

ANALYSIS

Poor White (1920)

Sherwood Anderson

(1876-1941)

“Hugh McVey, a telegraph operator at Pickleville, near Bidwell, Ohio, is isolated by his shyness from the people around him, whom he hopes to relieve of their back-breaking toil in cabbage planting. He invents a mechanical planter, but Steve Hunter exploits Hugh and the country people by causing them to invest in a company that, like the planter, is a failure. Hugh’s next invention, a corn cutter and a contrivance for loading coal cars, are so successful as to make Steve a millionaire and Bidwell a booming manufacturing town. Hugh, even in prosperity, finds it impossible to bridge the gap between himself and others. His shyness is appreciated only by Clara Butterworth, who marries him after her experiences with other men have left her with a loathing for their brutality.

Bidwell acquires the characteristics of a modern industrial town, with foreign workers crowding its streets, and such craftsmen as Joe Wainsworth, who stand out against the factory, are broken in spirit. Pioneer democracy gives way to class distinctions based on wealth. Bosses and agitators appear, and there are strikes, violence, and killings. Hugh finally awakens from his calculations with gears and levers to a moral evaluation of the corrupting effect on Bidwell and its people.”

James D. Hart

The Oxford Companion to American Literature, 5th edition
(Oxford 1941-83)

“*Poor White* belongs among the few books that have restored with memorable vitality the life of an era, its hopes and desires, its conflicts between material prosperity and ethics, and its disillusionments, in a manner that stimulates the historical imagination.... No novel of the American small town in the Middle West evokes in the minds of its readers so much of the cultural heritage of its milieu as does *Poor White*; nor does Anderson in his later novels ever recapture the same richness of association, the ability to make memorable each scene in the transition from an agrarian way of living to a twentieth-century spectacle of industrial conflict with its outward display of physical comfort and wealth.”

Horace Gregory, ed.

Introduction

The Portable Sherwood Anderson
(Viking 1949) 16, 22

“Nowhere in the work of Anderson is the problem of the machine, of the entire complex pattern of industrialism, put with such force as in *Poor White* (1920)...a novel of transition...from a comparatively simple economy to a complex one; from a moderately peaceful society to one shot through with intrigue and venality; from a Lincolnesque hero to a bewildered half-villain of a dawning industrial age. The years of the novel are 1870-1910, the crucial decades of industrialism in the Midwest; the setting is the small town of Bidwell, Ohio. The hero is Hugh McVey, half folk hero, half industrial genius. In the beginning he has ‘a dreamy detached outlook on life,’ prefers sleeping to progress, suffers the ‘curse of indolence.’ Like the widow Douglas and Miss Watson of *Huckleberry Finn*, Sarah Shepard, a transplanted New Englander, determines that she will reform Hugh, root out his ignorance (as her father had rooted out stumps from pioneer land), save him from the worst of all Puritan sins (this being ‘dreamy and worthless’).

When his father is killed in a drunken brawl (the same fate suffered by *Huckleberry Finn*’s ‘pap’), Hugh McVey is finally persuaded that he must make something of himself. He leaves the forlorn town of Mudcat Landing, travels eastward to Ohio. But making something of himself requires that he discover in himself a skill that he can develop, exploit, and eventually give to the world. That skill is calculation, a restless mathematical urge to count, figure, estimate. ‘Hugh...made a calculation as to the number of pickets in all the fences in town.... He tried to estimate the number of pickets that could be cut out of certain sized

trees.' From then on his life is filled with such movements, gestures, strings of calculation. His great contribution is a talent for abstracting from the life about him, rearranging it in mechanical terms, making an abstract imitation of it that will work; he is the genius of the machine.

He brings his gift to Bidwell, Ohio, a sleepy farming community (with its wise old men, its halfwit, its miser, its annoying go-getters), which is just beginning to stir with frontier energy and enterprise. Here the energy will take the form of industrial progress. Hugh McVey becomes the folk hero of this phase of the frontier epic. Hungry for recognition, anxious to prove himself, he turns to his calculations, is seen working over drawings and figures. He has his first chance to prove his good will when he observes the people in the fields at work on a mechanical substitute, reducing the act of planting to a gesture that can be duplicated by machine.... 'He tried to relate his arms to the mechanical arms of the machine that was being created in his mind.'

He becomes a grotesque of the age of industry, banks, cities, strikes, and slums. The busy entrepreneur, Steve Hunter, soon persuades him that he is important to the town's economy. After an initial failure Hugh's inventions begin the magic process of transforming Bidwell. Gone are 'poetry and vague thoughts'; in their place, restless planning, building, expansion, organization. Only a few citizens resent the change: Ezra French cries out that the machine is contrary to God's will; Joe Wainsworth, skilled maker of harness, becomes 'a silent and disgruntled man.' Most of the townspeople pray to God to protect Hugh's machines and their investments. For Hugh the changes are puzzling and disillusioning; the machine, instead of bringing him closer to the town, has changed the town into an industrial maze, fast becoming a waste land. [Compare T. S. Eliot's poem 'The Waste Land'.]

The real crisis in Anderson's novel, however, is neither economic nor industrial but sexual. His criticism of the age is most incisively given in terms of sex balance: men who become involved in 'calculations' (inventing, business organization, assembly-line disciplines) lose their potency. The heroine of the novel, Clara Butterworth, is a symbol of the neglected earth. She is the goddess of fertility, seeking recognition in the industrial, offering her gift to men who are 'too busy to attend to it.' 'She wanted to draw near to something young, strong, gentle, insistent, beautiful.' But this desire is insulted, ignored; there is no one to 'communicate' with her. Hugh McVey strikes her as the only great man she will ever know—a latter-day Lincoln or Grant, a hero, a 'creative force.' When he proposes marriage, she seizes the opportunity 'like a wild animal seeking prey.' The marriage begins most inauspiciously; shoes in hand, Hugh escapes via the bedroom window. Back in the safety of his workshop, he expresses the fury of his disappointment by smashing a part of his latest invention, as a 'protest against the grotesque position into which he had been thrown by his marriage to Clara.'

The crisis in Hugh's life occurs in his relationship with Clara; sex is not easily understood, cannot be mastered through 'calculation.' The 'gladness' of the body is somehow different from industrial achievement. The scapegoat, Joe Wainsworth, must help resolve the issue. The novel moves toward its melodramatic and symbolic climax: Wainsworth, goaded by his assistant into a frenzy of mechanico-phobia, destroys his employee with his harness knife, cuts the sets of mail-order harness into a thousand pieces, and rushes out of the shop, gun in hand. Clara, her father, and Hugh are out driving in their new car. When Clara hears about Wainsworth's act, she admires him for it: he stood 'for all the men and women in the world who were in secret revolt against the absorption of the age in machines and the products of machines.'

Wainsworth, captured, is taken into town in the Butterworth car; as he is being led to jail, he turns to Hugh and attacks him; springing forward, he 'sank his fingers and teeth into Hugh's neck.' This attack persuades Clara; she comes to Hugh's defense. A few minutes' violence has apparently resolved years of tension and hatred, has united Hugh and Clara, and has restored virility to Hugh. The novel concludes in a haze of resolution. Wainsworth, the tragic figure in this society, has in his act of violent repudiation unwittingly brought the two heroic forces of the novel into satisfactory union.

This is a typically Andersonian vision. The solitary, quiet, half-inarticulate folk hero, in his search for self-identity, turns to his single talent; the talent is foreshortened, grotesque; in consequence of its exercise, business and slums come to the town. The 'natural life' is the pre-industrial illusion, symbolized by the

sluggish Mississippi, on whose banks Hugh once dreamed; the 'artificial' life, the disciplined life, is a product of New England energy and Old Testament conscience. The two corams of life *must* be united, their tensions resolved; and their resolution is portrayed in the long, torturous progress of the marriage. For its happy conclusion, the sacrifice of the artisan, the worn-out, old-fashioned, pre-industrial scapegoat, is essential. Anderson did not deny the industrial age, but he regretted its influence in destroying the 'poetry and vague thoughts' available to a pre-industrial sensibility. In his other fiction there are men who avoid the complications of industrial society, or who live serenely in the midst of it without allowing it to touch them, or who climactically renounce it.

Against the neurosis and fever of this complicated and pointless world, there are the examples of the Negroes whose 'dark laughter' provokes a scornful commentary upon it. The Negroes have somehow come through almost untouched and unharmed; their vital, primitive wisdom is rural, pre-industrial, 'Southern' (as temperamentally opposed to New England), simple, and of the earth... This simplification of racial and human personality was of some importance as an exemplum in the critical text of the 1920s. Waldo Frank's *Holiday* (1923) used it to define the white consciousness in contrast with the black. Carl Van Vechten allowed it to give particular stress to his portrayal of *Nigger Heaven* (1926). This kind of primitivism, at best a convenient distortion of racial realities, was quite significantly a part of the widely expressed opposition to the world allegedly created by 'white' ingenuity and its disciplined commercial drive. Not only the Negro personality, but his music, his art, and the figurations (described by popular anthropologists) of his 'pure,' pre-industrial life, were exploited by those who needed to define their rebellion against the 'machine'."

Frederick J. Hoffman
The Twenties: American Writing in the Postwar Decade
(Viking/Crowell-Collier 1949-62) 302-06

"In *Poor White* Anderson has given untainted expression to the persistent American myth of isolation: the society that has made money its dominant objective indicates its self-doubt and guilt by stubbornly insisting that the wealthy are unhappy; the society that believes, as no other, in success yet feels a need to brand it with disapproval. Hugh McVey, combining two main constituents of American character, Ford's mindless inventiveness and Lincoln's lonely brooding, has been driven to his work largely by the barrenness of his life; which is to say that the rise of American industrial society is the culmination of previous failure in sociality and that in such a society work is intimately related to the absence of creative activity. The central symbol of the book, through which it gains a quality of muted pathos, is the basket woven in desperation: the basket that is neither produce nor commodity but token of despair."

Irving Howe
Sherwood Anderson
(Sloane 1951) 129

"The range and meaning of Anderson's protest found their most successful expression in *Poor White* (1920). Here, in the character of the almost dumbly shy Hugh McVey is a veritable stereotype of pre-industrial man. The irony of the narrative lies in his having perfected a machine for the planting of cabbages because he desperately wants to save the poor laborers in the cabbage fields from their back-breaking work. From this motive, therefore, and not from a lust for power and wealth, McVey becomes an inventor and a servant of the industrial world. He destroys the beauty of Bidwell, which changes from a pleasant small town into an ugly industrial center. Throughout these distressing experiences McVey remains a shy, gentle creature, free of the brutalizing effects of wealth and the temptations of power. At the novel's end he is able to sum up his experience and the town's, using his own unwitting contribution to its corruption as the unholy example.

This novel contributes the simplification of a thesis which is present implicitly or overtly in many of its contemporaries. The thesis embraces Freudian influences as it does social and historical criticisms. The simple, natural soul is one of the victims of a soulless and vulgar materialism; in its primitive habitat, and in such survivals as the Negroes, it had enjoyed the virtues of a simple and unsubtle sincerity; but the advantages of materialism are gained at the sacrifice of man's nobler impulses, which are repressed almost to the point of extinction. The survivor of this holocaust is apparently a man who either remains

remarkably simple in spite of overpowering odds against his chances, or the man who 'has had enough' and who walks out on the world, endlessly explaining and glorifying his decision."

Frederick J. Hoffman
The Modern Novel in America
(Regnery/Gateway 1951,1956,1963) 116-18

"The first part of *Poor White* (1920)—the story of Hugh McVey's shiftless youth in a small Missouri town, of the courage he imbibes from an energetic New England woman, and of his progress as an inventor—is much the best thing Anderson ever produced in a novel. His description of the change from an agricultural to an industrial community has been much praised. Indeed, all three of the novels so far considered are good so long as they keep to the village: it is odd that they should go all to pieces at about the same point. This one crashes with the introduction of the love story, partly because we are asked to establish a new center of interest in mid-narrative and partly because the tale itself becomes both dull and absurd."

Edward Wagenknecht
Cavalcade of the American Novel:
From the Birth of the Nation to the Middle of the Twentieth Century
(Holt 1952) 315

"There is more unity in Anderson's fourth and most scandalous novel, *Many Marriages* (1923), an expanded short story which is largely concerned with the events of a single night. Compared to what had gone before, *Many Marriages* is very objective. Anderson limits both time and space, begins at the end and looks back. Even here, however, the unity achieved is not perfect, for toward the end the point of view shifts from John Webster to his daughter. The narrative starts simply, and rather winningly, as a kind of parable, probing the problem of a middle-aged man, a washing-machine manufacturer in Wisconsin, tied to a clod who does not want to live and would not know how to try. But the climactic scenes, in which John Webster struts naked before an improvised altar and tries to justify himself to his daughter in an interminable monologue whose purpose is to awaken her awareness of life, with disturbing side glances at her sexuality, is too absurd even to be offensive, and his talk, whatever it may have done to the girl, only puts the reader to sleep. At the end, Webster runs off with his stenographer while his wife swallows poison....

It is one thing for a man honestly to admit that he is puzzled by life; it is quite another to make a cult of befuddlement and give the impression of playing the village idiot on purpose. Up until about 1923 Anderson was really groping; after that, he more or less went through the motions. His primitivism, too, suggests a literary attitude, and Rebecca West shows good sense when she remarks of the characters in *Many Marriages* that they 'never seemed to attain the dignity of complete nudity; their complexes clung to them like dark woolen socks.' Anderson has, to be sure, many 'solutions.' They range all the way from just walking out to joining the Communist Party. But one gathers that it was the walking out that he enjoyed most. He could not adjust himself to the ever-present condition of our life here: the compromise between the real and the ideal. As an artist, he was always limited to the particular effects he could secure within the range of an artfully simple, though, in its way, very accomplished technique. When he got beyond that range, he could only cry, 'I have a wonderful story to tell, but I know no way to tell it.'"

Edward Wagenknecht
Cavalcade of the American Novel:
From the Birth of the Nation to the Middle of the Twentieth Century
(Holt 1952) 316, 318

"*Poor White* (1920) is a portrait of a midwestern farming town and its moral destruction by the encroachment of industrialism; the time is the end of the nineteenth century. The central character, a country boy named Hugh McVey, is inspired by wondrous tales of New England factories and cities by his foster parents. Henry and Sarah Shepherds. He invents a crop-setting machine and manages to persuade Steve Hunter, a wealthy and educated local citizen, to sponsor a company to manufacture the invention. After several failures a successful machine is developed, and gradually Bidwell is industrialized. But the results are not quite as McVey had visualized.

Factory workers, strangers with new and disturbing ways, invade the town, and many people, like Joe Wainsworth, the local harness-maker, lose their savings through unwise and hasty investments. To Wainsworth the factory becomes a symbol of everything hateful and menacing in the modern age; not only has he lost his savings through speculation, but his business collapses because people now prefer to buy machine-made harness. Brooding on this, he finally becomes unbalanced, murders Hunter, and attacks and almost kills McVey. This incident makes McVey begin to doubt the worth of the change he has wrought in the town.

A secondary plot relates McVey's romance with Clara Butterworth, who returns to Bidwell after three years in the larger city of Columbus; the two are married at the height of McVey's success, and it is Clara who finally prevents Wainsworth from murdering her husband. As the novel ends, McVey, disillusioned with the new world of the machine, finds consolation in his happiness with Clara and in plans for the future of the child which his wife is soon to bear. This novel, thematically similar to the tales of *Winesburg, Ohio*, thus ends on a more positive note, admitting the possibility of individual happiness even in a world of disillusionment and frustration."

Donald Heiney
Recent American Literature 4
(Barron's Educational Series 1958) 299-300

"Even before *Winesburg, Ohio* was published, Anderson began his next novel, *Poor White*. Finished and published in 1920, it is his best attempt in the form, but still much less satisfactory than the best of the stories. Bringing to it what he had learned about style in *Winesburg, Ohio* and hoping again to accommodate a certain 'looseness' of structure by making the community itself the unifying center—the explicit theme now is the transformation of an agrarian to an industrial way of life—the narrative focus shifts so frequently and so drastically that the total is not 'a new looseness' but a thematic confusion."

Mark Schorer
Major Writers of America II
(Harcourt 1962) 675

Michael Hollister (2015)