban America” and seeks to break free and see the worlds he reads about in books (Lehan 186). Twain sought to avoid
urban America and created fictional escapes from the cities that he felt were “repressing the inner life of individuals” causing them to conceal their “true state of mind” (186). Suggesting escape from the city would free the mind, Dillard’s father pursues greener grass in New Orleans where he hopes the music would “smell like the river itself,” like a “thicker, older version of the Allegheny River at Pittsburgh” (Dillard 7). Within six weeks, his escape turns to loneliness causing him to sell his boat and fly back to Pittsburgh where he becomes “ensconced tamed in the household again” (102). The significance of her father’s short journey comes full circle in her memoir, as she follows in his footsteps—not to New Orleans but in pursuit of her own identity through detachment from the city in the form of escape.

While the city is swept away in the changes of renaissance, Dillard, like Twain and her father, uses her imagination to escape the evolution of the urban and to preserve her own identity. While her father is away, she begins her own journey by “vanishing from the known world into the passive abyss of reading” (Dillard 80). In books, she becomes aware of time “in full stream” and begins to feel consciousness “joining it, like the rivers” (69). As a result, she says her imagination “expands and fills” and “even begins to hear rumors, from beyond the horizon skin’s rim, of nations and wars” (86). In contrast to understanding the city through digging, she discovers worlds beyond Pittsburgh through books, which she says “swept” her away “this way and that” (85). Reading is her escape to the mind, which she accurately describes as the place “where words met imagination without passing through world” (120). By removing “world” from the equation, Dillard frees her mind from the urban expectations that influence her identity.
Emphasizing her fascination with imagination, Dillard becomes “fiercely addicted” to the notion of defying constraints and uncovering the unknown through books (120). Realizing her imagination is beyond urban reach and can be accessed by her will without regulation from the outside world, she relishes her sense of freedom, saying parents have “no idea what children are up to in their bedrooms” (120). She says they are reading the same paragraphs “over and over in a stupor” and would continue even “if the house caught fire” (120). Dillard suggests books offer more opportunity and freedom for children than reality, because there are no boundaries in the imagination to regulate time, place, or behavior.

By comparison to their imaginations, Dillard says children “hate the actual world,” calling it a “tedious plane” where “the boring body” dwells and goes to school (120). She describes the “boring body” as having no identity as it merely “houses the eyes to read the books” and “houses the heart the books enflame” (120-121). The description recalls the earlier image of Pittsburgh in its most natural setting, as a shell without contents, stripped of the elements of urban development. Similarly, Dillard suggests a child without imagination is an empty landscape. Just as cultural, social, and economic elements identify a landscape as urban; imagination identifies the body as separate from landscape and free to escape to other worlds. Without access to outside worlds, she says the “very boring body” seems to require a “very boring world to keep it up” (121). The “boring world” she says is a limited world where you have to “do time like a prisoner, always looking for a chance to slip away, to escape back home to books, or escape back home to any concentration—fanciful, mental, or physical—where you can lose yourself at last” (121).
Like her father’s journey down the river, Dillard’s discovers a sense of detachment through books as well as a perspective that transcends social, economic, and racial urban boundaries. The Homewood branch of Pittsburgh’s Carnegie Library system is Dillard’s nearest childhood library and is in a “Negro section of town,” where she only “very rarely saw other white people” (Dillard 80). There she learns “every sort of surprising thing—some of it, though not much of it, from the books themselves” (80).

For example, a list of names on the due-date card of *The Field Book of Ponds and Streams* indicates to her that she and the author are not alone in the world. Together, they share their enthusiasm for “dragonfly larvae and single-celled plants” with “apparently, many Negro adults” who were reading the book “every year, even during the war” (82-83). The due-date card serves as an escape for Dillard as she sees her name next to theirs and imagines belonging to the community of Homewood readers. “There we all were,” she says (83).

Feeling a relation to her fellow readers, Dillard wants to contact the people on the list to “cheer” them up, assuming they also find “pickings pretty slim in Pittsburgh” (83). In her head, the people of Homewood, “some of whom lived in visible poverty, on crowded streets among burned-out-houses” dream of ponds and streams like she does (83). She imagines they, like her, were “saving to buy microscopes” and “fashioned plankton nets in their bedrooms” (83). Through a similar interest and a connection on a due-date card, Dillard imagines dissolving the social, economic and racial boundaries that separate her from the residents of Homewood. On the due-date card, they share a common interest in the non-urban world of imagination where race and rank are irrelevant. “It is not fair,” she says (83).
Finding a sense of freedom in the library and in her imagination, Dillard turns back to her hometown of Pittsburgh with a new perspective, suggesting the real world does not compare to the experiences she has in books. She calls it a relief “to turn from life to something important” (Dillard 180). Instead, she is in Pittsburgh where she finds herself surrounded by superficiality infused by urban expectations:

Here, instead, I saw polished fingernails clicking, rings flashing, gold bangle bracelets banging and ringing together as sixteen-year-old girls like me pushed their cuticles back, as they ran combs through their just washed, just-cut, just-set hair, as they lighted their Marlboros with hard snaps of heavy lighters, and talked about other girls or hair. (215)

Books enlighten Dillard and send her “reeling back to the world,” making her less tolerant of the urban reality that surrounds her (160). As a result, she questions the life prescribed for her in Pittsburgh and wonders if she is still the same person who was supposed to “buy a house in Point Breeze, and send [her] children to dancing school” (184). Eventually, she says, books would “propel” her “right out of Pittsburgh altogether” (214).

In the meantime, spending a weekend away in the country provides a similar sense of freedom for Dillard, as she physically escapes to a non-urban setting away from the weight of the city. She suggests the rural countryside is a non-urban outlet where city folk can lose themselves in natural and intuitive behavior and feel free from social expectations, class hierarchy, and urban constraints. Dillard’s description of the non-urban outlet reflects Lehan’s image of the city as “surrounded by a glass wall that divides the rational from the irrational, the urban from the wilderness” (157). The image depicts
a barrier between nature and the urban center, implying a conscious effort to separate the
two from contaminating each other. While the wall implies a barrier, the glass suggests a
taunting view of what is natural, wild, and unattainable. According to Lehan, the
collapse of the wall would lead to “the reunion of humanity and nature,” also known as
“the reconciliation of reason and intuition” (157). Rather than collapsing the wall,
Dillard echoes a similar notion of escaping reason and embracing intuition in her
description of how high-society Pittsburghers hold themselves to lesser standards while
they are away from the city.

For Dillard, the contrast between urban and non-urban behavior surfaces at a
summer home on Lake Erie where she describes her paternal grandparents, who dined
“rather formally” in Pittsburgh, as less refined at the lake (57). As a “proud descendant
and heir of well-to-do Germans in Louisville, Kentucky,” her grandmother “boasted that
she never worked a day in her life” (57). Having grown up “in some luxury,” she says
her grandmother has “something Victorian about her,” yet at the lake her behavior is
“less imposing” (60-61). At the lake, her grandmother trades in her high heels, jewelry,
silk, linen, and “slithering mink coats” for “cotton sundresses and low-heeled sandals”
(61). Barely resembling the “imposing” and “formidable woman” she is in Pittsburgh,
Dillard says of the lake, her grandmother “relaxed there” (61). The difference in her
grandmother’s appearance and behavior at the lake suggests she escapes the urban barrier
and reunites with intuition, undefined by social standards.

Similarly, Dillard describes a weekend trip to her friend Judy Schoyer’s family
farmhouse in the country, where the fresh non-urban air has an effect on those who are
less likely to be themselves in the city. For example, she says, “In Pittsburgh” Judy was a
shy girl who “couldn’t catch a ball” and “perished of bashfulness at school sports” (153).

Four hours from Pittsburgh on the family farm, she says, Judy could climb a tree “as smoothly as a squirrel” and could “run down her nasty kicking pony with authority [. . .] and scoop up running hens with both swift arms” (153). Judy’s family belongs to “the oldest, most liberal, and best-educated ranks of Pittsburgh society,” which suggests that like Dillard’s grandmother, expectations confine her in the city. In the country, Judy escapes reason and behaves as if a weight is lifted.

In Pittsburgh, Dillard says she is “Packed into the procession,” reiterating the notion that her path is predetermined (215). In contrast, when she escapes to the non-urban setting, she says she begins her “lifelong task” of “tuning” her own “gauges” (155). This suggests that like the untouchable freedom she finds in her imagination, beyond city limits she is released from urban restrictions. For example, at the farm the children are allowed to stay “alone” in a log cabin “many fields away from the big house” (152).

Possessing a sense of freedom at the farm and gaining knowledge of the larger world beyond Pittsburgh’s city limits, Dillard’s desire for detachment becomes stronger. She says she could no longer see the world as a “backdrop” to her “private play” (157). Instead, she says she accidentally uncovered “vast and labyrinthine further worlds” within her own (157). As she becomes aware of the worlds beyond Pittsburgh, she discovers her own identity and understands the urbanity that defines the city. Pittsburgh is no longer an empty landscape to Dillard but is an intricate concoction of lives, beliefs, triumphs and failures, all of which rest on the shoulders of the men, women, and children who play their parts and fill their slots.
Chapter Two: Post-Renaissance Pittsburgh in Michael Chabon’s *Wonder Boys*

Smokestacks that once defined Pittsburgh as an industrial power and tarnished its reputation with soot, now serve as a reminder of its illustrious transformation into an academic town filled with writers, artists, and scientists. Since the air was cleared during the city’s renaissance following World War II, the Steel City has gradually and unexpectedly transformed into an academic, creative, and technologically advanced community guided by its colleges and universities (Campbell 646). Like Dillard’s postwar childhood, the city’s industrial roots were buried in renaissance and its future driven by expectations. As a result, the city struggled to shake the shadow of its grimy past and redefine itself into a thriving cultural center (662). Home of Michael Chabon’s *Wonder Boys*, Pittsburgh plays a subtle yet significant role in the lives of the characters who, like the city, strive to detach themselves from their pasts by redefining their identities.

Written in 1995 as a present-day fiction, *Wonder Boys* is set during Pittsburgh’s post-renaissance period when the city’s stability and economic growth depended upon the research and development of its technological and academic institutions (Campbell 642). In the mid-seventies over 70,000 students attended schools of higher learning in the city, affirming the belief that one day Pittsburgh’s reputation would transition from “the steel city” into the “university town” (Lorant, “Levelling Off” 493). With more than twenty-nine colleges and universities in the area and nine within the city limits, the economic foundation of the blue collar steel capital began to shift (“Renaissance II” 600, 626). When the city’s steel industry declined in 1987, Mayor Caliguiri directed economic revitalization efforts toward technology and the promotion of Pittsburgh’s educational
and medical centers (614). Pittsburgh was headed in a new direction and its residents were excited to create a new version of their hometown—"a city their grandfathers never dreamed possible" ("Levelling Off" 449). By the 1990s, Pittsburgh had become one of the top technology development centers in the country, inspiring its "homegrown entrepreneurs" to stay in or return to the city to pursue careers (Campbell 652).

*Wonder Boys* captures Pittsburgh's transition to academia and appropriately centers on the fictional character Grady Tripp, a published writer and native of the city, who abandons his hometown as a teenager and returns as a professor of Creative Writing at the University of Pittsburgh. Significantly, Grady returns to Pittsburgh during its academic prime and following the years of its industrial decline when the city was lost and employment was scarce. Resembling Dillard's image of a buried city, remnants of Pittsburgh's history linger in the novel as Grady narrates making reference to landmarks and city streets in a tone that assumes a sense of familiarity. Written in the past tense he tells his story through recollection, consistently stumbling across reminders of his past successes and failures lingering like landmarks and confusing his identity.

Unlike in Dillard's memoir, the significance of Pittsburgh's role is not remarkably evident in the structure of Chabon's sentences but rather in the characters' relations to the city, in their detachment from the past, and in the way they redefine themselves to accommodate social expectations. While Dillard's memoir animates Pittsburgh as a character in her book, the city is a subtle backdrop in Chabon's novel. Dillard's rich descriptions suggest a city buzzing with people and commerce, yet in Chabon's city, the streets are empty and filled with debris echoing bygone days. Spanning the length of her childhood in the fifties, Dillard's memoir describes the burial of the city's past through
phases of oblivion, awareness, acknowledgment, and escape. In stark contrast, Chabon’s fiction takes place fifty years later, spanning a period of three days, and by the end, suggests an image of Pittsburgh emerging from its postwar burial mound and dusting off its sooty past.

The story of Wonder Boys is rooted in expectations and follows each character’s struggle to detach himself from the imposed ideals of his predecessors’ mistakes. For Dillard, detachment means finding her identity by separating herself from the urban renaissance that blindly buries her past and the city’s history. In contrast, Chabon’s characters are already disconnected from the city and struggle to latch on to a sense of home in post-renaissance Pittsburgh by living double lives. Despite their differences, both accounts reflect Pittsburgh’s struggle to separate its identity from its industrial roots and its desire to redefine itself in the wake of its founders’ failures and successes. By exploring each character’s resistance to urban expectations and the dual identities each has created as a means of escape, I hope to draw a parallel between Pittsburgh’s post-renaissance presence in Chabon’s fiction and Dillard’s post-World War II version of Pittsburgh’s prime.

Living Up to Legacy

Pittsburgh’s postwar transformation was a process of redefining its identity while shedding its industrial reputation. After World War II, city leaders accomplished the first steps toward revitalization by clearing the air and controlling the flooding and pollution of the rivers (Lorant, “Renaissance II” 553). Progress began to level off, however, when renaissance leader, David L. Lawrence died in 1966 followed by his financial
counterpart, Richard King Mellon in 1970, leaving the city with a legacy to live up to ("Levelling Off" 463). In order to redefine its image, Pittsburgh had to detach itself from the successes and failures of its past and prepare for the future.

Mayor Caliguiri responded to Pittsburgh’s revitalization needs in 1980 with plans for a second renaissance (Lorant, "Renaissance II" 553). According to Lorant, Renaissance II was "more than brick and mortar" and went beyond constructing new office buildings (564). The program was meant to be a "comprehensive philosophical concept" geared toward "a new kind of environment" (564). The environment would pay homage to Pittsburgh’s reputation as "a city of steel, a city of coal, a city of glass, a city of corporations, a city of the Mellons’, of the Heinz’s, of the Hillman’s," but it would also redefine it as "a city of culture, a city of vital research for the country, a city of universities, a city of music and art" (574). The challenge of Pittsburgh’s second renaissance was attempting to balance the city’s dual identities as a steel capital with a blue-collar history and an academic town with a white-collar future. Likewise, Chabon’s Wonder Boys is a story of renaissance, in which his characters struggle to achieve balance between dual identities. Pittsburgh’s history and Chabon’s fiction are both stories of transition from a grimy past to an uncertain future, and both are predefined by urban expectations.

Wonder Boys is the story of Grady Tripp’s transition from published author to a writer who must redefine himself in order to live up to his past successes. It is the story of his renaissance and his struggle to choose an ending. For Grady, the culmination of two failed marriages, an affair that is more stable than his third marriage and a novel with no end in sight comes to a head over the course of one weekend. With all of this, in
addition to losing his mother in infancy and his father to suicide, he says he has not
gotten used to "the breathtaking impermanence of things" (Chabon 45). Rather than
establishing stability by the age of forty-one, Grady has created a void in his life,
misdirected by false hopes and the desire for a place to call home. Buried in multiple
identities and grappling with the expectations of his students, his editor, his wives, and
his pregnant mistress, Grady gets lost in his web of fiction and struggles to embrace
reality. The only thing that remains "inalterable and permanent" in his life is his fictional
and unfinished fourth novel *Wonder Boys*, which looms as an expectation behind every
character interaction, desperate for coherence and direction (45).

The fictional novel is the product of Grady’s renaissance and is the story in past
tense of how his transformation came to be. In the aftermath of his successful third novel
for which he won a "PEN award," his publisher banked hopes on a fourth novel, which
Grady called *Wonder Boys* (Chabon 12). Inspired by the advance reward he receives in
anticipation of its publication, Grady rides the wave of his previous achievements and
assumes his capability to effortlessly meet his editor’s aspirations for a new successful
novel. Meanwhile, he suggests that his future, like his novel, is driven by lofty
expectations with nothing substantial to carry the weight. For example, he says *Wonder
Boys* is a title he “invented” out of “air and brain-sparkle while pissing into the aluminum
trough of a men’s room at Three Rivers Stadium” (12). In an effort to live up to his
previous legacy, Grady drains the life out of his reality and buries himself in the task of
producing a publishable cult favorite. As a result, just as Dillard escapes to her
imagination, Grady plunges into his fictional world of incoherence, leaving only a
shadow of himself to assume the various roles expected of his editor, lover, wife, and students.

Resembling Pittsburgh in the midst of its industrial decline with its future defined by urban expectations, Grady’s reality becomes an empty shell desperate for an identity. The question of his success and the anticipation for his novel were “haunting every gathering,” and thwarting any attempt to “sit down [. . .] and plan for the future” (Chabon 225). He says, “I saw how lonely a pursuit the writing of Wonder Boys had become, how sequestered and directionless and blind” (259). Rather than a lack of motivation, inspiration, or material, Grady claims to have too much to write and struggles to surface from the fictional world he creates:

I had too much to write: too many fine and miserable buildings to construct and streets to name and clock towers to set chiming, too many characters to raise up from the dirt like flowers whose petals I peeled down to the intricate frail organs within, too many terrible genetic and fiduciary secrets to dig up and bury and dig up again . . . (12)

By creating a fictional and consuming world where he sets things into motion, Grady establishes a sense of consistency and permanence in his life. Meanwhile, the girth of his manuscript, which stands far from completion at about “two thousand six hundred and eleven pages,” reveals a rampant desperation for direction, not just in his novel but in his life (12).

Like the city, Grady’s past was his prime as an author, leaving his future open-ended and under the direction of expectations. As a result, the pages of his unfinished novel become the layers of fiction that bury his reality. He says after years of writing, he
is "nowhere near the end," because his characters "had not even reached their zeniths" (Chabon 12). The reality is the people who surround him become the characters in his book. They all have an idealized image of Grady, which becomes the basis for his identity as writer, professor, lover, and husband. Coasting on their confidence and on the success of his three previous novels, Grady is confronted with the reality that his identity is based on false hopes for a man he used to be. His wife left him, his boss's wife is pregnant with his child, and his editor is doomed to lose his job unless Grady's endless novel is publishable. By surfacing to the real world and confronting his reality, Grady realizes they are all awaiting his next move. Their "zeniths" depend on him (12). Like Dillard, he must first detach himself from their expectations in order to find his own identity. As a result, the process of writing their endings becomes the story of his novel and the journey of his renaissance.

Though we know the story ends with Grady's renaissance and the publication of Wonder Boys, the culmination of failures, successes, and escapes from which they emerge provides a parallel to post-renaissance Pittsburgh's history of pinnacles and pitfalls. Reflective of its fictional author, Grady's novel is disjointed at times suggesting a sense of desperation for clarity, direction, and coherence. The story staggers toward its defining conclusion just as Pittsburgh stumbled through its transition from industry to academia. Similar to Dillard's non-urban escapes from the city, Grady alleviates pressure by removing himself from non-fiction situations. As a result, elements of escape serve as the novel's cohesive core, providing momentum when direction is lost for the readers as well as the characters.
Escaping, or in Grady’s case, temporarily fogging reality allows him to avoid confrontation, leaving the characters around him like his book, without an ending. For example, while he “surrendered many vices” over the years, Grady says he and marijuana remain “steadfast companions” (Chabon 7). This is evident in his description of an “idyllic half hour” in which he sits in the airport parking garage “smoking a fatty” and listening to “Ahmad Jamal,” a jazz pianist from Pittsburgh (7). Similarly, he says, the “warm ache of codeine” eases the pain of his dog-bitten foot but more notably serves as a coping mechanism to lessen the weight of responsibility:

I wasn’t worrying about the tiny zygote rolling like a satellite through the starry dome of Sara’s womb, or about the marriage that was falling apart around me, or about the derailment of Crabtree’s career, or about the dead animal turning hard in the trunk of my car; and most of all I was not thinking about Wonder Boys. (77)

Grady’s behavior toward reality is reflective of his feelings for sobriety, which he says leads him to discover the “sad truth” about parties (43). He says, “A sober man at a party is lonely as a journalist, implacable as a coroner, bitter as an angel looking down from heaven” (43). In addition, he calls it “purely foolish” to attend any gathering without the benefit of “some kind of philter or magic dust to blind you and weaken your critical faculties” (43). This suggests Grady’s preference to escape to an alternative or fictional reality as opposed to confronting his uncertain future.

Several instances in the novel indicate that Grady uses a “philter” to bury his past, as well as to fog the reality of his present (Chabon 43). When he ran away from his grandmother’s home in 1968, the “somber hills, towns, and crooked spires” of western Pennsylvania were still alive with industry (17). Twenty-five years later when Grady
returned, the blue-collar city had transformed into a center for education and technology. Away for the duration of Pittsburgh's renaissance, Grady assumed the city's new academic identity upon his return. Still reminded of the past, his tendency to escape suggests he is lost in the present and in need of his own renaissance. In relation to Pittsburgh, he resembles a crumbling smokestack dressed as an academic attempting to sustain the successes of his past while redirecting his future. Confronted with the reality that others are dependent upon his stable transition, Grady creates a world of fog and fiction where he assumes no responsibility. The image suggests that he, like Dillard, finds waking life overwhelming and his future uncertain. Just as Dillard feared the day when she would be "awake continuously," as an adult Grady prefers to hide in oblivion rather than confront his lost identity (Dillard 11).

Similarly, at a party to kick off WordFest weekend, a literary event on campus, Grady describes a room filled with authors, faculty members, and students, all of whom, he suggests, hide behind a front of academic discussion to disguise the truth of their identities. He refers to a "shy, elfin man" whose prose style is among the "most admired in the country," yet whose company he finds to be "leering" and "self-important" (Chabon 44). The "old windbag," he says, flirts with young girls to "stave off the fear of death" (44). Another writer whose short stories Grady has admired for the last fifteen years, he describes as having "the withered neck and hollow stare of a woman who had wasted her life" (44). Many of the students, staff members, and colleagues in the department, he says are talented and give "good reasons to admire and like," yet he smells "the stink of sweet beer and whiskey on their breath" (44). Suggesting most of the party-goers are "philtering" their true selves, Grady describes their "false laughter" and
feels the discomfort they have with their “bodies, their status and their clothes” (44). He suggests that behind their talent, discussion, and admired writing is a sad group of insecure people with no identities, or perhaps dual identities—not unlike his own.

Early in the novel, Chabon subtly suggests duality as culprit for his characters’ behaviors through the academic discussion of “The Writer as Doppelganger” (53). In the discussion, a writer named “Q.” introduces the notion, suggesting a ghostly double is to blame for his “unwise or reprehensible” behavior. Just as Grady avoids confrontation by fogging reality, Q. blames the doppelganger, pointing a finger at the “malignant shadow” that haunts his existence (76). The discussion of the “double” influences all further interpretation in the novel, as it illuminates the moments in which each character struggles, like the city, to balance dual identities torn between expectations, desires, failures, and successes. This duality is reflective of Pittsburgh’s post-renaissance period in which the steel mills steadily declined while technology simultaneously advanced, driving the city in a new direction while clinging to the roots that anchored its foundation.

Suggesting that Pittsburgh is Grady’s double, Chabon uses the city as a backdrop to emphasize the intersecting moments of his transition from fiction to reality.

The discussion of the doppelganger reminds Grady of Albert Vetch, a writer who wrote his horror stories under the alter-identity of “August Van Zorn” and who was haunted by the “midnight disease” (Chabon 3, 5). Prior to World War II, Van Zorn successfully created fictional worlds of pulp horror, which fulfilled his audience’s desires to escape the boring stability of reality. In doing so, he provided a balance between expectations and desire and “set a kind of example that, as a writer” Grady has been “living up to ever since” (5). Reflective of the changing city and its new direction, when
pulp horror lost its audience after World War II, Van Zorn attempted to adjust the content of his stories to meet the market's expectations (4). Rather than writing horror stories about small Pennsylvania towns, he tried to sell humorous tales of the suburbs, a task that proved unsuccessful (4). The "ghost" that haunted Van Zorn from the "dusty, bare corners" of his midnight life, was the looming expectation to fulfill the changing needs of his urban audience (112). As a result, Grady says Van Zorn suffered from "a kind of emotional insomnia," which impaired his ability to distinguish between "fictional and actual worlds" (20, 233). Rattled with the "midnight disease," the author and his fiction were caught in the shift of urban identities—lost between the decline of Pittsburgh steel and the rise of new technology, when cars carried urban dwellers away to the suburbs and redefined their expectations (5).

Elements of both the midnight disease and the doppelganger, suggest a guilty counterpart is responsible for duality and for creating a sense of "unbridgeable distance" from reality, like "someone tossing on a restless pillow in a world full of sleepers" (Chabon 76). In addition, both are used as scapegoats in an attempt to rationalize the tendency to linger in limbo, distracted and torn between reality and fiction, with no direction for the future. For Chabon's characters, renaissance is achieved by bridging the gap between the two worlds that haunt each other—whether they are the past and present, failure and success, or expectations and desire. This is a notion that will surface consistently and significantly throughout Wonder Boys, as each character attempts to achieve a balance between opposing identities in a city torn between its blue-collar roots and its white-collar future.
James Leer, Grady’s student and a writer of pulp fiction who, like him, doesn’t “belong anywhere,” escapes through the lies of fiction and manages to find a balance with reality (Chabon 48). Obsessed with Hollywood suicides and old movies, Grady says James must be attracted to the “fluid identities of the actors and actresses” whose roles are “constantly adopted and shed” (251). Like the film stars he admires, James takes on the tragic and invented identity of his novel’s protagonist, pretending to be “really poor” and from the small town of “Carvel” (62-63). On several instances, he makes bitter reference to “rich people,” saying he feels sorry for them, because they are “never happy” (161). Meanwhile, Grady describes James’ parents as looking like “a pair of elegant ghosts, killed in a collision of limousines on their way to a fancy-dress ball” (238). In an effort to escape his rich reality, in which he says his parents ignore him and treat him like a “freak,” he creates a fictional identity and pretends it is his own (243).

By collecting pieces of other lives, James creates a new identity for himself—one that is not constructed by high-class expectations. Resembling his makeshift life, his novel, *The Love Parade*, Grady says “seemed to have been crafted out of echoes and fragments and secondhand threads” of the movies he admired (Chabon 250). By creating stories entitled with names of old Hollywood movies, Grady says James “hoped to make of himself not simply a writer but an entire studio [. . .] on the patch of vacant scrub that was his life” (251). This suggests that writing fiction is an escape for James, which provides freedom from class and gender expectations and detachment from an identity that he does not want to claim. In contrast, Grady’s writing is burdened with expectations to succeed, causing his reality to be buried in fiction from which he cannot escape. The difference is evident when James writes his own ending through the
publication of his novel, successfully balancing his fictional identity with reality and without Grady’s help. It is then that Grady surrenders to the legacy of his past and focuses on the future, inspired by James’ “wonder boy” ability to embrace reality through his fiction.

**Duality: Expectations & Desire**

The idea of living two lives, one acceptable and stable, and the other satisfying and uncertain, is a common theme threaded throughout Chabon’s *Wonder Boys* and significantly linked to the city in which it takes place. Everyday duality divides the characters, leaving each of them in a limbo between the life expected of them and the one they desire. Whether they teeter between harsh reality and the fogged and “philtered” version, or fiction and non-fiction, each character has a method of escape. In the novel Chabon focuses on one weekend, using Grady as his catalyst, forcing each character to emerge from the comfort of his limbo and choose a direction—the life expected of him or the one that he desires. Resembling Pittsburgh’s own struggle to transform its reputation from industrial power to educational hub for medicine and technology, Chabon’s characters are influenced by their pasts and defined by expectations for their future. Similar to the slow and undefined process of Pittsburgh’s renaissance, in *Wonder Boys*, there is no defining moment in which each character decisively steers his life in a specific direction. Rather, a conglomeration of circumstances, expectations, ultimatums and desires peaks over the course of one weekend, resulting in moments of opportunity laced with hope. Meanwhile, the characters, like their city, are lost in the interim and divided by duality.
Many of the characters in the novel are obsessed with books or with writing fictionalized versions of their lives as a means of escape from their realities. As a result, the obsessive escape takes on a second identity, a duality which some characters balance simultaneously and secretly, rather than exchanging one for the other. This is most evident in the marriage of Walter and Sara Gaskell, an arrangement influenced by expectations, geared toward urban survival, and resembling the intentions behind Pittsburgh’s Second Renaissance. Sara, the fictional chancellor of the University of Pittsburgh is pregnant with Grady’s baby and is married to his boss, Walter, the chairman of the English Department. The Gaskells’ academic union, like the city’s shiny new skyline, is a façade constructed for the sake of urban success and indirectly, to conceal the divided identities and desires that would shake its foundation if revealed.

Like most Pittsburgh professionals associated with the universities, the Gaskells reside in the attractive neighborhood of Point Breeze, east of downtown, and coincidentally the setting of Annie Dillard’s 1950s childhood home. Grady describes Point Breeze, in reference to industrialist Henry Clay Frick and members of the Heinz family, as a neighborhood where “in vanished days” the “heirs of great fortunes in steel and condiments had disported in the grass, knocking balls through silver wickets with gold mallets” (Chabon 352). It seems only appropriate that two academics take up residence in a historic home inherited by the heirs of old Pittsburgh. The Gaskells represent the new industry of academia, making their home in “an eccentric, brick Tudor affair, a crooked witch’s hat of a house” that sits in a “leafy pocket” of the neighborhood as a relic of old Pittsburgh (32).
Remnants of the city's old industry lay along the Gaskells' sidewalk and in their backyard, including "a massive old wrought-iron fence" and "a pair of rusted rails, buried in the grass"—the remains of a "small-gauge railroad that had been the childish hobby of some long-dead Heinz heir" (Chabon 32). Seemingly foreshadowing the downfall of the Gaskells' academic union and suggesting an image of old industry haunting the new, Grady describes the house's "harsh floodlights" as there, "not to illuminate so much as to identify, to mark the Gaskells' house to passersby as one that had an infamous history, or was slated for imminent destruction" (121). The house, now occupied by two high-profile members of the university, stands as a reminder of Pittsburgh's predecessors and of the transition from the original industry that financed the grand homes of Point Breeze to academia.

Similar to the urban forces behind Pittsburgh's Second Renaissance, the Gaskell marriage was inspired by the imposed expectations of Sara's mother whose criteria were based on the shortcomings of her dead husband. Sara's father, previously an assistant groundskeeper at Forbes Field, was known to be "careful in his work but terrible with money" (Chabon 38). Two of his gardening businesses went under as a result of "disorderly bookkeeping" and the rest "through drink" (38). While working at Forbes Field in Oakland during the summer of 1958, he was suspended for "keeping an illegal vegetable garden" when a real estate broker noticed it beyond a wall in the outfield (37). At the time, the broker was working on a deal to sell the ballpark to the University of Pittsburgh. Backed by the union, her father returned to work, dug up his garden, and a few weeks later had too much to drink, choked on a piece of meat, and died during Sara's eighth birthday party (38). That same year, Forbes Field was sold to the University of
Pittsburgh for $3 million dollars, a deal which subtly signified the future direction of the Steel City and that of Sara Gaskell (Munsey).

As Pittsburgh’s universities navigated a new direction for the future, the city shifted its priorities and raised its expectations for both men and women. Likewise, after Sara’s father’s death, her mother raised the bar and trained her “half orphaned” daughter to expunge her father’s “evanescent legacy of failure and excess” and to “always go for the sure thing, however modest” (Chabon 38, 39). As a result, Sara traded in her passionate and early love of literature to focus her studies on the concrete field of accounting and eventually obtained a Ph.D. in Administration (39). Refusing two marriage proposals in order to pursue a stable career, Sara “allowed herself to marry” at the age of thirty-five when she took on the role of chancellor at the university (39). She married the head of the English Department, a man whose stability and reputation were in accordance with her mother’s expectations.

According to Grady, Walter was a suitable spouse for the chancellor, because “his affairs were in order, his career well-established, his habits husbandly, and he kept his seven thousand books not simply alphabetized but grouped by period and country of origin” (Chabon 39). In addition to marrying a man worthy of her mother’s approval, Sara was attracted to Walter’s “genteele manners, to his Dartmouth education, his knowledge of sailboats, [and] his parents’ penthouse apartment on Central Park West” (39). As the eighth child of a poor family from the Greenfield neighborhood of Pittsburgh, Sara told herself that Walter was “quite literally the best she could hope for” (39). Passionately, however, Sara, like her husband, has an affinity for the erroneous:
Nevertheless, in spite of all her mother’s efforts, there remained a wild and sentimental Neapolitan streak in Sara, and this, along with some faint Electral residue she saw crackling in the air around me, may also help to explain her willingness to endanger her stable existence for the doubtful pleasure of my company. (39)

A woman who is “sensible” and “afraid of disorder,” Sara buries her hidden desires for Grady in an effort to uphold her social and professional reputation in the eyes of her mother and in the spotlight of academia (38). Grady is her guilty pleasure of five years, which affirms that neither of them intends to abandon their spouses, or “do anything to disturb the tranquil pattern of what was already an old love” (33). This suggests that their affair is an escape from the social expectations that drive their professional and academic endeavors.

Despite her stable and successful position in academia, Sara escapes the constructs of her urban reputation to pursue her internal desires. Grady rationalizes that Sara is having an affair with him because she is an “addict” of fiction, and he is “a manufacturer of her particular drug of choice” (Chabon 39). He describes Sara’s obsession with reading as a “kind of pyromania,” in which she desperately scours “insurance brochures, hotel prospectuses and product warranties, advertising circulars, sheets of coupons” when nothing else is available (40):

Sara would read anything you handed her—Jean Rhys, Jean Shepherd, Jean Genet—at a steady rate of sixty-five pages an hour, grimly and unsparingly and without apparent pleasure. She read upon waking, sitting on the toilet, stretched out in the backseat of the car. (Chabon 39)
While meeting her expectations as wife and chancellor, Sara is simultaneously satisfying her desire for escape through her love of fiction and passion for Grady. Likewise, Walter has an obsession with memorabilia, particularly remnants of the marriage between Joe DiMaggio and Marilyn Monroe. The famous union is what Grady’s calls a “significant obsession of Walter’s” and is the subject of his own “Wonder Boys,” an “impenetrable seven-hundred-page critical ‘reading,’ [. . .] of the marriage of Marilyn and Joe” (60). This suggests that most characters have a “Wonder Boys,” or a mammoth void in which they could get lost in an effort to escape.

Along with the buried mysteries of Sara’s addiction to fiction and Walter’s devotion to baseball memorabilia, the Gaskell house, carved “from the estate of H.J. Heinz,” harbors memories of the Pittsburgh’s history and suggests the direction of its future (Chabon 32). Hints of expectation and dissatisfaction are evident in the Gaskells’ marriage, as well as in their compulsive desires that are hidden in the “grand, dark spaces” of their Point Breeze home (32). According to Grady, the inventory of Walter’s memorabilia collection fills the inside of the house from “crawl space to attic” and haunts it with the presence of “fainter ghosts of dead ballplayers and tycoons” (32). This suggests a longing for the past and the presence of a hidden identity. For example, Walter periodically visits his treasures in a fireproof bedroom closet “dressed in Yankee pinstripes” with “tears streaming down his [. . .] cheeks, mourning his Sutton Place childhood” in Manhattan (59). Contained in the closet are remnants of Marilyn and Joe, whose imperfect union Walter calls “conclusive proof” of the “American tendency to view every marriage as a cross between tabooed exogamy and corporate merger” (61). Walter’s preoccupation with an unlikely and exaggerated glamorous union of fame and
fortune, as antithesis to his own marriage, resembles Sara’s attraction to Grady, a passionate man as unstable and unpredictable as his fiction. Both are leading separate lives while married to each other.

The Greenhouse Escape

In Grady’s description of Sara’s academic appearance, he portrays an image of a woman contained by self-consciousness and by the “demands of her professional position” as chancellor of the University of Pittsburgh (Chabon 34). Sara’s attire, he says, consists “almost entirely of control-top panty hose, plain white cotton blouses, and shapeless tweed suits that spanned a brilliant spectrum from oatmeal to dirt” (34). The simplicity of her bland wardrobe exudes a practical and conservative image and accentuates a refined and professional focus. According to Grady, she “imprisoned her glorious hair within its scaffolding of pins” and wore a “thin copper line across her lips for makeup” (34). The only jewelry she displays is her wedding band and a pair of reading glasses, appropriately conveying her business-like concern for minimal aesthetics and pure function. Illustrating the complexity of Sara’s professional front and the depths to which she buries her true identity, Grady describes the contrasting and extensive process of undressing Sara as “an act of recklessness, a kind of vandalism, like releasing a zoo full of animals, or blowing up a dam” (34). Grady disassembles Sara’s university image and frees her hidden and unacceptable desires for passion and instability.

Similar to Dillard’s escape to the country, Sara creates a space outside of the Gaskell house where she detaches herself from the social expectations associated with her roles as university chancellor and academic wife. Like her father’s passion for his garden
at the stadium, Sara escapes to her greenhouse. The garden provides freedom from the present and a connection to the memory of her father—the man who set the precedent for her mother’s expectations of whom her daughter should not marry. The connection to her father is evident in subtle features of the garden. For example, Grady describes the framework of the greenhouse as “metal and wood, painted the dark green of an outfield wall,” an image that recalls the garden behind the green outfield wall at Forbes Field where her father worked (Chabon 153). In addition, “irregular bricks” border the flowerbeds in the garden, which Grady says were salvaged from the “demolition of Forbes Field” by Sara’s uncle, “one of her father’s brothers” (152). Though Sara does not directly make reference to her father’s influence, elements in the garden suggest she is quietly carrying his legacy while escaping the confines of her structured life.

The standards that Sara upholds at the university, in her Point Breeze home, and for the sake of her mother, she abandons upon entering the greenhouse. This is evident in Grady’s description of Sara’s disheveled and relaxed appearance in the garden in contrast to her professional attire:

She had on her gardening boots, big, steel-toed, motor-head butt kickers, black as stovepipes, scuffed and muddied and beat to shit, and a cracked old leather coat of some indeterminate color between olive and buff. It was creased and split and mud-spattered, had belt loops but no belt, and its fur-trimmed collar looked as though it had been lovingly chewed by a dog. It had belonged to her father.

(Chabon 153-154)

In the garden wearing her father’s coat, Sara surrenders her refined and conservative wardrobe for the unpretentious and disorderly garbs of a gardener. There, she freely
displays disorder and defiance against the academic institution that defines her and finds solace in her father’s forbidden legacy.

As an outlet from Sara’s stable world as chancellor and wife, the greenhouse appropriately serves as a place where she and Grady haphazardly meet on several occasions throughout the novel. The garden houses Sara’s fictional and unstable world, outside of her marriage and beyond the walls of the university, where she can escape from her reality. Originally inspired by Grady, Sara started the garden in April, “right around the same time” she fell in love with him (Chabon 156). At the beginning of their affair, she says, “There was nothing out here,” only “bare ground and dead grass” (156). She compares herself then to the empty landscape saying, “I was the same way really” (156). It is when she and Grady first fell in love that she walked into the yard to find “crocuses everywhere” (156). The growth of the flowers inspired Sara to build a greenhouse, a space where she can garden like her father without limitations.

A structure as old as their affair, the greenhouse is reflective of the growth and decline of Grady and Sara’s affair and is a reminder of her detachment from reality. Grady describes the greenhouse as a “miniature palace of glass, speckled with dew” and compares its “peaked, hipped roof” to a “glass steeple” (Chabon 152-153). The image of the glass steeple suggests a sacred structure pointing toward heaven and away from urban constraints. There, Sara finds balance between her professional expectations and conflicting desires. Likewise, Grady is drawn to the garden, finding a sense of stability, balance, and direction there “as though the greenhouse were breathing [him] in” (153). As a professor of English, his invitation to the Gaskell house is separate from his invitation to the greenhouse. In the house, he is a guest of the Chancellor and Chairman.
In the garden, Grady has access to Sara without academic and social attachments and worries when the flowerbeds look “empty and dead” (152). Revoking his welcome to the greenhouse implies the end of their dual lives.

**Renaissance: Determining Direction**

Pittsburgh’s quiet presence throughout *Wonder Boys* provides a significant backdrop to Grady’s struggle with duality, as elements of the city’s history help to illuminate his emergence into reality. Particularly, when Grady realizes his novel does not live up to its anticipation, he becomes aware of his previously philtered surroundings. For example, his student, Hannah Green reads a draft of his novel and tells him, “I wondered how it would be [. . .] if you weren’t always so stoned all the time when you write” (Chabon 302). Hannah’s admiration for Grady and the success of his previous novels drive her anticipation for *Wonder Boys*, yet her face suggests to him that “pressing onward to the end was obviously too onerous for her even to contemplate” (303). In her disappointment, he sees his true character revealed, describing her face as that of a woman who discovers “her fiancé’s claims and bona fides were false, all of his credentials forged” (303). As a result, he says she looks as though she “has unpacked her trunks and cashed in her ticket and now must tell him quickly that she will not sail away” (303). Hannah’s revelation of the truth behind her idealized image of Grady, suggests a sense of disappointment that he has not fulfilled her void as she had expected him to.

The scenery of Pittsburgh’s lost past becomes more prominent in the novel as Grady begins to realize his image as anticipated and successful author is fading. As he cruises further into the bulk of his never-ending novel, he senses the disappointment of
those depending on him. For example, after reading part of his incomplete manuscript, Crabtree, his friend and editor, tells him there are "too many characters," and "The style changes every fifty pages or so" (Chabon 312). Reflective of Grady's labyrinth of a life, he says, "It's a mess" and suggests that like its author, it is "all over the place" (312). Significantly, Grady realizes Crabtree's disappointment at a red light while driving in downtown Pittsburgh:

It was like old times; he was writing his name in water. But whenever we stopped for a red light, he would glance over at me, and his expression would go blank, incredulous, faintly pitying, as if I were only a bedraggled hitchhiker picked up in a rainstorm on the road between Zilchburg and Palookaville: a nobody headed nowhere, smelling vaguely of wet wool. (304)

For years Grady rode the wave of his successful publications but suddenly finds himself washed up without the momentum of anticipation. Desperate for direction, he expects Crabtree to be the "hammer blow to loosen all the windows" of his creativity, hoping a push would allow him to finish his novel and save both their careers (134). Instead, Crabtree sees the reality behind his fiction.

Pittsburgh's dwindling appearance in the novel coincides with the decline of Grady's character as he is confronted with the reality of his failure to meet his editor's expectations. On their way to the Hill District, Grady and Crabtree pass "storefronts along Centre Avenue" that are "barred and shuttered" with the "door handles chained," and "the broken sidewalks deserted" on the streets of downtown (Chabon 305). They drive in silence as Grady peers out the window and begins to notice his surroundings. He comments on the location of "Kravnik's Sporting Goods" as the ground floor of a
commercial block that, “like most of the obsolete skyscrapers in this part of downtown, must once have been a bold flower of nineteenth-century capitalism” (313). Reflecting an image of his own career, he says its windows are “filmed over with grime,” and its “stone face was tattooed with handbill glue” from past events (313). Kravnik’s he says is “one of an ever-dwindling number of such classic Pittsburgh establishments—half buried in dust and soot and an enigmatic mantle of central European gloom” (314). The elements of the city’s decline and burial of it past successes reflect Grady’s own self-loathing as he realizes, “I had lost everything: novel, publisher, wife, lover; the admiration of my best student; all the fruit of the past decade of my life” (342).

Elements of Pittsburgh’s bygone days trigger a momentum in Grady as he realizes his prime has faded and disappointment has replaced anticipation. Rather than avoiding his reality, he must choose a direction for his future. Significantly, direction dawns on Grady, while he and James Leer are on their way to his wife’s parents’ home in Kinship, Pennsylvania. While driving in the city on their way out of town, Grady reaches a point of “utter volitional equipoise or collapse” as they come to a red light (Chabon 149). The red light signifies Grady’s pause for reflection as he sees a young family crossing the street, gazing up at them “in uncomprehending pity” (149). He then looks at the baby in the woman’s arms and says, “For an instant I could feel the weight of it, like an ache, in the hollow of my arm” (149). Grady implies the “weight” of reality is setting in as he is reminded of the imminent responsibility of his own unborn child (149). Inspired by his “ache” for the baby as a fulfillment to his “hollow” world, rather than heading to his wife’s parents’ home, Grady decides to see Sara instead: “I did a one-eighty in the
intersection and headed back toward Point Breeze” (150). The intersection is significant as a crossroads for Grady in which he ponders the direction of his future.

**Post-Renaissance: Duality Balanced**

Like Pittsburgh, Grady chooses the direction for his future by finding a balance between the failures, successes, expectations, and desires that haunt his life. This is evident in the evolution of an image he uses to describe himself throughout the novel. While the topic emerges in discussions of the doppelganger and the midnight disease, Grady consistently refers to his own duality using the image of a minotaur. Inspired by Greek mythology, the minotaur is a creature tormented by duality as part man and part bull (Lindemans). The image conveys Grady’s contrasting identities that leave him in limbo awaiting direction, and resembles post-renaissance Pittsburgh as the outcome of blue-collar steel merging with white-collar technology.

According to Greek myth, the minotaur caused “such terror and destruction on Crete” that he was contained inside an inescapable labyrinth (Lindemans). While the image of the labyrinth resembles Grady bound to his endless novel and directionless reality, his references to a “blind minotaur” suggest Picasso’s variation of the Greek image. For example, after dancing with Hannah, his attractive student who is in love with him, Grady says he needs codeine for his ankle and “something else” for his “sense of shame” (Chabon 107). He calls himself “ridiculous” after “thrashing around” on the dance floor “like one of Picasso’s wounded minotaurs lumbering blindly after an angelic young girl” (107). Based on Picasso’s illustrations, the minotaur is a “lusty, vigorous” creature, “not the terrible monster from Crete but a sympathetic and pampered pet” (Ries
This suggests Grady’s version of the blind minotaur is more vulnerable than the original, which implies a sense of shame in his weakness.

According to Ries, Picasso’s minotaur as “frolicking brute” represents the “antithesis of the hero,” a characterization fitting for Grady, considering his stagnant position at the depths of heightened anticipation for his novel’s ending, his love affair with Sara, and his neglect to acknowledge his baby’s future (144). It is not until he looks down into the “fog and rain of his life on earth” that he realizes he is the anti-hero of his own story (Chabon 344). In Ries’ interpretation, Picasso’s blind minotaur represents the contradiction between “Man’s brief existence in a transitory world” and “his participation in a world of infinite ideas and meanings” (145). As Grady assumes the role of his own protagonist, he resembles the image of half man and half bull torn between a transitory world and reality. The creature’s dichotomy reflects Grady’s duality and transition into a world where he is disoriented.

By detaching himself from his writing, Grady, like James Leer, achieves a balance in his duality in which his fiction complements his reality rather than consuming it. As a result, he moves beyond incoherence and embraces reality through his writing. This is evident as he begins to surface from his fictional world and again refers to himself as a “blind minotaur,” yet this time he does so recognizing that his reality is in shambles (Chabon 275). He says, “I saw that I could write ten thousand more pages of shimmering prose and still be nothing but a blind minotaur stumbling along broken ground, an unsuccessful, overweight ex-wonder boy with a pot habit and a dead dog in the trunk of my car” (275). According to Ries, Picasso’s depiction of the blind minotaur suggests that he moves toward a “deepened awareness of life and a cultivation of that awareness” when
confronted "by the chaos of history and the unconscious" (145). Likewise, Grady becomes aware of his blindness as the minotaur or anti-hero of his own novel and decides to confront the future. By choosing reality over limbo, Grady finds direction for his novel, writes his ending, and in the process becomes the hero for the story. In his novel, he trades in his image as blind minotaur and reclaims the role of wonder boy.

In the end, Grady's finished novel proves to be a recollection of his renaissance, as well as the answer to balancing his duality and claiming his identity. This becomes apparent as he compromises his contrasting identities using a description of the minotaur. Following the publication of *Wonder Boys*, after Grady quits smoking pot, and after he and Sara leave their mates and marry each other to raise their son, he refers to himself as the "half-blind minotaur" (Chabon 367):

You can look for the half-blind minotaur with the corduroy sport coat and the battered horsehide briefcase, at the far end of the bar by the jukebox, holding onto a mug of Iron City cut, for the sake of his health, with thin, sweet lemonade. If you sit long enough on the neighboring stool he will probably mention that he is working hard on a novel about baseball and the Civil War, or a memoir of Berkeley in the early seventies..." (367).

Due to his dual disposition as tormented writer and stable husband and father, Grady still refers to himself as a "minotaur" but now describes himself as "half-blind" (367). In this case, half-blind does not suggest that he is still partially unaware but rather literally indicates, "I couldn't see very well out of my left eye anymore" (366). By describing himself as "half-blind," Grady reaffirms that he has transitioned to a literal world. In addition, at this point in the novel, he refers to himself in the third rather than first-person
perspective. This suggests that he has stepped out of the role as character in his book to embrace reality. Now, he narrates from an outside perspective without becoming involved and lost in his fiction. Also emphasizing his transition from fiction, Grady refers to his current non-fiction works about “baseball and the Civil War” and a “memoir of Berkeley in the early seventies” (367). Having escaped his fictional world, he now warns his students of the “incurable disease that leads all good writers to suffer, inevitably, the quintessential fate of their characters” (367).

Grady’s post-renaissance perspective suggests a writer’s “true doppelganger” is the “protagonist” of his work—the creature whose stories at first resemble but eventually come to determine his “life’s very course” (Chabon 234). While Grady is both, the protagonist and fictional author of Wonder Boys, his story of balancing duality mirrors the story of the city in which it takes place. For this reason, I suggest that Pittsburgh’s story is the shadow that haunts Grady’s two identities, both of which struggle to meet expectations and fulfill desires, while tormented by the success of the past and the uncertainty of the future. Just as smokestacks stand as reminders of Pittsburgh’s transformation into an academic town, Wonder Boys is a token of the weekend that redefined Grady Tripp.
Conclusion:
Postwar Pittsburgh’s Role in American City Literature

“Unlike many other cities in this country, which strive to ape the so-called sophistication of New York or the transient and changing cosmopolitan of Washington or whatever it is that San Francisco is supposed to radiate, Pittsburgh persists in being existentially itself. It simply but inevitably and determinedly keeps becoming what it is.”

-Samuel Hazo (9)

Evidence of the city’s significance in Annie Dillard’s memoir may outweigh its presence in Michael Chabon’s novel, yet both authors present Pittsburgh as the foundation for their American stories of duality, detachment, and identity. In *An American Childhood* and *Wonder Boys*, both authors capture the defining moment in which the lines between awareness and oblivion and reality and fiction dissolve. In doing so, they interweave their narratives with elements of the city’s history, its future, and its sidewalks and streets, creating character identities infused with Pittsburgh’s urban landscape. Literature is saturated with tales of the city, in which characters correlate identity with their environment—why is Pittsburgh significant and what makes its story relevant to postwar American literature?

Pittsburgh’s transformation from blue-collar Steel City to white-collar academic town was a long process of growth and decline, a sequence of pinnacles and pitfalls not unfamiliar to cities like Baltimore, Detroit, and St. Louis (Teaford 9). These cities are “counterparts” to Pittsburgh, that have in common an identity “forged by the Industrial Revolution” and that share ideas of how to navigate the uncertain future (Hazo 26). Each city, however, experienced a unique postwar period of transition, in which its dual identities merged into one before redefining itself into something new. The dramatic urban changes that occurred during each city’s transformation span layers of social, cultural, physical, and economic boundaries that can hardly be quantified in any history.
book. Through the stories of those who call it home, the city begins to shed its layers, uncovering perspectives that emerge from behind the shiny postcard image of the skyline.

Postwar American cities continue to inspire writers as a topic to be consistently textualized, personified, and analyzed in literature. According to Lehan, however, “Before the city is a construct, literary or cultural, it is a physical reality with a dynamics of its own,” a concept which requires a sense of detachment (291). By separating its interpretation as a literary or cultural construct from its physical landscape, its past, its present, and its people—the city’s identity emerges untainted and without expectations. This is a concept Dillard and Chabon emphasize in their stories of identity in which they present a way of “seeing” postwar Pittsburgh through their characters (Lehan 291). Significantly, their versions do not “substitute for the pavement and buildings” but rather parallel Pittsburgh’s renaissance and postwar struggle with dual identities (291).

The renaissance of an American city is a story of its people and their struggles to survive urban challenges and desires, despite the past and in honor of the future. Each perspective suggests that behind the façade of a city’s skyline, there are “forces at work as old as our origins” that bury the past and shape the future with expectations (Lehan 6). This affirms Dillard’s suggestion that the city is an empty landscape infused with the lives of the people who set it into motion. While Pittsburgh’s rivers and hills make up its natural landscape, its people make it a city of rivers and bridges, a Steel City, and an academic town refined by failures and success. For this reason, the city’s presence in Dillard’s *An American Childhood* and Chabon’s *Wonder Boys* is significant, as their urban narratives present stories of duality, detachment, and identity that are quintessentially American and distinctively parallel to postwar Pittsburgh.
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