

Symbolism in Sherwood Anderson's Winesburg, Ohio

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Abstract: *Sherwood Anderson occupies a distinctive position in the history of American letters. He was the first American novelist of consequences to break firmly away from the tradition of gentility that had dominated the writing of fiction in the United States. He was a leader in the movement to revitalize the stream of literary naturalism by demonstrating a concern with inwards, psychological reality rather than the journalistic, documentary recording of outward experience.*

Anderson's substantial body of work is now being revalued from many points of view particularly his most reputed novel Winesburg, Ohio. Much is being said about the way Anderson develops his stories around shafts of vision that become pivotal points around which the stories revolve. Some of his admiring critics subjected his work to the most penetrating analysis, disseminating a great deal of information and coming up with unique interpretations that all his characters are types to be found in any society or community and have great symbolic significance. Out of this interpretation, this study was born. All the twenty two stories of Winesburg, Ohio deal with characters. In Winesburg, Ohio, Anderson recorded the often-troubled "inner workings" of the fictional citizenry of Winesburg, Ohio. This gallery of repressed individual, are unable to understand, and communicate with their fellow men. They are highly symbolic in their macrocosmic setting.

The present study intends to clear out the image of Sherwood Anderson in terms of character –portrayal in his most reputed novel Winesburg, Ohio as Anderson called it, through analysis of some selected stories. This paper also tries to assert the symbolic significance of these characters who are also types to be found in any society.

Keywords: *Character, Portrayal, Symbolism, Anderson, Winesburg.*

1. INTRODUCTION

In 1919 Sherwood Anderson published *Winesburg, Ohio*, a collection of short stories and sketches written between late 1915 and 1917 in which contains many parallels to Anderson's earlier works. With publication of *Winesburg, Ohio*, Anderson provided at once a lesson and an example for fiction in which plotting was organic and arose naturally from the material that was being created. The short stories, more than any other literary mode, established Sherwood Anderson's reputation as a major influence in American Literature. Edward J. O'Brien, editor of *The Best Short Stories*, an annual anthology, included Anderson selections for many years, and dedicated the 1920 volume to him. In 1921, Sherwood Anderson won the *Dial* award as the most promising writer of the year.

In *Winesburg, Ohio*, Anderson tried to depict American life as it is not as he wants. He tried to look beneath the appearances in order to find tentative conclusions concerning, not only American life in particular but human life in general. At his best, Anderson's prose is stripped of sentimentality and yet conveys emotion. He was strongly influenced by Gertrude Stein, and used poetic repetition and variations in words, phrases, and sentence structures to convey his images of people and their circumstances.

In *Winesburg, Ohio* his tales take on symbolic significance, with small Ohio town being a microcosm of modern life in general. The structure of the tales in *Winesburg, Ohio*, usually move toward sudden self-revelation like James Joyce's epiphanies in *Dubliners*. In observing that "one of the most

characteristic things about American life is the isolation from one another”, (Jones and Rideout, p.305) Sherwood Anderson reiterated the sense of alienation that had become a theme of much twentieth century American literature. He could make such a statement with more authority than many contemporary writers. Having grown up in small mid-western towns in the last quarter of the nineteenth century, he had seen quite villages of farmers and tradesmen disrupted by the advent of factories with machines that could produce more goods in less time than ever before. He had witnessed an erosion of close human relationship as one man competed with another for financial success and position of authority.(Odeh,pp.84)

2. THE CONFUSION THIS STUDY TRIES TO ADDRESS AND CLEAR OUT

This paper is basically based on theoretical research methodology. Structured on intensive and extensive literature review and critical analysis of Sherwood Anderson’s stories in *Winesburg, Ohio* aimed at resurrecting the image of Sherwood Anderson at least as far as his art of characterization is concerned. This paper also tries to clear out the misconception at the hand of some critics who associate and place Anderson as a minor writer in the history of American Letters. On the contrary, he was very much innovative and influential in the genre of short story – his stories focus on characters rather than plot. Thus, he changed the form and technique of writing short fiction.

Therefore, I began with brief introduction to show the importance of the writer. Then I stated the objective of the present study by interpreting and analyzing the symbolic significance of some selected short stories in *Winesburg, Ohio* and divided it into three groups so as to arrive at a conclusion that assert and support my point of view. I also included some critical appraisal of the writer to show and assert the credibility and universality of the writer who influence such great writer like Earnest Hemingway, William Faulkner and many others

For the purpose of analyzing and appreciating the symbolic significance of the characters and sketches that he wrote for *Winesburg, Ohio*, I have classified the fictional characters into three groups: **Grotesques, Victims, and Dreamers**. Each group will be discussed in more details in order to arrive at a final conclusion that assert and support my hypothesis in this study.

3. GROTESQUES

“*The Book of the Grotesque*” is an attempt to explain the causes of alienation and to suggest ways of overcoming its effect. Part of this explanation is stated in the words of an old writer, who resembles Anderson in several respects. Like Anderson, the old man was once a loving, outgoing individual who in his youth had known many people “in a peculiarly intimate way”. Gradually he has become separated from them and now lives alone in a single room.

One night the old man lay on the raised bed half asleep, half awake, and pondered his former friends. It suddenly occurred to him that they had all been transformed into grotesques – estranged people whose minds and lives have become distorted. In his perception of the word, however, not all grotesques were horrible; “some were amusing, some almost beautiful”. Anderson summarizes the unnamed old man’s definition of grotesqueness as follows:

... In the beginning when the world was young there were great many thoughts but no such thing as truth. Man made the truths himself and each truth was a composite of a great many vague thoughts. All about in the world were the truths and they were all beautiful ... And then the people came along. Each as he appeared snatched up one of the truths and some who were quite strong snatched up a dozen of them. It was the truths that made the people grotesque The moment that one of the people took one of the truths to himself, called it his truth, and tried to live his life by it, he became a grotesque and the truth he embraced became a falsehood. (The Book of the Grotesque)

“*The Book of the Grotesque*” is the key point for understanding the twenty-one stories that follow, for each contains a character in which grotesqueness is manifested. Some of these are revolting, some are amusing, some are beautiful- but all are presented by Anderson with feeling and sympathy.

"*Adventure*" the story of Alice Hindman, a non-aggressive grotesque, contains the elements of a sentimental melodrama. As a girl of sixteen, Alice had made love with Ned Curry, a writer for *Winesburg Eagle*. He later went Cleveland to find a better job, promising to return and marry her. At the time the story takes place, she is twenty-seven, and he has never returned.

In Anderson's treatment, however, Alice story has little resemblance to a sentimental account of a country maiden whose lover is seduced by the evils of the city. It is, rather, a penetrating psychological study. Recalling the definition of grotesqueness, one recognizes that the "truth" or idea that Alice had seized on is a concept of romantic love, derived out of the fantasies she weaves around her brief affair. Anderson in no sense implies that Alice is selfish in indulging her inclination. Indeed he seems to sympathize with her. He is rather attempting to demonstrate that when fantasizing obscures one's ability to perceive reality, the result can be catastrophic.

Alice's memory of love is the seed of a dream of Ned's return. Over a period of eleven years, the loneliness increases – and ultimately becomes desperation. One rainy night, this desperation becomes more than she can bear. She runs naked from her house through the streets of *Winesburg*. Alice's bizarre action is a reckless attempt to experience the imaginary romantic adventure that has engrossed her. Her dreams of marriage to Ned Curry make her uneasy with other men; it is unlikely that she can ever feel otherwise. Apparently, however, she has realized something useful from her actions: later, as she lies sobbing on her bed, she begins "trying to force herself to face bravely the fact that many people must live and die alone, even in *Winesburg*".

"*Goodliness*" a four-part tale, is the most complex of the stories. One of those in which George Willard does not appear, it incorporates more than three generation on an Ohio farm. In it Anderson shows the passing of pioneer innocence and the rise of materialism. In the story Jesse Bentley, the family patriarch, is dominated by the Calvinistic interpretation of God's favor being manifested in material wealth; as he grows richer he becomes convinced that he is God's chosen instrument to work his will. Finally, as he frightened his grandson with his Biblical fervor, he begins to doubt. His daughter, seeking the love that she cannot find from her father, takes a lover and eventually she marries in confusion. In the end the old man frightens the boy again with an Old Testament – inspired sacrifice designed to alleviate his doubts, and the boy strikes his grandfather with a stone and runs off into the unknown.

In "*Godliness*", Anderson uses both theme as well as setting to tie the story into the book. In this instance, the theme of isolation stems not from human shortcomings alone but also from the new false god of materialism, a god that depends for its success upon the continued isolation of human beings. Jesse Bentley is made grotesque and frightening; his daughter is denied love and understanding; and his grandson is driven away in terror. They are all unable to find release from the service of the puritan and materialistic god the old man has erected. For the daughter and her son, Anderson shows his compassion and love; he has none for the old man completely dominated by his false god. (Odeh, pp.92)

Another grotesque who elicits sympathy from the reader is Dr. Reefy, one of two physicians who live in *Winesburg*. He appears in two stories, "*Paper Pills*" and "*death*."

"*Paper Pills*" is a haunting story about the contrast that can exist between appearances and reality. Dr. Reefy is a seemingly ugly old man, with an extraordinarily large nose and huge hands with knuckles like gnarled apples. But Anderson quickly adds that "in Dr. Reefy there were the seeds of something very fine". For years he has sat in his office, staring out of the window and writing down disjointed thoughts on scraps of paper. These he thrusts into his pockets, where eventually they become compressed into little balls.

Once, years before Dr. Reefy appears in the story, he was married. Again, on appearance, this was odd, but nonetheless beautiful union. The girl he married had come to him because she was pregnant. But the father of the child was a man she did not love and did not wish to marry. Dr. Reefy had quickly grasped her circumstances. He greeted her with the words, "I will take you driving into the country with me". From that moment she knew that she never wanted to leave him. The two married

and lived happily. He was able to discuss freely with her his ideas and dreams. She died after a year of marriage. Dr. Reefy was then left alone to think and write down fragments of ideas.

The comments made by the narrator about Dr. Reefy are important for understanding Anderson's attitude toward the majority of the grotesques in the stories. Dr. Reefy's marriage is characterized as "delicious, like the twisted little apple that grow in the orchards of Winesburg". Then the narrator explains that after the choice apples have been picked and sent to cities "where they will be eaten in apartments that are filled with books, magazine, furniture and people", only the gnarled, twisted fruit remains. These are the sweetest apples of all, though "only the few know the sweetness of the twisted apples". The twisted apples are a key image in *Winesburg*. Dr. Reefy's knuckles are described as resembling the misshapen fruit, and Anderson was later to refer to the *Winesburg* stories themselves in the same way. To him, the source of beauty lay in the nature one's character. Though physically unattractive, Dr. Reefy possesses an inner beauty, which is reflected in his relationship with his wife. And in "Death", one of the later stories, he offers comfort to Elizabeth, George Willard's mother. He has intuitive understanding of the problems of both women and offers unbounded sympathy.

4. VICTIMS

A group of *Winesburg* stories features characters whose lives have become misshapen through means other than self-assertion. They have become victims of the warped ideas of the unattractive grotesque – either acting individually, as a group, or even as entire segment of society.

A good example is Wing Biddlebaum in the story "Hands", while he talks, his hands stay in perpetual motion, as if they were wings. As a young man, he was a headmaster of a boys' school in Pennsylvania. There, he enjoyed talking for hours with is students.

... lost in a dream. Here and there went his hands, caressing the shoulders of the boys, playing about the tousled heads. As he talks his voice became soft and musical. There was a caress in that also. In a way the voice and the hands, the stroking of the shoulders and the touching of the hair were a part of the schoolmaster's effort to carry a dream into the young minds.

One youth he touched in this fashion was a half-witted boy who formed a romantic attachment to his teacher. He had fantasies of love between himself and Wing and began talking with others about them. Parents of the students became concerned and question their children about the teacher's touch. Immediately they assumed that he was a homosexual. They beat him, threatened to lynch him, and drove him from the town. He came to Winesburg, where for twenty years has employed his nervous hands picking berries in nearby farms.

The trembling old man may be seen as a grotesque- someone unable to talk naturally to others and avoided by his fellow citizens of *Winesburg*. However Wing is portrayed as a thoroughly good and wholesome human being, who touches people out of love and concern. He is a lonely person who craves closeness with others. The real grotesques in the story are the parents in the Pennsylvania town, who act upon an unfounded assumption, and the citizens of *Winesburg*, who ridicule his strange mannerisms. In ruthlessly imposing their mistaken perception of the truth, they have made an innocent man an unfortunate victim.

Elmer Cowley, in "*Queer*", has for years suffered silently because he thinks of his family as being misfits in *Winesburg*. His father, Ebenezer, has sold his farm and bought a general store. Ebenezer has been a miserable failure as a merchant, partly because he feels ill at ease talking with people. His ignorance in merchandising prompts him to purchase a stock that no one will buy. He allows the store to become filthy. Generally uncommunicative, his favorite expression is "Well I'll be washed and ironed and dried!" Elmer thinks that Ebenezer's unusual expressions, his unattractive store, and awkwardness with his customers, cause people to see the whole family as queer. He is therefore intent upon changing this image.

George Willards figures prominently in this story, as a foil to Elmer. As a successful newspaper reporter, George can express himself well. The townspeople think he has a promising future as a George's attribute, and one day he expresses this feeling with desperate force. Elmer has run a

traveling salesman out of his father's store by waving an empty pistol about and telling him he will do no more purchasing until some sales are made, and that he wants no more queer merchandise. But as he reflects upon his action, his feeling of queerness increases. Several hours later, he calls George Willard out of the newspaper office, thinking in some vague way that discussing his feelings with George may ease them. Elmer is unable to articulate any of his confused thoughts. When he tries to talk, his arms move involuntarily and his face twitches. He asks George to leave him.

Elmer has arrived at this unhappy point by having been subjected to conditions over which he had no control. The father's eccentricities have made him ashamed, and his need to correct matters has turned into frustration. Again, it can be said that he is one of those Winesburg citizens whose miserable plight is not at all the result of anything he has consciously done or willed.

5. DREAMERS

A few *Winesburg* characters possess the strength necessary to live happy, well-adjusted lives; all of these have a sense of hope. This is often expressed in the form of a dream, or ideal, toward which the character aspires. This possibility does not mean that the individual has escaped traumatic experiences; no one ever does. It does mean that whatever menacing circumstances are endured, these people show resiliency as well as the motivation to press forward.

The most obvious example of a dreamer is George Willard, the protagonist in "*Departure*", the final story. In a village that contains so many whose frustrations have made them inarticulate, his is an important role. Often, the grotesques and their victims come to George and attempt to unburden themselves, as if he were a father confessor, able to offer them salvation and release. In the course of these encounter, George is drawn into their problems and actions. Yet, he is never adversely affected by these involvements. Neither is he threatened by his garrulous father Tom Willard or by the death of his mother, to whom he has been close. George leaves Winesburg when he is eighteen. Significantly, he sets on a departing train in a dreamlike state and, in the closing words of the book,

... When he aroused himself and again looked out of the car window the town of Winesburg had disappeared and his life there had become but a background on which to paint the dreams of his manhood.

The fact that George Willard is able to place the experiences of his years in *Winesburg* in the background of his mind should not be taken to mean that he was insensitive to them, or he failed to perceive the significance of what he has experienced. It is rather a sign that his often painful experiences have not destroyed his capacity to dream, and it is his dreams that will provide direction and motivation in his manhood.

It is, however, wrong to assume that all dreamers find happiness, for there is another type of *Winesburg* dreamer whose dreams are sometimes destroyed. Anderson implies that such people can become grotesques. At least this was the case with Wing Beddebaum, for Anderson states explicitly as Wing's nervous hands tousled the hair of the boys in his school he was attempting "to carry a dream into the young minds". Wing's capacity to dream, and in turn to convey dreams to others, was permanently destroyed by the cruel accusation of the parents of his students.

Elizabeth Willard, George's mother, is the classic example of the ruined dreamer. Her dreams have always been specific: she had wished to become an actress and to enjoy the stimulation of life in the theater. Elizabeth, however, was more willful than prudent, and she unwisely married the garrulous Tom Willard because he was at hand and wanted to marry at the time when the determination to marry came to her". She has spent years chastising herself for the unwise decision. Her health has failed, and at forty-one she appears much older than she actually is.

Elizabeth had paid frequent visits to Dr. Reefy, more for his patient understanding than for medical help. "Something inside them meant the same thing, wanted the same release". Both are dreamers who stand no hope of gaining fulfillment. One afternoon she tells the doctor of her lost dream and of her unhappy marriage. As she speaks, she suddenly becomes animated and they start to embrace. Just then a wooden crate is thrown onto the floor outside the office; Elizabeth become embarrassed and

leaves. The intrusion symbolizes the destruction of the beautiful by the mundane in Elizabeth's life. She and Dr. Reefy never share such an intimate moment again

As with many Anderson characters, their lives are un-lived in the fullest sense of the word. Both Reefy and Elizabeth may be a grotesque in that they seize upon treasured dreams and hold on them throughout their lives. But Elizabeth's dream of theatrical career and Reefy's desire to find someone like his wife, who will give him sympathy and understanding, are beautiful, innocent dreams. Both of these dreamers are basically unselfish, loving and intent upon close communication with mankind. It is in a sense tragic that the innocent dreams of deserving dreamers often go unrealized. But in *Winesburg, Ohio* dreamers such as Reefy and Elizabeth seem fated, either by external circumstances or by the nature of their temperaments, to dream in vain.

Anderson seems to be saying that every man is entitled to his dreams of self-fulfillment. Providing that these dreams do not jeopardize the happiness and well-being of others, they are to be nurtured and pursued. When one's pursuit is thwarted, whether by the actions of another individual or by external conditions over which he has no control, one is to be viewed as a pathetic grotesque, but not necessarily as unattractive. Despite her sickly appearance, Elizabeth remains beautiful throughout her life. Anderson uses the observation of both George and Dr. Reefy as a reflection of her loveliness. Both speak of her as "the dear ... the lovely dear".

It is worth noting that in one of the earliest and most detailed commentaries on *Winesburg, Ohio*, Harry Hansen (1923) made repeated references to the stories as depiction of "types", asserting that they qualified Anderson's name to be linked with that of Chekhov, Hansen urged.

The character's universality ...is distinct; they are types to be found in any community. But the narcissus character of most individual, who look into a mirror and thereupon pronounce all the world beautiful, will not let them acknowledge the typical character of Anderson's people. These critics apply the terms abnormal, subnormal, delinquent, vicious and other epithets that are in current use to designate a variation from the normal and average.... But after all, he was entitled to the right selection. (184)

6. CONCLUSION

It is very much obvious from the above various readings and interpretations that all the stories in *Winesburg, Ohio* have a symbolic philosophy and perspective on human life in general and American conditions during that specific period in particular. However, due to the limited range and specific object of this study, I could not take up and analyze all the stories in *Winesburg, Ohio*. Therefore, I was selective on my choice to a limited number of stories and could assert and claim of the highly symbolic significance of *Winesburg* stories that Sherwood Anderson tried to explore in his book. As the study shows that most of the characters exist mainly through their inner lives and the focus has been on their whims and desires. They were completely deprived any opportunity to communicate among themselves and the society for being afraid of misunderstanding. That is why they have that sense of alienation. Alienation is a key issue that has been raised in this study and it is a common characteristic among all the characters.

Winesburg, Ohio contains, on balance unhappy and unattractive grotesques and victims than optimistic dreamers. Anderson stated that collectively the tales formed "the story of repression, of the strange and almost universal insanity of society". Many readers have thought, therefore, that by showing unattractive side of a large number of *Winesburg* characters, Anderson was attempting to denounce the small town and American culture in general. This is not actually so. His purpose was not to condemn American political system and social institutions. He realized that most Americans were repressed without realizing it. He felt that if Americans could be made to see the extent of their repression in compassionate manner, individual might be made more aware of the sufferings of their fellow beings and act with more understanding toward them.

In *Winesburg, Ohio*, Anderson simply implied that people can become happy and complete when they possess the freedom to follow dreams and ideals, and that they should be encouraged, rather than

Symbolism in Sherwood Anderson's Winesburg, Ohio

thwarted, in this pursuit. Anderson portrayed his fictional small town as being no better and no worse than any other part of America.

Finally, I can very much claim and assert the greatness of Sherwood Anderson as far as the form and technique he innovated in the genre of the short story; and thus he deserved to be placed as a distinctive and major American writer.

Appendix

The complete text of the contents page appears as follows in the first edition of Winesburg, Ohio; The tales and The Persons.

- The Book of the Grotesque
- Hands – concerning Wing Biddlebaum
- Paper Pills – concerning Doctor Reefy
- Mother – concerning Elizabeth Willard
- The Philosopher – concerning Doctor Parcival
- No Body Knows – concerning Louise Trunnion
- Godliness - a tale in four parts
 - Part 1 – concerning Jesse Bentley
 - Part 2 – concerning Jesse Bentley
 - Part 3 – concerning Louis Bentley
 - Part 4 – concerning David Hardy
- A man of Idea – concerning Joe Willing
- Adventure – concerning Alice Hindman
- Respectability – concerning Wash William
- The Thinker – concerning Seth Richmond
- Tandy – concerning Tandy Hard
- The Strength of God – concerning The Reverend Curtis Hartman
- The Teacher – concerning Kate Swift
- Loneliness – concerning Enoch Robinson
- An Awakening – concerning Belle Carpenter
- Queer – concerning Elmer Cowley
- The Untold Lie – concerning Ray Pearson
- Drink – concerning Tom Foster
- Death – concerning Dr. Reefy and Elizabeth Willard
- Sophistication – concerning Helen White
- Departure – concerning George Willard

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