

## ANALYSIS BY CHAPTER

*Winesburg, Ohio* (1919)



Sherwood Anderson

(1876-1941)

The book is set in about 1900 in fictional Winesburg--based on Clyde, Ohio--located in farmland about 18 miles south of Lake Erie, with a population of 1,800.

“The Book of the Grotesque”

The old writer is an archetypal “wise old man,” Anderson’s ideal as a writer. His *Winesburg, Ohio* is parallel to *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1916) by James Joyce, except that Anderson presents an image of himself first as he hopes to be—presenting in an overture the values, themes, motifs and vision of his book. Then he portrays himself as he more or less actually was as a young man like George Willard. The disparity between the ideal and the real generates ironies throughout the narrative. The white mustache of the writer initiates a color motif that culminates in Helen White at the climax of *Winesburg*. White has differing connotations in the book, including both purity and sterility depending on the context, though not as many implications as Melville elucidates in “The Whiteness of the Whale.”

The symbolic mode of this overture is simplified, general, abstract and allegorical, setting it apart from the particularized Realism to follow in the book. “The windows of the house [psyche] in which he lived were high [idealistic] and he wanted to look at the trees [Nature] when he awoke in the morning.” The ideal writer dreams [creates] in an elevated state, as his bed [position] has been raised to be “on a level with the window” [idealistic vision]. What elevated his vision? A carpenter, repeatedly a Christ-evoking figure in American literature, usually an icon of idealism, with exceptions such as the Existentialist carpenter on the Pequod as Melville allegorizes alternatives to the Christian trinity.

This carpenter is immediately elevated in our esteem by reference to his having fought for the Union in the Civil War, identifying him with personal sacrifice and freeing slaves. Add to his suffering that he has been a prisoner of war in Andersonville Prison—an infamous Hell. And that he lost a brother there. “The brother had died of starvation, and whenever the carpenter got upon that subject he cried.” Many men become brothers in adversity, suggesting the idealistic theme that all men are brothers, making the Civil War especially horrible. When the carpenter cries, he has a heart. When he smokes a cigar it makes him a common man rather than a paradigm. That he like the writer has a white mustache identifies them with each other as pure of evil, unlike the several hateful characters in *Winesburg*. “The weeping old man with the cigar in his mouth was ludicrous.” Despite the appearance, he is by implication noble. Likewise, we are not to judge the “grotesques” in *Winesburg* by mere appearances.

The old writer not only has a heart, he has heart trouble. His feeling of pregnancy is a metaphor of the creative process. Anderson uses a faltering style to convey his groping for words to convey his idealism, personified as Joan of Arc—his muse. “No, it wasn’t a youth, it was a woman, young, and wearing a coat of mail like a knight. It is absurd, you see, to try to tell what was inside the old writer as he lay on his high bed and listened to the fluttering of his heart.” He cannot tell it directly. As a writer (a Modernist in the mode of *holistic realism*) he must *evoke* his meaning in the reader, who discovers it for himself as in a dream of his own. In personifying his meaning in a woman, Anderson exhibits the creative intercourse of the masculine and the feminine sides of a person (a synergy embodied in Joan of Arc) that Virginia Woolf said must take place if a work of art is to be “fertilized.” The “dreaming” of the writer is the process by which Anderson said he wrote: “He imagined the young indescribable thing within himself was driving a long procession of figures before his eyes.”

“All of the men and women the writer had ever known had become grotesques. The grotesques were not all horrible.” Some are beautiful. “It was his notion that the moment 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.” Even the noble carpenter, who “became the nearest thing to what is understandable and loveable of all the grotesques in the writer’s book.” Apparently the suffering and death of his brother is the crippling emotional truth that has made the carpenter one of the grotesques, or perhaps it is the idealistic feeling that all men are brothers. That virtually everyone is a grotesque, reducing life to one big Truth or another—such as Death—is the primary thematic chain that links the characters of *Winesburg* together. The reader is encouraged to empathize with the “grotesque” in each story and to consider how his or her single Truth became a falsehood.

#### “Hands”

Anderson boldly introduces his procession of “grotesques” with a loner who is implicitly homosexual, at a time in history when the subject was not discussed among respectable people. Wing Biddlebaum was slandered, beaten up and driven out of his teaching position in another town without a hearing, based simply on *accusations* of molesting students. He almost got lynched. His innocence of wrongdoing is implied by his “white forehead” due to the motif of white purity begun in the overture.

The decadence of small-town America is imaged at the outset by weeds and the half-decayed veranda of his house. The happy hands of passing young berry pickers are contrasted to the “guilty” hands of Wing, who used to be a champion picker. In keeping with the tone of the book as a whole, the name Wing Biddlebaum combines the sublime with the ridiculous, the elevated with the mundane, the transcendent with the fiddle-bum. Wings are traditionally an image connoting freedom, but this Wing is singular and can no longer fly. His hands are like “the beating of the wings of an imprisoned bird.” He is a grotesque trapped by his one Truth, which has become a falsehood: He must keep his hands to himself.

George Willard the reporter is a natural listener. Until the end of the book he is too young and naive to understand the people he talks to, yet he absorbs their stories and each becomes a part of him, contributing to the experiences he needs to become a writer. He becomes so much “the spirit of the town,” as Elmer Cowley calls him, that he seems to be present figuratively even in the stories in which he is not present literally. In the story of Wing, he pays so much attention to the pathetic nervous fluttering of Wing’s hands

that hands become a strong motif in the book hereafter, evoking the inhibition of the common human desire to reach out and touch someone, for fear of the consequences.

Wing seizes the opportunity to become a teacher again when he tells George, "You have the inclination to be alone and to dream and you are afraid of dreams." Wing urges him to dream—to have ideals—before his mother does in the narrative. He is on her side and Anderson's side against the practical materialism of Tom Willard. Variations of the word *dream* occur 6 more times in this story. Wing speaks "as one lost in a dream." And his vision of an ideal society resembles Anderson's: "...men lived again in a kind of pastoral golden age....the young men came to gather about the feet of an old man who sat beneath a tree in a tiny garden and who talked to them." This old man is a wishful projection of Wing himself, he also recalls the old writer, and because he is sitting under a tree he brings to mind Buddha.

Sadly, the fallen Wing will never be that old man: His "hands were but fluttering pennants of promise." Ironically, he was done in by a homosexual: "A half-witted boy of the school became enamored of the young master. In his bed at night he imagined unspeakable things and in the morning went forth to tell his dreams as facts. Strange, hideous accusations fell from his loose-hung lips." Beaten and driven out, Wing is so traumatized he loses his true identity and takes a new name off a box he sees in a freight station. George becomes "the medium through which he expressed his love of man."

Wing's purity of purpose is imaged again in his small "white" body, his washing of soiled dishes, and his eating stray white bread crumbs in the concluding scene, evoking the Christian ritual of the Eucharist: "the kneeling figure looked like a priest engaged in some service of his church. The nervous expressive fingers, flashing in and out of the light, might well have been mistaken for the fingers of the devotee going swiftly through decade after decade of his rosary." The extension in time is a sad recognition that his story of unjust persecution—a kind of crucifixion—is an ongoing revelation of human nature.

#### "Paper Pills"

Doctor Reefy is "an old man with a white beard" who used to ride a "white horse." In Reefy "there were the seeds of something very fine." The motif of white links him to the wise old writer in the overture, except that in Reefy's case the white connotes lost idealism and current sterility--like his paper pills. Darkness is introduced as a counter motif--connoting passion, fertility and Nature. Doctor Reefy marries a *dark* girl who inherited a *fertile* farm. Within a year she dies. After that he is so depressed he "sat all day in his empty office close by a window that was covered with cobwebs. He never opened the window." The Doctor is sick. He has closed himself off from the world and is stuck like his window. He "had worn one suit of clothes for ten years."

The story of his relationship to the dark girl he married "is delicious, like the twisted little apples that grow in the orchards of Winesburg." The rejected apples, grotesques like his patients, "look like the knuckles of Doctor Reefy's hands." The dark girl, identified with an apple, becomes an innocent Eve. Reefy's knuckles identify him with knowledge of those he handles. "Only the few know the sweetness of the twisted apples." When he was a young and idealistic doctor, Reefy used to philosophize to himself, forming a truth that "arose gigantic in his mind," only to fade and be displaced by another gigantic truth. He jotted his big ideas down on scraps of paper only to throw them away one after another.

The dark girl first comes to see Doctor Reefy because she is pregnant and frightened. By age 45, he is no longer so idealistic, as indicated by his riding a "jaded grey horse." In her humanity and need, the pregnant girl contrasts with the abstractly pregnant truths he aborts and throws away. She is real life, offering the potential of new life. He learns her Truth. After her parents died she had suitors attracted to her money. One with white hands "talked continually of virginity"—his Truth—but underneath "she began to think there was a lust greater than in all the others." She dreams three times that "he had bitten into her body"—like into an apple. But she is impregnated by the "black-haired" suitor "who said nothing at all but who in the moment of his passion actually did bite her shoulder so that for days the marks of his teeth showed." Here white signifies a false appearance of purity, and silence a false appearance of inhibition. What happens to the inexperienced girl is as shocking to her as a rape.

She is so traumatized she has become sociopathic—without empathy, hence grotesque—as she displays when Doctor Reefy pulls out a woman’s tooth. The patient bleeds down her white dress and both she and her husband scream, but the “dark girl did not pay any attention.” Reefy is kind, he smiles at her and takes her out and marries her. By then both of them have “discovered the sweetness of the twisted apples.” But then she dies after only a year, not pregnant after all. That he could not save her—his own wife—gives birth to his Big Truth. He stops practicing and his single Truth becomes a falsehood—that his life is no longer worth living. He spends his time writing thoughts on scraps of paper, then laughing at himself and stuffing them into his pockets where they become little balls, or “paper pills.”

His thoughts are futile. Like placebos, they cure nothing, just as he has given up trying to cure anyone. Sometimes he throws his paper pills, his futile abstractions, at his friend who grows trees, identifying the nursery man with Nature, in contrast. Anderson is affirming Nature, primal human experience and feeling against intellection. Yet Nature is what traumatized the dark girl and killed her. And the parallel between the doctor and his pills implies that both could still help to heal, depending on the nature of his thoughts. After all, the competent practice of medicine requires thought. Anderson considered his own thoughts worth expressing in many stories and books. Reefy is a disillusioned idealist who has become impotent and cynical, as if there is no truth, like a Postmodernist.

### “Mother”

“Mother” is the deepest in pathos of the stories in *Winesburg*, until the emotional climax of the book when grief and realization transform George into a man—her “Death.” In a sense, like others in town, she has been dead all along. *Winesburg* resembles the later play *Our Town*, except that here the ghosts “on all sides” are not of the dead, “but of living people.” When the “ghostly” Elizabeth Willard tries to make contact with her son, she might as well have been trying to bridge life and death through a séance: “In the evening when the son sat in the room with his mother, the silence made them both feel awkward. Darkness came when the evening train came in at the station.” The random sounds from the town are routine and trivial compared to the poignant drama of mother and son.

The estrangement even of people who love each other—inarticulate and repressed—is common in the world, Anderson implies. The symbolic walls of Winesburg imprison people within themselves, looking out through a dim window as Elizabeth does, only to see a reflection of herself in the ineffectual pursuit of Abner Groff chasing a *grey* cat: “It seemed like a rehearsal of her own life, terrible in its vividness.” She feels the meaning so intensely she “put her head down on her long *white* hands and wept.” This is her moment of Existential confrontation with meaninglessness, the same attitude that her son will overcome at the end through his communion with Helen *White* in the high grandstand of “Sophistication.”

In contrast to that scene, in this one neither George nor his mother are able to express their love for each other and the pathos is deepened by silence and clumsiness: “George Willard arose and crossing the room fumbled for the doorknob. Sometimes he knocked against a chair, making it scrape along the floor. By the window sat the sick woman, perfectly still, listless. Her long hands, white and bloodless, could be seen drooping over the ends of the arms of the chair. ‘I think you had better be out among the boys. You are too much indoors,’ she said, striving to relieve the embarrassment of his departure. ‘I thought I would take a walk,’ replied George Willard...”

What follows, what she can never express to George, is the story of her life in images of light and dark. It is a tragedy of disillusionment, the loss of her dream in the course of an isolated life endured in frustration, hatred and despair. The account of her sad life shrouds the room at the end of this story, as mother and son sit again in silence together. She has invested all the meaning of her life on the chance that her son is “not a dull clod.” Like her husband. “A thousand times she had whispered to herself of the matter.” Despite the failure of her own dream, she tries to teach her son to pursue a spiritual goal in life—to dream. “It is the thing I let be killed in myself.” To the contrary, her crass husband keeps urging the boy to “wake up” and become a “success” in life. George’s parents become allegorical figures who personify the dominant opposing values influencing him: conventional materialistic society versus the free soul. Anderson’s pastoralism is expressed in his siding absolutely with the values of the heart against those of the

head. George loves his mother, who hates his father. “Again, as on the other evenings, they were embarrassed. After a time the boy tried again to talk.”

George tells her that he will be leaving Winesburg because of “something father said.” His uncertain rattling of the doorknob magnifies suspense. To his dying mother, he embodies all the meaning in her life poised on a threshold. This is an example of what Eliot would later call the “objective correlative.” George has not yet formulated his plans and to the reader his words here are ambiguous, but his mother is able to infer that she has prevailed over her husband, that her son is not a “clod” and will pursue a dream in life. “He fumbled with the doorknob. In the room the silence became unbearable to the woman. She wanted to cry out with joy because of the words that had come from the lips of her son, but this expression of joy had become impossible to her. Anderson uses the technique of repetition he learned from Gertrude Stein. He emphasizes inhibition by her repression of her joy and by her changing the subject and repeating what she has said before. Ironically, she is the one who is too much indoors: “I think you had better go out among the boys. You are too much indoors,’ she said. ‘I thought I would go for a little walk,’ replied the son stepping awkwardly out of the room and closing the door.”

#### “The Philosopher”

The tone of the book changes from pathos in the first 3 stories to ironic. In the tradition of Naturalism, deterministic forces are emphasized in the focus on characters who have been emotionally crippled by events, but free will and hope are embodied in young George Willard. His decision to assert his independence by leaving Winesburg has brought joy to his dying mother.

Irony is generated in the second sentence of this story by the contradiction between “Doctor Parcival” and the color motif: Parcival was the legendary knight who sought the Holy Grail, a personification of virtuous idealism—spiritually pure and traditionally symbolized by white. In ironic contrast, Doctor Parcival “always wore a dirty waistcoat.” Always. He sleeps in an office “that was unspeakably dirty.” In a dirty lunchroom “filled with flies” he eats food served by a man in a white apron “more dirty than the floor.” He is a dirty doctor, if doctor at all. “His teeth were black and irregular and there was something strange about his eyes. The window/eye motif in *Winesburg* appears in the description of Doctor Parcival’s twitching left eye: “...it was exactly as though the lid of the eye were a window shade and somebody stood inside the doctor’s head playing with the cord.”

The two doctors in *Winesburg* are moral opposites who are both village “philosophers.” Doctor Reefy is implicitly a goodhearted doctor so sensitive he gives up medicine with low self-esteem because he fails to cure his own wife. Doctor Parcival is a dangerous egomaniac, a near sociopath as close to Satan—though he is also a paranoid ridden with guilt—as any character in Anderson’s moral allegory. Doctor Reefy is closer in character to the idealized old writer in the overture than anyone else in the book, though he contrasts in being emotionally crippled and giving up. He has a white beard and the old writer a white mustache, whereas Parcival has a “drooping mouth covered by a yellow mustache.” Reefy is exemplary in his capacity for transcendence of pain and grief when he is able to be playful with his friend, mocking himself by throwing away his paper pill placebos.

Young *Will-ard* is employed by *Will* Henderson, a *willful* “sensualist” who drinks a lot and talks about women. Parcival likewise is identified with George in a psychological allegory of moral development in the tradition of Hawthorne: “You are a reporter just as I was once....” Both want to be writers but they are moving in opposite directions. “Doctor Parcival appeared immediately after Will Henderson had disappeared.” George’s own willful sensuality, most evident in the next story “Nobody Knows,” gives way to his calculated pursuit of an egocentric goal, like Parcival, until his disillusionment in “An Awakening” and his eventual attainment of a higher moral consciousness with Helen White. At this immature stage, he fails to recognize the contrast between Doctor Reefy and Doctor Parcival—good and evil, truth and fraud—though he is given plenty of evidence. He is fascinated by Parcival. He even “began to admire the fat unclean-looking man.”

Parcival exposes his immaturity—in contrast to Reefy—and his sense of inferiority when he tells George, “I have a desire to make you admire me.” An outsider in Winesburg, “He came from Chicago and

when he arrived was drunk and got into a fight..." He was thrown in jail. Parcival compensates for his guilt and low opinion of himself with boasting and arrogance. Yet like a lowly scavenger, he will eat anything: "Use up food that you wouldn't otherwise sell. It makes no difference to me. I am a man of distinction." Confessing indirectly, he hints to George that he may be concealing his true identity because he is a murderer who stole a lot of money from a real doctor in Chicago, then assumed his identity and set up a minimal practice in Winesburg, a fraud posing as a self-sacrificial physician to the poor. His guilty conscience keeps suggesting to George "the notion of looking me up."

Parcival's father was insane, his mother poor. Whereas he is dirty, his mother "took in washing...she spent her time over the washtub scrubbing people's dirty clothes." She had a dream that he would become a minister, but he turned insane himself with jealousy and hatred of his brother, because his mother loved his brother more than him, even though the brother "despised everyone." Parcival has been conditioned to believe that money is more rewarded than virtue. He hates this perversion of values and becomes the opposite of the Christ-evoking carpenter who loves his brother. Stealing from his brother, he turns against his own religion: "I was a regular ass about saying prayers." He has become so crass he blesses the body of his father as if it is a dead animal: "Let peace brood over this carcass." Stealing from his own brother sets up the implication that he stole the life of a real doctor.

Generally speaking, Parcival has devolved into a Postmodernist: "It seemed to the boy that the man had but one object in view, to make everyone seem despicable. 'I want to fill you with hatred and contempt so that you will be a superior being.' He refuses to go down out of his office to attend a child struck down in the street, fearing exposure as a fake doctor. Instead he exposes himself as a moral grotesque. Mistaken about everything, he is terrified that his refusal has become public knowledge and that as a consequence he will be lynched—martyred and "uselessly crucified." The murderer is paranoid about appearances, arrogantly equates himself with Christ and projecting his megalomania urges George to convey his Big Truth to the world: "that everyone in the world is Christ and they are all crucified." Anderson shows that while many people suffer injustice, few sacrifice themselves for others.

#### "Nobody Knows"

"Nobody Knows," a story of sex in the dark, follows the mistaken fear of Parcival that his misconduct had been exposed to the light of day and "everybody knows." The irony in this story is that those who count the most—Louise Trunnion and George himself—both know. George becomes "wholly the male, bold and aggressive," without any balance of the feminine. Young Willard's exploitation of Louise in the dark is "sensual" like his employer Will Henderson and "dirty" in a moral sense like Parcival, because in "his heart there was no sympathy for her." Louise is "washing dishes," clean except for her "soiled" dress and a "black smudge on the side of her nose"—an emblem of passion. Motifs of darkness and hands also reappear: "He wanted to touch her with his hand."

Also ironic is George's response to her note: "'I'm yours if you want me,' it said. He thought it annoying that in the darkness by the fence she had pretended there was nothing between them." George wants no consequences, no ties, and has no sympathy for her, yet he is annoyed that she does not have more feeling for *him*. A further irony is the possibility that Louise, lonely and inarticulate, actually does feel more than lust and wants a romantic communion rather than a one-time roll in the weeds at a dead end. He leads her across a "bridge" to nowhere. The emptiness of their trite liaison is evoked by "another vacant lot in which corn grew. The street ended." They sit down where empty crates will be stored.

Afterward George feels so "satisfied" and so much like a man he buys a cigar, recalling the black cigars Parcival carries in his dirty waistcoat. A puffed up George Willard whistles over "toward the *New Willard House*" (italics added). But he is not there yet—not yet worthy of Helen White. He is still an adolescent, as implied by his stopping at a fence covered with circus pictures, by his not yet lighting the cigar and by his state of mind: "She hasn't got anything on me. Nobody knows."

#### "Godliness"

Anderson uses this four-part story to expand his vision, taking us out into the farmland around the town and placing Winesburg in the continuum of history. On their farm the Bentleys are old and “colorless” figures now fading into the past, except for Jesse when he grows ambitious after the Civil War. They have emerged from “pioneer life,” when conditions were “coarse and brutal.” Jesse’s wife “worked every day from sunrise until late at night and then after giving birth to a child she died.” Like Willa Cather, Anderson affirms “the heroic labor of breaking up new ground,” then laments the later decadence.

Jesse Bentley is not a brute, by nature he is “sensitive” like George Willard, but he is so absorbed in his own ambition not to be a “clod”—as Elizabeth Willard feared George might be—that he becomes insensitive to others, as in working his wife to death. He represents the hard Puritan spirit of the pioneers. His character and his Old Testament religion are out of date after the Civil War and corrupted by the “will to power” that comes with industrialization. He is traditional Patriarchy Anderson uses the “mythic method” of the Modernists, to a much simpler extent, three years before T.S. Eliot in “The Waste Land” and James Joyce in *Ulysses* (1922): Jesse casts himself as a mythic hero corresponding to his namesake in the *Bible*, whereas in fact, ironically, he becomes a decadent grotesque contrasting with the original Jesse: “O God, create in me another Jesse, like that one of old, to rule over men and to be the father of sons who shall be rulers!” He comes to think that “something like a halo of Godly approval hung over him.” Feeling righteous, he “grew avaricious.” In fact, he grows into a Goliath of greed. The great irony of the story is that Jesse himself is the Philistine he vows to send a David out to slay.

## II

His offspring is a “modern woman.” Louise Bentley frustrated her father’s desire for a son to act out his dream. She was emotionally crippled by Patriarchy, feeling unwanted. Frustrated herself, she feels trapped in her marriage with an unwanted child. The color motif calls attention to her “black hair”—connoting passion—and to her “sharp grey eyes.” After he loses his youthful idealism, Doctor Reefy’s horse changes from white to “jaded grey.” Throughout *Winesburg* the color grey connotes futility and living death, as in the cases of Ebenezer Cowley, Aunt Elizabeth Swift, and Joe Welling’s mother with her “peculiar ashy complexion.” Abner Groff chases a grey cat, the killer Tom King rides a grey horse and the black dye runs out of Tom Willard’s grey mustache as he weeps over his dying wife.

Out in the countryside away from the isolating rooms and walls and vacant lots of the town, Anderson’s *agrarian* and *folk* pastoralisms are expressed when David goes to live on the Bentley farm: “Everyone in the old house became happy after the boy went there.” Among these rural people David experiences the human communion and love that is so exceptional in Winesburg: “he wanted to embrace everyone in the house.... There in the country all sounds were pleasant sounds”—in contrast to “his mother’s angry voice that had always made him tremble.” Louise the modern woman and Jesse the traditional patriarch are both afflicted by “industrialization”: “the most materialistic age in the history of the world...when men would forget God...when the will to power would replace the will to serve and beauty would be well-nigh forgotten in the terrible headlong rush of mankind toward the acquiring of possessions.... The greedy thing in him wanted to make money faster than it would be made by tilling the land.” When he invents a machine to improve fence-building, Jesse has *become* the Machine in the Garden. His psychological imbalance is physically manifest, as in Hawthorne’s villains: “At one time in his life he had been threatened with paralysis and his left side remained somewhat weakened. As he talked his left eyelid twitched.” Doctor Parcival likewise has a twitching left eyelid. The left side of the body in most people is controlled by the right brain, represented in metaphor as the heart.

Jesse has a white beard, his carriage is pulled by a white horse, his prayers are sincere, and he *appears* to be pure in his righteousness: “He wanted to be a man of God and a leader among men of God.” However, his will to power has corrupted his character. His young grandson David is an innocent cast by name as an underdog savior—a Christ-evoking figure. Old Jesse has become such a fanatic that the reader may anticipate the possibility that he will harm the boy, like the biblical Abraham who was prepared to sacrifice his son for God. “The whole left side of his face twitched.” David now embodies both the pastoral values of the heart and the transcendent values of the soul. As such he rejects the “dangerous and brutal” aspect of his grandfather—embodying puritanical excesses of the head—as “someone else.” He runs

away but falls and hits his head, remaining vulnerable, unable as yet to understand his grandfather—his own cultural past. Like Captain Ahab, Jesse becomes tragic by retaining his humanity, as he takes David home with the boy's "cut and bleeding head held tenderly against his shoulder."

### III

Louise is "one of the race of over-sensitive women that in later days industrialism was to bring in such great numbers into the world." Anderson here agrees with D.H. Lawrence that many women do not adapt well to industrialized modern life, that it dissociates them from nature, makes them neurotic and unfulfilled. He emphasizes even more, as in *Dark Laughter*, that industrialization has done the same to men, rendering many impotent. He offends Postmodern feminists by diagnosing Louise's neurosis as "wanting love more than anything else in the world and not getting it"—rather than wanting a career more than anything. He reminds us that this is rural America in an agrarian age, up to the early 20<sup>th</sup> century: "ideas in regard to social classes had hardly begun to exist."

Louise Bentley is contrasted to Louise Trunnion: "...although the thing she wanted so earnestly was something very warm and close it had as yet no connection with sex." Her note to George Willard is more intelligent and spiritually elevated above Louise Trunnion's note in explicitly looking for love. The maturation of George is paralleled in the book by female maturation as represented by the progression from Louise Trunnion through Louise Bentley to Helen White. Louise Bentley liberates herself by refusing to be conventional—to conform to passivity as a "nice girl." She goes after what she wants: "Louise Bentley took John Hardy to be her lover." She took him. But then John "did not listen" and "in the end she did not want to be kissed. She did not know what she wanted."

She feels trapped by her own decision to marry John—"tricked" by Nature when she thought she was pregnant. When David is born she is so angry and bitter "she could not nurse him and did not know whether she wanted him or not." Ironically, by making him feel unwanted, she does to her son what her father did to her. She becomes, in effect, a radical Feminist: "Had it been a woman child there is nothing in the world I would not have done for it." Also ironically, Louise becomes the moral equivalent of Old Jesse the patriarch, as is George in his exploitation of Louise Trunnion.

### IV

Jesse takes the boy David out with him to sacrifice a lamb. Animal sacrifice was a barbaric ritual that contradicted Christianity--the sacrifice of Christ as "the lamb of God." Old Jesse mutters, "I must put the blood of the lamb on the head of the boy." David's innocence is equated with the lamb: "His face became as white as the fleece of the lamb." Both run away from Jesse. Defending himself, David uses his sling to hit Jesse in the head and free himself and the lamb, an adaptation of the biblical story. Ironically he thinks he has "killed the man of God," whereas Anderson has cast David himself as the agent of the divine. Like Hawthorne almost a century before, Anderson advocates replacing the primitive Calvinistic Puritanism traditional in America with a more humane pastoral religion of the heart. Old Jesse is redeemed by young David, as is evident in the end when he confesses, "I was too greedy for glory."

#### "A Man of Ideas"

"Astride an idea, Joe was overmastering. His personality became gigantic." Joe resembles Jesse. Overall, however, Joe Welling is the opposite of Jesse Bentley: Jesse is a wealthy self-made man, Joe lives with his mother. Jesse is the agrarian past, Joe the industrialized present: "Joe was the Standard Oil agent in Winesburg and in several towns up and down the railroad..." Standard Oil epitomized the rapid industrialization of America. Oil wells had become conspicuous. As an agent of Standard Oil Joe *Well*-ing represents, literally, the fuel of industrial development. Joe is the voice of modern business enterprise, entrepreneurship and marketing. Joe Welling is Anderson himself writing ad copy—"a man of ideas"—banal, trivial, worthless ideas. Ironically, Joe's teeth are tipped with gold.

Joe also resembles Jesse in his frustration and egotism. He is boastful like Doctor Parcival and thinks he would be great if he was doing something else, like running a newspaper. He even tells George, "I should



have your place.” He seems to be thinking the same thing about the Kings, owners of the local cider mill. Otherwise why would he “fall in love” with Sarah King, a “sad-looking woman” with “dark rings under her eyes” who lives across from the cemetery? The Kings are “dangerous.” One is reputed to be a murderer and once killed a dog with a stick. Yet Joe Welling is so enthusiastic, so voluble and slick and well-oiled—like advertising—the Kings accept him: “As he had swept all men before him, so now Joe Welling was carrying the two men in the room off their feet with a tidal wave of words.”

#### “Adventure”

“Adventure” is the most Naturalist of the stories in *Winesburg*, apart from aesthetics and style. Alice Hindman is born into the Victorian paradigm of manners, morals and gender roles. She is willing to liberate herself, to live with her boyfriend Ned in the city and marry later, but she has been conditioned to feel permanently committed to him because she slept with him once: “I am his wife whether he comes back or not.” This is an expression of the sentimental Romanticism that informs the old Victorian paradigm. Anderson is a Realist in implying that her prolonged loyalty to Ned is foolish. Like Old Jesse, but unlike his daughter Louise, Alice is out of date: She “could not have understood the growing modern idea of a woman’s owning herself and giving and taking for her own ends in life.”

A bohemian himself (who had 4 wives), Anderson expresses his sympathy for women’s liberation and dramatizes the pathos of Alice waiting for Ned until “the beauty and freshness of youth had passed.” She goes out with a drug clerk and reaches out and touches him in the darkness, though she knows “It is not him that I want.” Contrary to the denial of free will common to Naturalists, Anderson gives Alice a choice. She chooses to reject the drug clerk. She outlives her dependence on Ned, to such an extent that “She did not want Ned or any other man. She wanted to be loved, to have something answer the call that was growing louder and louder within her.” Although she has liberated herself from convention in no longer wanting either Ned or marriage, she retains her desire “to be loved.” Not to love—to *be* loved. By now perhaps even the drug clerk would qualify as a lover, but Alice is not as bold as Louise Bentley, and she is no longer young. She waited too long.

Despite its aesthetics and its implication that Alice has free will—which makes this story tragic rather than merely gothic—“Adventure” is usually seen by critics as proving that Anderson is a Naturalist because it exhibits *some* of the characteristics of Naturalism: (1) the *determinism* of her Victorian conditioning; (2) her feeling *trapped*; (3) her *deterioration*; (4) her *atavism*—regression to an animal state—crawling on the ground; and (5) that life can be a *dirty trick*. Sexual repression is an emphasis shared with Freud, except that Anderson says what Alice wants is not sex for itself but “to be loved.” The ironic ending is a dirty trick. So desperate that in “madness” she runs out naked into the rain, Alice encounters a man all right—an *old* man, somewhat deaf and apparently *blind*! She runs out naked into the world and is not even noticed! Feeling older than ever, she crawls back inside herself, gets into bed and turns her face to her wall, facing isolation and resigned to loneliness.

#### “Respectability”

The ironic tone of *Winesburg* extends into the title “Respectability” and the first name of dirty Wash Williams, a telegraph operator who cannot communicate in his personal life. Anderson introduces Wash as a generic male animal by comparing him to a caged monkey, an ugly baboon that reminds women of male acquaintances. “Everything about him was unclean. Even the whites of his eyes looked soiled.” Dirty Wash recalls the dirty Doctor Parcival.

Wash is the male counterpart to Louise Bentley in hating the opposite gender—a misogynist brute. Both are social types, as characters tend to be in the tradition of Realism. Wash personifies an ugly feeling common to many men, who sense in Wash “a glowing resentment of something [they] had not the courage to resent.” Confiding in the darkness, Wash tells George the story of how he turned from a “comely youth” into an ugly old man. He is sitting on old railroad ties that are “decayed” like Wash himself, and not going anywhere. Once he married a woman he loved “with a love as absorbing as the hatred he later felt for all women.” He was so devoted that he did nothing but send her home to her mother when he discovered that she “had managed to acquire three other lovers who came regularly to our house when I was away at

work.” He gave her all his money and sold their house and gave her that money too. He responded to her betrayal with restraint and generosity. “I love her yet.”

What turned him into an ugly grotesque was not his wife’s disloyalty—“I ached to forgive and forget”—it was the shocking response by her mother. This “respectable” mother asks him over to her house and pimps her daughter into stripping naked, then pushes her into the parlor with Wash. This reduces his wife to a prostitute and Wash to an animal easily manipulated with sex—like a monkey. Still loving his defiled wife but alienated from her by disgust, Wash can love no other. He recalls Alice Hindman who is trapped by her love for Ned. Alienated now from all women, Wash generalizes his anger from the mother to her gender and vents it in hate speech. In his verbal revenge, ironically, he becomes the “perverted” grotesque stereotype the mother saw him as being. His single grotesque “truth” that “all women are bitches” is contradicted by the examples of other women in *Winesburg*, including Elizabeth Willard, Alice Hindman, Kate Swift, Belle Carpenter, and Helen White. In contrast, George like Walt Whitman enlarges with diversity, identifying with all he comes to know in Winesburg, even ugly old Wash: “The young reporter felt ill and weak. In imagination, he also became old and shapeless.”

#### “The Thinker”

Seth Richmond is the rival of George Willard for the affection of Helen White. The Richmonds lost their riches and the name Virginia Richmond, Seth’s mother, evokes the faded aristocratic past of the South. In contrast George is democratic in spirit and identifies with common people, as connoted by the New Willard Hotel and as evinced throughout *Winesburg*. Seth rebels against conventionality by running off for awhile with two other teenage boys. They ride a freight car with “drunken Negroes,” drink “black-berry wine”—identified with vitality, passion and pastoral life in Winesburg—and Seth returns home with black “coal soot in his ears and around his eyes.” In town he is called “the deep one,” but unlike George, Seth “had no great underlying purpose...no plan for his life.” His brief fling at adventure reveals a superficial relation to life and nature rather than depth.

Seth visits George, who is in his room trying to write a love story, pretentiously lighting a pipe and naively planning to fall in love. Even more naively George sends Seth off to tell Helen White “that I’m in love with her”—echoing the legend of Miles Standish. The two boys reverse roles as the “thinker.” First George is too much into his head, then Seth. By not approaching Helen himself, George reveals the presumption, immaturity and egocentricity that he later exhibits with Belle Carpenter. Helen is virtually the soul of Winesburg. Seth thinks that “George belongs to this town... I don’t belong.” He wants to “get out of here.” Just as Henry James characterized Americans by how they responded to Europe, Anderson defines characters by how they respond to Winesburg—and to Helen. Seth feels like an outcast here, whereas George absorbs the town and its people like a plant absorbs nutrients.

Helen has written notes to Seth in the past and he is pleased to have been “selected as the favorite of the richest and most attractive girl in town.” He walks her into the garden of his place. He considers staying in Winesburg and making love to Helen, but while sitting on a bench with her, he releases her hand and thrusts his hands into his pockets. “A desire to impress the *mind* of his companion” is stronger than romantic feelings [italics added]. Helen is impressed, but Seth’s talking changes the mood between them: “Certain vague desires that had been invading her body were swept away and she sat up very straight on the bench.” Seth talks away the mystery of the moment--the romantic opportunity for communion. Ironically he is complaining that everyone else is talking too much, especially George. By the end of the book, in the grandstand with Helen, George has matured enough to respond to her quietly with his heart.

In this preliminary relationship, Helen responds to Seth by first reaching toward him with “pure affection”—then “letting her hand fall heavily to her side.” Disappointed, she advises him to go home to his mother. She “ran away through the hedge,” leaving him “perplexed and puzzled by her action as he had been perplexed and puzzled by all of the life of the town...” Seth is more a talker than a thinker. He lacks the sensitivity to others required for social adaptation. He concludes that he is fated to be disappointed in love. Like Alice Hindman, he inhibits himself by *thinking* it is fate, as the pessimistic Naturalists do: “When it comes to loving someone, it won’t never be me. It’ll be someone else—some fool—someone who talks a lot—someone like that George Willard.”

Talking too much about himself is a symptom that Seth is already so much into his egocentric head he is dissociated from Nature, from natural instincts and feelings. This dissociation is a major theme of the Modernists, especially T.S. Eliot. Ironically, though he blabs on and on about himself, Seth lacks the self-knowledge required to read other people.

“Tandy”

This sketch affirms the strength and independence of women. As a Modernist, Anderson supports the liberation of women such as Alice Hindman from the gender role paradigm of Victorianism: “Venture anything. Be brave enough to dare to be loved.” As a chapter in *Winesburg* this piece is flimsy and sentimental and weakens the book. Anderson relies on mawkish dialogue rather than developing the situation with adequate action. This is the kind of unreal sentimental writing that prompted Hemingway to parody Anderson in an effort to stop critics from comparing him to Anderson. The alcoholic stranger in this sketch “was a true dreamer” who turned “vile” like Wash Williams, but he idealizes rather than hating women. The father of the little girl called Tandy recalls Doctor Parcival as a destroyer of ideals, an agnostic “so absorbed in destroying the ideas of God that had crept into the minds of his neighbors that he never saw God” manifest in his own daughter.

“The Strength of God”

Anderson mystifies God as manifest in Tandy, then in this story he demystifies the puritanical God of Reverend Curtis Hartman, first by specifying that the minister’s wife “was the daughter of a manufacturer of underwear.” Reverend Hartman is considered “scholarly and refined” and is the highest paid minister in Winesburg, but the underwear beneath his respectability is stripped off when he peeks at a naked woman. Hartman is sexually repressed like Alice Hindman—another set of counterparts in *Winesburg*. He is a descendant of early Puritan ministers such as Michael Wigglesworth, who recorded in their 17<sup>th</sup>-century diaries their agonized struggles against “carnality.” The Calvinist belief in the total depravity of humans polarized their morality against the human body, which they considered vile. Wigglesworth and others berated themselves in their diaries for having “carnal dreams,” which they believed were temptations from Satan. Over a century later, the Victorian Nathaniel Hawthorne rejected Calvinism yet believed that even thoughts could be sins, advising us to “purify that inward sphere.”

The more goodhearted Hartman lacks the passion of his Calvinist predecessors, until he begins to lust after his neighbor Kate Swift. Since he lives mostly in his head, his name *Hart*-man is ironic. When he breaks a hole in the stained glass window of his church bell tower to sneak a peek at Kate, “the piece of glass broken out at the corner of the window just nipped off the bare heel of the boy standing motionless and looking with rapt eyes into the face of the Christ.” This images the theme of the story, that the “Achilles heel”—the vulnerable point—of a Christian is sexual desire. Though he preaches inhibition, Hartman blames his wife for being “ashamed of passion.” He blames Kate Swift for being a tempting “woman of sin” because she smokes cigarettes. He feels cheated and Nature asserts itself. One night he sneaks into the bell tower, thinking “the blackest thoughts of his life.” Feverish in the cold, he peeks through the little hole he broke in the glass window.

Kate Swift appears in her room next door, dimly lit. She is naked. Then she exposes herself inwardly, weeping and beating her pillow with her fists—violence that prefigures his own. Ironically, she too may be suffering from sexual repression. To the minister’s chagrin, she begins to pray. How embarrassing. “In the lamplight her figure, slim and strong, looked like the figure of the boy in the presence of the Christ on the leaded window.” This affirms Kate as innocent rather than a sinner. In fact, she is implicitly virginal. Unlike Louise Trunnion, Kate is not “fast,” making her name Swift ironic. The minister’s Bible falls to the floor, as the “woman of sin” is revealed as more reverent than the Reverend.

Hartman rationalizes his sin into a revelation from God, absolving himself of guilt. This way he does not have to confess to being a peeping parson. Instead, to reporter George Willard, he proclaims himself a visionary: “God has manifested himself to me in the body of a woman.” Anderson would agree, just as God is also manifest in the little girl Tandy, but his perspective is not Puritan like Hartman’s. He affirms a pastoral Christianity imaged in the stained glass window, Jesus expressing love of a child, modified by a

pagan Greek acceptance of sensuality. The title of the story is ironic as applied to Reverend Hartman, since it dramatizes the strength of Nature prevailing over the strength of his religion. This contradiction points to Anderson's belief that the strength of the true God is manifest in Nature.

Smashing the window illustrates that repressed passion can lead to violence. "Now it will have to be wholly replaced," says Hartman. The word "wholly" is a pun. Hartman has wholly replaced the holy with a hole, beauty with destruction, love with anger, truth with a lie. Like Hawthorne, but adding the acceptance of a freer sexuality, Anderson emphasizes the contradiction between the repressive Calvinistic religion of the head and the pastoral example of Christ. This is the most complex symbolism in *Winesburg*, as Anderson calls for "wholly" replacing the repressive tradition of Puritanism embodied in Calvinistic ministers like Hartman with a more holistic vision.

#### "The Teacher"

Snow fits the color motif of whiteness, connoting in this story (1) covering and repression; (2) moral purity and/or lack of sex; (3) cold and lonely isolation as when snowed in. George Willard is out in the cold while Kate Swift is "cold" in her classroom: "Everyone felt it."

Like most teachers, Kate has an outstanding former pupil. She reaches out to young George, who misunderstands her much as Wing Biddlebaum was misunderstood. "He began to believe she might be in love with him." He leaves a literal fire "blazing in the wood"—youthfully careless—builds another fire at home and "began to have lustful thoughts." Embracing a white pillow he thinks of Kate Swift and then of Helen White, who is his own age. Meanwhile, as his lustful fires burn, "Kate Swift's mind was ablaze with thoughts of George Willard. In something he had written as a school boy she thought she had recognized the spark of genius and wanted to blow on the spark."

Kate takes George for a walk and they sit on the grass at the Fair Ground, prefiguring the climax of the book when George and Helen sit together in the grandstand high above this place. Kate gives George advice on becoming a writer that Anderson himself exemplifies: "The thing to learn is to know what people are thinking about, not what they say." In observing this principle, Anderson was inclined to write dialogue in which characters talk without saying much. As a result, their actions and even their small gestures become more significant. Kate begins to feel like more than a mentor to George when she impulsively "took hold of his hand" and he "stirred the heart of the lonely woman."

Louise Bentley was a step up in development from Louise Trunnion and Kate Swift is well above either of them: "A passionate desire to have him understand the import of life, to learn to interpret it truly and honestly, swept over her. Leaning forward, her lips brushed his cheek." Her desire to teach has stirred other desires. Since she is a female counterpart to Wing Biddlebaum, the parallels in *Winesburg* suggest that Wing may have felt the same attraction to George but kept his hands to himself. Kate stops herself by acknowledging that he is too young for either of her inclinations, professional or personal: "'It will be years before you begin to understand what I mean when I talk to you,' she cried passionately."

Anderson makes this scene simultaneous with the scene in the previous story when Reverend Hartman is waiting to peek at her through the hole in the stained glass window. He has said that Kate "looked like the figure of the boy in the presence of Christ on the leaded window." That implies that she is as innocent as a child. However, "A great eagerness to open the door of life to the boy...had possession of her. So strong was her passion that it became physical. Again her hands took hold of his shoulders...her eyes blazed." Then she confesses that she must leave for "if I stay, I'll be wanting to kiss you." With a "passionate desire to be loved by a man" she lingers and allows young George to embrace her. "She was a teacher but she was also a woman."

As soon as he holds her she realizes that he is not a man but a *boy!* She reacts against her mistake violently, taking it out on George, which is generally parallel to Reverend Hartman violently projecting his guilt onto the stained glass window. The minister proclaims that naked Kate is an "instrument of God bearing a message of truth." His "Truth" is a rationalization of his guilt that falsifies God. He will continue to preach the repression of Nature, a doctrine misleading to the young, whereas Kate refrains from

misleading the young. She must retain her integrity by denying her nature as a woman. She becomes a teacher of self-sacrifice like Christ.

George is confused in the dark—"the baffled male." His fire goes out, he is lonely and cold and his bed sheets are "like blankets of dry snow." He hugs his white pillow as he did earlier, circling in this story rather than progressing—too young to have learned anything from this experience with a woman: "he raised a hand and with it groped about in the darkness. 'I have missed something. I have missed something Kate Swift was trying to tell me'." Focused upon what she was saying, he is too inexperienced yet to "know what people are thinking about, not what they say."

#### "Loneliness"

Enoch Robinson goes from the farm to the city to become an artist but he "never grew up." In several ways he resembles the adult Sherwood Anderson. The "child in him kept bumping against things, against actualities like money and sex and opinions." He is "a complete egotist, as all children are egotists." Like Anderson, he worked in advertising. "He was like a writer busy among the figures of his brain..." The young writer George Willard resembles Enoch in that "everyone Enoch Robinson had ever seen had left with him some essence of himself... He was like Enoch Robinson on the evenings when the old man came down out of his room and wandered alone in the streets."

When he was young Enoch met a good woman (Anderson met at least four), an attractive musician and harmonious personality so attentive she seems the devoted type: "her face was so good and she looked at me all the time." He wants her to understand him, but he is so childish and insecure he has to boast. If he did not inflate himself he would sink. If he told the truth about himself he would deflate compared with her: "I wanted her to understand but, don't you see, I couldn't let her understand. I felt that then she would know everything, that I would be submerged, drowned out, you see." Enoch is like many a man whose wife is more strong than he is, or more virtuous or accomplished or makes more money. So he boasts and boasts about how important he is until she does understand. She understands what a childish egotist he is. Consequently he abuses her with "vile words" and orders her away. "Things went to smash," he says, as when Hartman smashed his stained glass window. Enoch will not be doing any restoration. After driving the good woman away—one equipped by nature to give him nurturing, confidence and inspiration—he loses his creativity and grows old alone, moaning in the dark.

#### "An Awakening"

George Willard in this story is still just as immature, selfish and obtuse as he was to Louise Trunnion in "Nobody Knows." A lusty adolescent, he wanders through a back alley in Winesburg "smelling the strong animal smell of the animals." His boyish egotism is manifest in his feeling "unutterably big." He goes for a walk with Belle Carpenter, climbing the hill toward the Fair Ground where he talked to Kate Swift and then "missed something." Still a boy as Kate realized, George tries to seduce Belle with talk, recalling Seth's mistake with Helen White. He is "full of big words" and is "swaggering along and swinging his arms about." The thought that Belle is about to "surrender herself to him...made him half drunk with the sense of masculine power." He even gives Belle an ultimatum, making himself ridiculous, since the reader knows what Belle is doing: "You've got to take me for a man or let me alone."

Kate Swift mistook him for a man and then left him alone, whereas Belle is just stringing him along as a provocation to "awaken" her true romantic interest, Ed Handby. The man in her life throws George aside like a little boy—three times. George has no basis for complaint. Previously, in the pool room talking about women with other boys, "He said that women should look out for themselves, that the fellow who went out with a girl was not responsible for what happened." This time gender roles are reversed and George is the one exploited. This time at the end he hopes nobody knows because "He hated himself and he hated the fate that had brought about his humiliation."

Before his humiliation George told himself that he must get in touch with reality, with the universe, "with something orderly and big that swings through the night like a star." Belle's last name Carpenter is ironic, for she represents a salvation—a spiritual death/rebirth in the individuation process—different from

that represented by Christ the carpenter. She is comparable to the existential carpenter in *Moby-Dick* in forcing George to face his nothingness. She and Ed Handby awaken George to how pretentious, small and insignificant he is in the order of Nature and even in the life of Belle Carpenter.

#### “Queer”

The paranoid young storekeeper Elmer Cowley has no friends and looks at Winesburg through a “dirty window.” His father “looked unwashed” and has “dirty fingers.” The Cowleys sold their farm, came to Winesburg to get ahead and are failing like the family in Anderson’s great story “The Egg” (1921). Failure is driving Elmer crazy. He grabs a gun and runs a salesman out of the store because he and his father are such poor merchants they keep buying merchandise they cannot sell—“a queer jumble”: “We ain’t going to keep on being queer and having folks staring and listening. You get out of here!” Elmer sees George the reporter as “the spirit of the town” and “public opinion,” which had “condemned the Cowleys to queerness.”

Elmer has “dirty fingers” in stealing money from his father, then cleanses himself by giving it to George to return. After summoning George to the railroad station, Elmer is unable to articulate what he wants and resorts to the identical expression of bafflement made earlier by his father and by Mook the half-wit: “I’ll be washed and ironed. I’ll be washed and ironed and starched.” That is, I’ll conform and be conventional and starched. Cowley is “cowed” and wants to be as docile as a cow. He wants to be “like other people” and he is running away to the city where he “would lose himself in the crowds there” and become “indistinguishable.” Elmer does not realize that he is already “like other people,” in that almost everyone feels “queer” or strange at one time or another, and too many are overly concerned with what other people might think. The bohemian Anderson implies that only a half-wit would rather be an “indistinguishable” conformist than an individual, even if some people think you’re queer.

Once again the conclusion is ironic, as (1) Elmer feels proud of himself for beating up the innocent and bewildered George—more severely than the reporter was treated by Ed Handby who had some cause; (2) Elmer the paranoid believes he will feel less queer in the city; and (3) Elmer thinks that his queer behavior in attacking the reporter, inexplicable to George, proves that he “ain’t so queer.”

#### “The Untold Lie”

The farm hand Ray Pearson married a girl because he got her pregnant and now regrets it. Like Louise Bentley he feels “tricked by life.” This feeling of life as a trap—the traditional Naturalist metaphor—prompts Ray to consider advising his friend Hal not to marry Nell after he gets her pregnant. When Hal asks Ray for his advice he “put his two hands on the older man’s shoulders” and they experience a rare moment of human communion, a spiritual goal in Anderson: “from being just two indifferent workmen they had become all alive to each other.”

Ray cannot answer Hal. “He was a sensitive man and there were tears in his eyes.” He had made the responsible choice in his own life and he knows he should advise Hal to marry Nell, for that is the “one thing that all his own training and all the beliefs of the people he knew would approve, but for his life he couldn’t say what he knew he should say.” Ray does have a legitimate reason to advise Hal against marriage, in that “Hal was a bad one,” a woman-chaser who seems unlikely to be faithful. However, Ray’s stream of consciousness dramatizes his projection of his own feeling of entrapment—“I didn’t promise my Minnie anything”—onto another man who turns out not to be trapped at all: “I want to marry her,” Hal tells Ray at the end. “I want to settle down and have kids.”

In his rebellious thoughts, on his way to advise Hal to stay free, Ray rationalizes that children are “the accidents of life... I had nothing to do with them.” His denial of responsibility echoes the adolescent George Willard in the pool hall and his self-centered attitude toward Louise Trunnion and Belle Carpenter. Ray the good guy almost becomes a bad guy, while Hal the bad guy becomes good. Ray argues to himself that he was “tricked” and a victim of determinism, but he had the same options as Hal, both before and after he impregnated a girl. The transformation of Hal, the strong moral tone of the story and the emphasis on choice all contradict the Naturalist emphasis on determinism.

At the end when Ray turns back toward home and takes up his torn overcoat where he threw it off, he is accepting once again the mantle of responsibility in his own life. He realizes that he was about to tell his friend a lie, that his advice would have been a lie either way because it is not possible to make a decision like that for another man. For one thing he is obviously too biased by his own experience. Hal is Anderson's expression of faith in the decency of the common man.

#### "Drink"

Tom Foster is the most pastoral character in *Winesburg*. Tom fosters love. He is so appealing he was loved even by the tough guys in gangs on the streets of Cincinnati. He is so simple he seems retarded—a gentle, quiet, passive stable boy who "never asserted himself." He is not perfect, for he is a common man, as the name Tom implies—the pastoral extreme of the common man, more like Huck Finn than Tom Sawyer. He is lazy and neglects the horses in his care. Once he steals money from a cash drawer, but he is ashamed and learns from the experience. On another occasion he gets drunk because he wants to learn from that as well: "no one in Winesburg was any the worse for Tom's outbreak." His indulgence just once only calls attention to the purity of his life compared to most people.

As a boy when he lived in the city of Cincinnati his proximity to prostitution "left a scar on his soul." Unlike Wash Williams, however, he does not react by hating women: "So gentle was his nature that he could not hate anything." After his grandmother brings him to settle in Winesburg he too falls in love with Helen White. Like Walt Whitman he enjoys loafing, loves sensations and is poetic: "He said that Helen White was a flame dancing in the air and that he was a little tree without leaves standing out sharply against the sky."

The story of Tom Foster evokes the intoxicating atmosphere of *Winesburg* and the natural world. Anderson has led up to this with a motif of happy berry pickers initiated in the first story "Hands" and with poetic descriptions of landscapes that express intense feelings such as romantic love, several leading to or at the Fair Ground. In the preceding story for example, "The beauty of the country around Winesburg was too much for Ray on that fall evening." And earlier in the book: "In the spring when the rains have passed and before the long hot days of summer have come, the country about Winesburg is delightful. The town lies in the midst of open fields, but beyond the fields are pleasant patches of woodlands. In the wooded places are many little cloistered nooks, quiet places where lovers go to sit on Sunday afternoons." Tom Foster is a dreamer transported by his imagination and intoxicated by the natural world, even while sitting in a country store: "For an hour he did not move but sat perfectly still, filling his being with the spicy odor that made him half drunk with happiness."

Tom and George Willard have in common their feelings for Helen White. When Tom claims to have made love to her—a fantasy parallel to getting drunk—George sternly defends her purity and hurts Tom's feelings. For poetic Tom, getting drunk "was like making love." Unlike Elmer Cowley, Tom loves the town and seeks out George, the spirit of the town, to hurt him over Helen White. "Everyone suffers and does wrong" and Tom is so happy he wants to experience hurt and suffering like everybody else in order to "learn things"—but without hurting anyone else. Tom has such a good heart, George Willard "felt drawn toward the pale, shaken boy as he had never before been drawn toward anyone."

#### "Death"

The stairway "leading up" to Dr. Reefy's office above the Paris Dry Goods store, imaging the theme of spiritual ascent, is old and worn. In this small town, the name Paris is ironic, like so many such placenames in America, expressing the civic aspiration to ascend. To the contrary, the office is located off a hallway being used for storage and rubbish. Here the lonely nonbeliever Dr. Reefy "invented gods and prayed to them." He and Elizabeth Willard become close friends and "were a good deal alike." Both have given up their dreams and feel used up like rubbish.

Now a "tired gaunt old woman at forty-one," Elizabeth in her depression remembers one of her lovers when she was young who had cried out in passion, "You dear! You dear! You lovely dear!" These words

“expressed something she would have liked to have achieved in life.” Once she was beautiful, adventurous and full of passion—she had “half a dozen lovers before she married Tom Willard.” Still, she wanted a “real lover.” She was “forever putting out her hand into the darkness and trying to get hold of some other hand.” Her father, a failure in the hotel business, urged her not to marry his clerk Tom Willard. He gave her \$800 and told her to get out of Winesburg.

“It wasn’t Tom I wanted, it was marriage.” When she tells Dr. Reefy about her unhappiness with Tom, he responds like the passionate lover in her youth. He begins to kiss her and uses the same tender words. He “was on the point of becoming her lover” when a clerk from downstairs comes up and throws an empty box on the pile of rubbish in the hallway. In itself this trivial event is empty of meaning like the discarded box, yet its effect is to interrupt a spiritual communion—potentially one of the most significant moments in the lives of both the fragile Elizabeth and Dr. Reefy. The overwhelming sense of absurdity in human life makes this the most Existential scene in *Winesburg, Ohio*, and one of the most poignant. Once again Dr. Reefy is unable to save a woman he loves.

The sick woman feels so defeated in life that she now hungers for death as her lover. Adding to the ironic pathos, death takes her before she can tell her son George about the \$800 from her father she wants him to have. George “had but little sense of the meaning of her death. Only time would give him that....he was in fact a little annoyed that his mother had died on that day,” because it interferes with his plan to see Helen White. Ironically, it is her death that will make his final communion with Helen possible. Tom Willard “forgot his resentment” of his wife “and the tears ran out of his eyes and lodged in his mustache.” His tears wash the black dye out of his grey mustache, exposing his true self.

In contrast, George is in denial. He remains selfishly preoccupied with himself while confronting her body, until finally he succumbs to sobs and resigns himself--“half blind with grief.” He then repeats the words of the young lover his mother remembered and that Dr. Reefy had repeated: “‘The dear, the dear, oh the lovely dear,’ the boy, urged by some impulse outside himself, muttered aloud.” The redeeming impulse comes from “outside himself”—from a transcendent source manifest in the extreme coincidence of the repetitions.

This experience of his mother’s death and of a transcendent force outside himself mature George and make him spiritually capable of his communion with Helen White in the next story. His mother’s contribution to his individuation—to his ability to be unselfish, to love and to dream—is worth far more than the \$800 she hid in the wall and was never able to give him. The money is analogous to the articulation of her love. In the end, neither matters. Money is the primary value of Tom Willard, in contrast to the values Elizabeth is able to pass on to George.

Elizabeth has passion like the dark girl Dr. Reefy married, but she is strong. Though she too is bitterly disappointed in love, unlike Louise Bentley she is not so bent against the opposite gender that she rejects her own son. To the contrary, she is devoted to George. Unlike the teacher Kate Swift she is attracted not to a confused boy but to a sensitive older man in Dr. Reefy. Elizabeth is an exemplar: She attained at least threefold what most of the characters in *Winesburg* are missing and longing and reaching out for: She is loved.

#### “Sophistication”

“Sophistication” is the climax of the book, a quiet eulogy of simple town life as Anderson had known it as a boy. His affirmation is more than local, it dramatizes basic human values beyond the village. His vision is the more compelling set in a decayed grandstand that overlooks the Golden Age of pastoral America passing away, a literary tradition that extends from Crèvecoeur’s *Letters from an American Farmer* into Thomas Jefferson’s *Notes on the State of Virginia* and on through Irving, Cooper, Emerson, Thoreau, Jewett, Frost, Cather, Anderson, Faulkner, Steinbeck and the southern agrarians.

As George takes a “backward view of life,” his vision at first is a blend of agnosticism, Naturalism and Existentialism: “...a message concerning the limitations of life....seeing, as though they marched in procession before him, the countless figures of men who before his time have come out of nothingness into the world, lived their lives and again disappeared into nothingness.... With a little gasp he sees himself as



merely a leaf blown by the wind through the streets of his village. He knows that in spite of all the stout talk of his fellows he must live and die in uncertainty, a thing blown by the winds, a thing destined like corn to wilt in the sun." At the same time, Anderson has affirmed in the previous story the existence of a positive force "outside himself," implying faith in a transcendent spiritual order.

George Willard has "crossed the line into manhood." In his "sadness of sophistication," his mind turns to Helen White. On his way to see her he falls down over a pile of rubbish in a vacant lot, tearing his trousers. The existentialist mood of meaninglessness and absurdity is expressed in vacancy, rubbish, triviality, falling and frustration. The trivial event recalls the frustration of his mother and Dr. Reefy when the clerk throws an empty box on a pile of rubbish. To Helen too the world seems meaningless this evening—"full of meaningless people saying words." This shared mood implies that she is George's female counterpart, a spiritual equal. Now "the feeling of loneliness and isolation that had come to the young man in the crowded streets of his town was broken and intensified by the presence of Helen." People are lonely in small towns as well as in big cities. All the stories of lonely isolated frustrated repressed characters are like foreplay throughout *Winesburg*, leading to this climax, this moment of spiritual communion.

"In the darkness under the roof of the grand-stand, George Willard sat beside Helen White and felt very keenly his own insignificance in the scheme of existence." The two of them together in this high place above the town transcend its limitations. Alone in this place that had been "filled to overflowing with life" that day, together they confront a silence that is "almost terrifying." This is the Existential silence felt throughout the book. At such moments "one shudders at the thought of the meaninglessness of life while at the same instant, and if the people of the town are his people, one loves life so intensely that tears come into the eyes." They move together and *Winesburg* includes the world: "In that high place in the darkness the two oddly sensitive human atoms held each other tightly and waited. In the mind of each was the same thought. 'I have come to this lonely place and here is this other'."

The spiritual dimension of their communion is evident first in their sharing the same thoughts. "Mutual respect grew big in them." Big enough with respect to be natural, they *drop* "into the animalism of youth." But they control their impulses. "They waited.... They stopped kissing and stood a little apart." Then they descend from the *high* place to the fair-grounds below and play together "in some way chastened and purified by the mood." They do not have sex. Their *love-making* is spiritual. This is the transcendent state of consciousness as it appears in Anderson. The mutually respectful young lovers are reborn into "a young world." They had "for a moment taken hold of the thing that makes the mature life of men and women in the modern world possible."

#### "Departure"

George rises at dawn for his journey to a new life. Spring is the season of rebirth and the maple tree "seeds are winged." The wing image recalls Wing Biddlebaum, is a metaphor of transcendence in Nature, and gives a circularity of structure to *Winesburg* in accord with the cycle of the seasons. All the people George got to know in *Winesburg* are like winged seeds in his memory, with potential for growth when he begins to write. Before his departure he takes a nostalgic walk into the farmland around the town that conveys his love for the place. On the railroad station platform more than a dozen people come to shake his hand and see him off. Even a woman who had never paid any attention to him wishes him good luck. She "voiced what everyone felt." His maturation, the elevation of his dreams and his spiritual growth are implied by the statement that "The son had become taller than the father."

George boards a "westbound train." In American cultural history the West has always represented the future and boundless opportunity, while the railroad is the traditional icon of Progress in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. George is Young America moving in ever greater numbers from the countryside into the City, as observed by Tom Little the railroad conductor: "Tom had seen a thousand George Willards go out of their towns to the city." In general, George is a common type, fathered and "conducted" by common Toms. He has learned that he is little in the universe, yet paradoxically, he feels "big" with dreams and the promise of youth, as he did with Helen White. When she comes running to the station too late for a parting word, he does not see her, just as he cannot see the culmination of his dreams.

Waiting on the train for departure, George hears the words of his father: “Be a sharp one... Keep your eyes on your money. Be awake.” He does count his money, but George is like his mother and is her final triumph: His “mind was carried away by his growing passion for dreams. One looking at him would not have thought him particularly sharp.” His “departure” leaves behind the values of his father--conformity, materialism, the primacy of money—while preserving his own heartland--Winesburg as “the background on which to paint the dreams of his manhood.”

Michael Hollister (2015)