

INTRODUCTION



Sherwood Anderson

(1876-1941)

Sherwood Anderson transformed the short story 10 years after Ezra Pound revolutionized poetry and Gertrude Stein initiated the Modernist tradition of experimental prose, in his only major book *Winesburg, Ohio* (1919) and in later stories. His best story is “The Egg” and the other best are “Death in the Woods,” “I Want to Know Why,” “I’m a Fool,” “Unlighted Lamps”—all published in later collections—and “The Untold Lie” in *Winesburg*. “Hands,” the first story in *Winesburg*, has a special interest in treating discretely the subject of homosexuality, a taboo in 1919. All of his 7 novels are flawed and weak, though some are interesting and have an historical value, in particular *Poor White* (1920), which dramatizes his major theme, the destructive impact of industrialization on small-town and rural America at the turn of the century—the Machine in the Garden. Anderson’s *agrarian pastoralism* is so strong he is close to being a Luddite, one of the workmen in England (1811-16) who wanted to destroy machines.

INFLUENCE

Anderson is an intuitive, poetic storyteller in the oral tradition of Mark Twain, without the humor, inclined to earthy mysticism in the tradition of Walt Whitman—to Romantic primitivism and sentimentality. Early in the century the commercial magazine writer O. Henry had reduced the short story to a formula deriving from Poe, so successfully that editors were not inclined to publish a story that did not conclude with a surprise, an ironic reversal at the end, or a “snapper” like the punchline to a joke. Commercial fiction relied—and still does—on *plot*, inducing the reader to ask, What happens next? Anderson does not rely on plot. He is literary in inducing the reader to ask all along throughout the story, What does this mean? No Americans, he declared, “lived, felt, or talked as the average American novel makes them live, feel, or talk and as for the plot short stories of the magazines—those bastard children of de Maupassant, Poe, and O. Henry—it was certain that there were no plot stories ever lived in any life.”

Anderson believed that it is only in key *moments* that “we truly live.” Typically his stories end with an epitome, or a moment of realization—an epiphany like those of James Joyce in *Dubliners* (1914). His prose style—called by one critic “a poetry of inarticulation”—and the form of his stories influenced Hemingway, Faulkner, Wolfe, Steinbeck, Saroyan, and later short story writers including Bobbie Ann Mason and in particular, Raymond Carver. To demonstrate their breaking from his influence, both Hemingway and Faulkner wrote parodies of Anderson. *Winesburg* set an example for Jean Toomer in *Cane*, Hemingway in

In Our Time, and Faulkner in *Go Down, Moses*. Anderson's treatment of "grotesques" informs the tradition called "southern Gothic" exemplified by Carson McCullers, as well as the more complex Modernist fiction of Flannery O'Connor. Anderson candidly said of himself, "For all my egotism, I know I am but a minor figure." But Faulkner said, "He was the father of my generation of American writers and the tradition of American writing which our successors will carry on."

COUNTERCULTURAL MODERNIST

In his life, Anderson is the prototype of the 1960s countercultural hippie who "drops out, turns on and does his own thing." He did all he could to make himself a legend by getting up one day and walking out on his manufacturing business to become a writer and then retelling the story over and over. He wrote three "autobiographies" that romanticize himself and contradict each other. His defining act of free will, repeated in various ways by several of his protagonists, contradicts the critics who have categorized him as a Naturalist because he emphasizes psychological and environmental determinism.

Though he is not at all schematic and had not read Freud, some critics have tried to reduce him to a Freudian because of his focus on "the hidden life beneath the surface," depth psychology, and sex as a potential spiritual communion that is usually frustrated. Sexual repression is most obvious in "Adventure" in *Winesburg*, the story of a woman who freaks out and runs into the street naked. Anderson is a Modernist in (1) rebelling against Puritanism, Victorianism, respectability and convention; (2) experiencing a crisis of religious faith; (3) creating himself in the Existentialist sense; (4) developing a personal aesthetic unique in style and form; and (5) using techniques of poetic Expressionism.

BIOGRAPHY

Sherwood Anderson was born in Ohio, the third of 7 children in a family that traveled from town to town wherever his father could escape creditors and find work doing odd jobs such as painting houses. His father--Anderson called him a "colorful no account"--was a harness maker and story teller who became an alcoholic after getting forced out of business by mechanization, a dominant theme in his son's fiction. "My father never paid his rent, and so we were always living in haunted houses." Anderson romanticized his dark Italian mother. He grew up among laborers, tramps, Indians, blacks, horse trainers and hustlers who hung around livery stables and race tracks. In 1884, the year *Huckleberry Finn* appeared, the Anderson family settled down in Clyde, Ohio, 18 miles south of Lake Erie, where Sherwood spent most of his youth. Though he denied it, Clyde is the model for Winesburg and is embodied in Anderson himself.

HUCK AT HEART

His formal schooling was irregular, as he helped support his family by going to work at a young age as a farm hand, newspaper delivery boy and racetrack groom. At 14, the age of Huck, he quit school entirely. "One who like myself could not, because of circumstances, spend the years of his youth in schools must of necessity turn to books and to the men and women directly about him; upon these he must depend for his knowledge of life and to these I turned."

Once he hopped a freight train to Cleveland and Lake Erie, where he worked as a deck hand for awhile. "To the end of my life I would talk with the half-slovenly drawl of the middle-westerner, have the air of something between a laborer, a man of business, a gambler, a race horse owner, an actor." One of his many jobs was assembler in a bicycle factory: "There were days as I worked in that place when I became physically ill and other days when I cursed all the gods of my age that had made men—who in another age might have been farmers, shepherds or craftsmen—these futile fellows, ever more and more loudly proclaiming their potency as they felt the age of *impotency* asserting itself in their bodies. In the bicycle factory I...repeatedly told the other men that I was subject to sick headaches and I used to go often to a window, throw it open and lean out, closing my eyes and trying to create in fancy a world in which men lived under bright skies, drank wine, loved women and with their hands created something of lasting value and beauty..." This describes much of rural Italy, the homeland of his mother.

When he was 19, his mother died of tuberculosis. His father wandered off and the family broke up. The story called "Mother" in *Winesburg* is deeply autobiographical. Soon after her death, in the following year Anderson left town for Chicago like George Willard. He found work as a stock handler in a cold-storage warehouse. Then in 1898 he joined the U.S. Army during the Spanish-American War in Cuba. Frank Norris and Stephen Crane were already covering the war as correspondents for newspapers. "America wanted heroes," Anderson wrote later, "and I thought I would enjoy being a hero...[Though he is joking, he sounds like Henry Fleming in Crane's *Red Badge* published just 3 years before] I could not get over the feeling that I was going off with many others on a kind of glorious national picnic." Anderson arrived in Cuba after the Spanish had surrendered.

BUSINESSMAN

Back home unscathed, he worked as a farm hand and finally, in his 20s, graduated from high school at Wittenberg Academy in Ohio. "To the young workman culture is somewhat like a new suit of clothes that does not fit too well," he wrote later. "It binds under the arms when one first puts it on." Then in 1900, the year that Dreiser's *Sister Carrie* appeared briefly and then got suppressed by the wife of the publisher, Anderson returned to Chicago and became a writer of advertising copy. As an advertising man he wrote copy that glorified the adventure of business, much like Sinclair Lewis's *Babbitt*. "In America there seemed at that time but one direction, one channel, into which all such young fellows as myself could pour their energies. All must give themselves wholeheartedly to material and industrial progress. Could I do that? Was I fitted for such a life? It was a kind of moral duty to try."

In 1904, already successful at the age of 28, he got married. He was always attractive to women and the first of his 4 wives was above him socially. He moved to Cleveland and became the president of a mail-order firm. But then: "On an evening of the late summer [1906] I got off a train at a growing Ohio industrial town where I had once lived. I was rapidly becoming a middle-aged man....In Chicago I had ruined my chances of becoming a successful man of affairs because I could not take affairs seriously.... All day I wrote advertisements and perhaps the advertisements helped sell so-and-so many dollars worth of goods. As I walked homeward through the streets, across bridges, I could not remember what I had been writing about." Nevertheless, he went on striving for success.

In 1907 he bought a paint factory in Elyria, Ohio and ran a very successful manufacturing business, producing "Roof-Fix." He fathered 3 children and lived an affluent life. He actually wanted to become a huge success, a benevolent capitalist—but he hated the grind. He endured it for 5 years, torn between his sense of duty and his longing to break free and live a bohemian literary life. In 1909, as the Modernist movement began in Paris and London, Anderson was inspired by Gertrude Stein's *Three Lives*: "She is making new, strange and to my ears sweet combinations of words." By 1912 he had written the drafts of his first two novels. And he had begun to drink heavily. He turned away from his wife and took up with women he met on the street and in bars and at race tracks, neglecting his business.

SELF-REALIZATION

At the age of 36, Anderson had a nervous breakdown. He was dictating a letter to his secretary when he stopped in mid-sentence. He got up and without another word he walked out of the office. Four days later he was found wandering around in Cleveland. He had walked for 30 miles. Dazed and disheveled, he was found in a drugstore and hospitalized by the police. He could never explain how he got there or what had happened during the time he went missing. Later he said that he let people think he was mad so that his creditors, his employees and his children would forgive him for walking out on them. He explained that he was "escaping from his materialistic existence." The critic Clifton Fadiman said of him that "the dramatization of this moment is his major contribution to the interpretation of American life...He is obsessed with the experience of sudden self-discovery."

Anderson closed his business and returned to Chicago in 1913 and wrote more advertising copy. His brother Karl was a painter there and introduced him to artistic people. After two years he got a divorce and married a sculptress named Tennessee Mitchell. He joined the "Chicago Renaissance" that included Theodore Dreiser, Carl Sandburg, Edgar Lee Masters, Floyd Dell, Ben Hecht, Harriet Monroe, who had launched *Poetry* in 1912, and Margaret Anderson, who founded the *Little Review* in 1914. By 1915 he was

writing the first *Winesburg* stories, contributing poems to *Poetry* and stories to the *Little Review*. With the help of Dreiser and Dell his first novel was published, *Windy McPherson's Son* (1916). The son lives in a drab town, is disillusioned with business, drops out like Anderson and floats down the river like Huck. The style is imitative, as is the style of his second novel *Marching Men* (1917).

CHANTING AFTER WHITMAN

Anderson is least impressive as a poet, in his book of awful romantic free verse, *Mid-American Chants* (1918). Candidly he confessed, "I am immature, will live and die immature. A quite terrible confession that would be if I did not represent so much." (*Letters* 53) "Were others like myself, hopelessly childish?" (*A Story Teller's Story* 323) "In the chants, I reached into my own personal mutterings, half insane and disordered, and tried to take out of them a little something ordered. You should see how I clutched at the ordered cornfields, insisting on them to myself, took them as about the only thing I could see." (*Letters* 37) His unifying symbol in *Chants* is corn, rather than leaves of grass: "We are come to the face of the gods through the cornfields." His dominant theme is the desire to commune with others and to assert a "bardic leadership of the people," taking up a cornstalk and marching onward--a disciple of Whitman who wrote more like a parody of the lesser Sandburg. He is humble, falling on his knees and glancing around, hoping to be followed: "On my knees I crawled before my people. I debased myself. The excretions of their bodies I took for my food. Into the ground I went and my body died. I emerged in the corn, in the long cornfields....With your white teeth you may bite me."

The extreme unevenness of Anderson's writings, especially the awfulness of his worst, obscures the great merits of his best. Only a year separates the *Chants* (1918) from *Winesburg, Ohio* (1919), but in quality the two works are far removed. The first one so strenuously mystical is facile and corny, whereas the one that seems Naturalistic is mystical and vital.

Winesburg, Ohio (1919)

Winesburg, Ohio is the best in a succession of works about the small town in America written at a time when a majority of the population was shifting from the farms to the cities: *The Story of a Country Town* (1883) by Edgar W. Howe; *The Country of the Pointed Firs* (1896) by Sarah Orne Jewett; *Spoon River Anthology* (1915) by Edgar Lee Masters; *Winesburg* (1919); *Main Street* (1920) by Sinclair Lewis; *Our Town* (1938) by Thornton Wilder.

Anderson went like George Willard and other characters in *Winesburg* from the country to the city, but when he learned what he loved he returned in spirit to the pastoral village. He yearned for social patterns lost by the time he began to write, in fact for an ideal pastoral life that never had been—a utopian dream of the lost Garden that was nostalgic rather than progressive. His idyllic village of independent artisans creating and caressing with sensitive hands did not exist even in the poetry of Longfellow. His idealism is in the tradition of Whitman at a time after World War I when the prevailing view of culture was expressed in "The Waste Land." As a Modernist, however, he is a synthesis: His Romantic idealism is balanced by a sad, disillusioned Realism, informed by depth psychology and the literary tradition of Naturalism. Also as a Modernist he blends complementary aesthetic values: Making his town a metaphor of America, as by naming the local newspaper the *Winesburg Eagle*, is in the tradition of Realism, selecting the representative in order to reveal general truths. At the same time, his sensibility, emphasis on feelings, and choice of abnormal situations is characteristic of Expressionism.

Winesburg, Ohio is a metaphor of middle America set in Ohio, at that time the approximate middle of the American population viewed geographically. It was published in 1919, the year when for the first time the majority of the population had become urban, as the long tradition of pastoral agrarianism championed by Thomas Jefferson began to fade away. The name *Winesburg* is another metaphor: Making the best of the fruits of Nature all around us can be intoxicating and sweet like the "twisted apples." Wine usually comes to mind as red, like blood, evoking vitality and passion—rare now in *Winesburg*, making the name ironic, since few are able to make the best of their opportunities. Red is also the color of the heart, and *Winesburg* is located in the heartland. The book is increasingly unified from story to story by tone, atmosphere, techniques, color motifs, light and dark, and most obviously by the protagonist George

Willard, the naïve young reporter for the *Eagle*. Elmer Cowley in the story “Queer” says that George “typified the town, represented in his person the spirit of the town.”

The theatrical effects of *Winesburg*, with its bare settings and silences, resemble those in paintings by Edward Hopper and in *Our Town* by Thornton Wilder. The haunting tone of the book, its atmosphere of repression, its slow pace and prolonged awkward moments, give emphasis to the most trivial aspects of reality. The effect is often similar to what happens in the Theater of the Absurd, as when George falls on the pile of rubbish in the vacant lot, except that the meaninglessness of words and actions is transcended in *Winesburg* by the sense that meaning is attainable. Anderson would urge Vladimir and Estragon to live life while they are waiting for Godot. This sense of absurdity is the clearest evidence of Existentialism in Anderson, what he has in common with Hemingway’s “A Clean, Well-Lighted Place.”

Most of the action in *Winesburg* is inside—psychologically and literally in rooms--most of it seems trivial or meaningless yet is actually significant, and the most important meanings are beneath the surface. Anderson was shocked by the moral condemnations of *Winesburg*. Some people in New England burned copies in a public bonfire. Once after he sat beside the wife of a midwestern banker at a dinner he received a letter from her informing him that she had read his book and that having sat next to him now “she felt that she could never, while she lived, be clean.”

ANDERSON AND HEMINGWAY

Anderson and Hemingway differ in their aims and methods. Hemingway tried to write as objectively as possible, avoiding expressions of emotion and instead using the “iceberg principle” and the “objective correlative” to evoke feelings in a reader. He used such techniques to get specific effects, writing in a carefully polished style, perfected in every cadence and implication. Anderson tries to convey *essences* rather than to elicit *effects*, in a style that is informal, conversational, subjective, groping, hesitant, and at times even deliberately awkward. This increases the Realism of his epiphanies, or moments of spiritual realization, in contrast to the refined intellectual calculation of epiphanies in Joyce.

Poor White (1920)

Of his 7 novels, *Poor White* is closest in quality to *Winesburg*. It grew directly out of the *Winesburg* stories and there are many significant correspondences of character, incident, theme and technique between the two works. The haunting strangeness and the sense of alienation persist in *Poor White*, particularly in the early chapters. But in the town of Bidwell, ambition and Realism snuff out the mystical spirit and society replaces dreamy solitudes. An aspiring inventor realizes that his industrial “progress” is destroying the environment. *Winesburg* is a mysterious place of silences and whisperings, whereas *Bidwell* is filled at the end with the shrieks of factory whistles, a shrillness that disturbs the peace of rural America. The Machine has destroyed the Garden. “In some way we have got to come to an understanding of the cause of the shrillness and emptiness of our times.” (*Letters* 23)

PARIS

Several of his best stories including “The Egg” are included in *The Triumph of the Egg* (1921). He had already been influenced by reading Gertrude Stein as early as 1909 and now with his stature established he traveled to Paris to praise her. Gertrude Stein enjoyed praise. They became close friends. Anderson wrote a letter of introduction to her for Ernest Hemingway. He also met James Joyce, who had influenced him with his epiphanies, Ford Madox Ford and other Modernists. After divorcing his second wife and remarrying again, and after publishing another novel and another collection of stories, he wrote an autobiography and then embarrassed himself with *Dark Laughter*.

Dark Laughter (1925)

Anderson’s only popular novel *Dark Laughter* is a dreamy “torrent” of Romantic primitivism influenced by D. H. Lawrence. Hemingway thought this novel was dreadful and parodied it in *The Torrents of Spring* (1926). Anderson sentimentalizes race: The white man has lost his virility to the new industrial order,

whereas the black man has escaped unscathed. In the last paragraph of the novel an impotent white industrialist named Fred *Grey* tries unsuccessfully to laugh like the black women he hears outside his window: "The older Negro women tried to quiet the younger, *blacker* woman, but she kept laughing the high shrill laughter of the negress....And the high shrill laughter ran through the garden and into the room where Fred sat upright and rigid in bed." [Italics added; her "shrill" dark laughter inspires an erection in contrast to the "shrillness" of factory whistles in the industrial age.] Both Anderson's novel *Many Marriages* and this one were banned in Boston.

FAULKNER

Living in the bohemian Quarter of New Orleans in 1924, Anderson got acquainted with William Faulkner, who sought him out daily at Jackson's Square. Anderson did most of the talking, as the older man and the established writer. Faulkner developed an affection for Anderson and envied his lifestyle of working in the mornings and drinking in the afternoons. He later credited Anderson for inspiring him to become a writer. He started writing a novel and did not see his friend for awhile until one day Anderson walked into his place off Jackson Square, the first time he had come to see Faulkner. "What's wrong?" Anderson asked. "Are you mad at me?" Faulkner told him he was writing a book. "My God," Anderson said and walked out. Awhile later Faulkner encountered Anderson's wife Tennessee on the street and she told him that Sherwood said he would recommend Faulkner's manuscript to his own publisher on the condition that he didn't have to read it. "Done!" said Faulkner.

HIS PUBLISHER

Horace Liveright was the most flamboyant publisher in America. He published unknown authors and controversial books and eventually boasted 7 Nobel Prize winners. At one time among his writers were Anderson, Dreiser, O'Neill, Pound, T. S. Eliot, Cummings, Hart Crane, Conrad Aiken, Edgar Lee Masters, Robinson Jeffers, Dorothy Parker, Hemingway, Faulkner, Bertrand Russell, and John Reed the famous Communist. During the 1920s his editorial offices—known as the "asylum"—resembled a speakeasy with a non-stop party going on. Liveright was said to live right. To conceal everyday trysts from his wife and his mistress, he had a hidden bedroom in his office, accessed by the push of a button—a bookcase swung out to reveal a bed decorated in lace.

Once when Anderson bumped into Liveright in New Orleans he was not surprised to see his publisher with another attractive woman. "I want you to meet my wife," smiled Liveright. "Oh, yeah, sure, Horace," Anderson replied with sarcasm. After an awkward silence he realized that, for once, this lady was the real Mrs. Liveright. The publisher subsidized Anderson with \$75 a week while he wrote a novel in Greenwich Village, but the security of having money gave Anderson writers' block. He burst into Liveright's office one morning, crying out, "Horace, Horace, please stop those checks! *Give me back my poverty!*"

LATER YEARS

In 1926 Anderson settled on a farm in Virginia, returning to agrarian America. There he lived for the rest of his life. He bought and edited two newspapers in the state, one Democrat and one Republican. That was a Modernist thing to do—balanced and transcending partisan politics. Later in the 20th century Postmodernist academics--liberals--were so "politically correct" they did not even tolerate free speech. During the Great Depression of the 1930s Anderson toured mill towns and published essays supporting protest movements by workers, while resisting the politically correct Communists.

DEATH

"As for the end, I have often thought that when it comes, there will be a kind of real comfort in the fact that self will go then. There is some kind of universal thing we will pass into that will in any event give us escape from this disease of self. I believe...that it is this universal thing, scattered about in many people, a fragment of it here, a fragment there, this thing we call love that we have to keep on trying to tap. I know that I am being vague in speaking of this, because it is likely that no one of us will ever find it in all its

fullness and richness in any one other person, and I know also that I am trying to express the inexpressible.” (*Letters* 287)

While on a ship to South America to make a U.S. State Department goodwill tour, Anderson attended a literary cocktail party where he and his wife ate some hors d'oeuvres on toothpicks. Soon afterward he was stricken with severe abdominal pains and taken to a hospital in Panama, where he died eight days later of a perforated colon and peritonitis from swallowing a toothpick—probably impaling a martini olive. He died, “Having made a few bicycles in factories, having written some thousands of rather senseless advertisements, having rubbed affectionately the legs of a few race horses, having tried blunderingly to love a few women, and having written a few novels that did not satisfy.” In the Ohio town where he had run his factory years before, the local newspaper announced: “Sherwood Anderson, Former Elyria Manufacturer, Dies.” He had written his own epitaph: “Good Night, ‘Twas Fun Enough, and Life Was Dear / I Tried to Get My Wish. / I Did Not Want to Die-- / Before They Put Me Here.”

MYSTICISM

Anderson’s work is full of nostalgic yearning after what was lost: “There was no God in the sky, no God in myself, no conviction in myself that I had the power to believe in a God, and so I merely knelt in the dust in the silence and no words came to my lips.” *A Story Teller’s Story* (1924) 270. The God of Jesse Bentley and Curtis Hartman in *Winesburg* was not available to Anderson, but something else was. While he was writing of those who had lost touch with each other and with divinity, the existential Wallace Stevens was writing in “Sunday Morning” (1915) that divinity must reside within. Anderson’s mysticism is likewise earthbound. However, his pantheism is unlike that of the American Indians, for his spiritual values do not reside in the natural world itself, but in the minds of men. He “reads into” Nature. His view of reality approaches that of Zen Buddhists, whose philosophy affirms human consciousness becoming one with the natural world and “escaping from this disease of self.”

For all his talk of gods and worship, Anderson saw no transcendent metaphysical order, but he did not deny one. Sometimes he prayed “to God” (*Memoirs* 280). Sometimes he spoke as if he believed: “You will have to say that I have never let God down.” But such expressions of fidelity are less earnest than wistful. His belief that we are all “a part of something, of some incomprehensible thing” (*Letters*, 287) arises from an intuition of meaning that goes no further than the concept of cosmic order. Anderson had deep religious feelings without transcendent Faith. He had a pantheistic faith in Nature, in what he could see and touch, without raising his eyes above the cornfields. Hart Crane reports a conversation in which Anderson said, “I am mighty little interested in discussions of what a man’s place in the scheme of things may be. After all, there is the fact of life. The story wants telling and singing.” For Anderson, striving for “spiritual integrity” (*Letters* 62) in storytelling became a mystical creative process, a form of worship and a mode of communion—his way of reaching through the walls of Winesburg.

ANDERSON AND LEWIS

Sherwood Anderson and Sinclair Lewis were both liberal humanists from the Midwest who depicted the frustrations and failures of Americans in the modern world. They each invented a fictional small town based on their hometown, a place that represents the whole country—a microcosm of middle America. Anderson was pantheistic, seeing and feeling divinity everywhere around him, like Walt Whitman. Lewis was atheistic, seeing divinity nowhere except in the potentiality of the human race. As a satirist Lewis resembles Ambrose Bierce and H. L. Mencken, except that they did not believe in the potentiality of the human race and were too conservative to become Socialists like “Red” Lewis. Anderson initially felt sympathy for Socialism, but his nostalgic agrarianism is “reactionary” and by 1926 he was making fun of leftist writers to Hemingway.

Anderson tends to be soft and sweet, Lewis hard and sharp. Anderson opens hearts, Lewis exposes minds. Anderson is a poetic storyteller inclined to sentimentality, Lewis is a bitter journalistic Realist inclined to cynicism. Anderson’s fiction is often weak in plot, narrative continuity, and power because he focuses upon *internal* crises of emotional life—rare key moments. Lewis’s fiction is deficient in depth, nuance and intensity because he focuses on *external* manifestations of mental life—recurrent, characteristic

social behavior, in the tradition of William Dean Howells. Anderson loved the sweetness of the “twisted apples.” Lewis tasted bitterness. Their responses to their environments were antithetical and their very faces expressed their contrasting excesses—Anderson over-ripe, Lewis withered.

Michael Hollister (2015)

ANDERSON AND FREUD

“At the peak of his career, in the mid-twenties, critics hailed Sherwood Anderson as the ‘American Freudian,’ the one American writer who knew his psychology and possessed a rich fund of knowledge and experience to which it could best be applied. Anderson had spoken of the repressed villager, the frustrated American businessman; he appeared to be admirably equipped to portray both, for he himself had had knowledge of both types....

Anderson’s opposition to psychoanalysis appears...to be founded upon a personal conviction that the ‘universal illness’ of which he speaks in ‘Seeds’ cannot be remedied by science, though it can be described by the artist. It is another assertion of his independence of the psychologists...There is internal evidence, however slight, that leads us to suspect that Anderson was aware of the intellectual version of Freud and that he did not altogether dismiss it from his mind....Those who were closest to Anderson during his life in Chicago and New York either do not refer to Freud at all or suggest moderately that Anderson and Freud are working along parallel lines. There seems little hesitancy, however, in associating the two men, and the temptation to ascribe an actual influence is easily indulged. The reasons for this easy ascription are not obscure. Most important, of course, was the recognition that Freud had contributed to American criticism the term *repression*, which acquired new significance...Anderson was hailed as the leader in the American fight against conventional repression...He dealt with frustration, in many cases with the frustration of normal sex expression...Anderson’s use of dream symbolism and of the vision appeared also to play a role in influencing his critics...

Anderson developed his themes quite independently of Freudian influence, but with such a startling likeness of approach that critics fell into the most excusable error of their times; it seemed an absolute certainty that Anderson should have been influenced by Freud. Throughout all of this Anderson maintains a skeptical attitude toward the new psychology; sometimes the reaction is simply humorous; at other times... He becomes actively insistent upon his independent position....There is some justification in noting the parallel courses of psychoanalysis and Anderson’s fiction, but there seems little evidence to prove that those two courses intersected at any vital points. It is as though Anderson were thrusting upon Freud the burden of clarifying the artist’s analysis: ‘Men who have passed the age of thirty and who have intelligence understand such things....If there is anything you do not understand in human life consult the works of Dr. Freud’ (*Dark Laughter*). If you have been unable to follow with me into the lives of these characters, Anderson seems to be saying; if they still seem queer to you—if their acts are merely violent and inexplicably so—Dr. Freud has studied these matters calmly and scientifically, and he will aid you. But if you do go to him, you will have failed to understand much of what I wish to say to you.”

Frederick J. Hoffman
“Three American Versions of Psychoanalysis”
Freudianism and The Literary Mind
(Louisiana State U 1957)

ANDERSON ON HIS WRITING

“My own vocabulary was small....There was a kind of poetry I was seeking I my prose, word to be laid against word in just a certain way, a kind of word color, a march of words and sentences, the color to be squeezed out of simple words, simple sentence construction....”

“I considered then, as I now consider, that my earliest stories, both *Windy McPherson* and at least in the writing, *Marching Men*, had been the result not so much of my own feeling about life as of reading the novels of others. There had been too much H. G. Wells, that sort of thing. I was being too heroic. I came

down off my perch. I have even sometimes thought that the novel form does not fit an American writer, that it is a form which had been brought in. What is wanted is a new looseness; and in *Winesburg* I had made my own form. There were individual tales but all about lives in some way connected. By this method I did succeed, I think, in giving the feeling of the life of a boy growing into young manhood in a town. Life is a loose, flowing thing. There are no plot stories in life. Our writers, our storytellers, in wrapping life up into neat little packages were only betraying life." *Letters of Sherwood Anderson* (Little Brown 1953) Walter B. Rideout and Howard Mumford Jones, eds.

"I am not one who can peck away at a story. It writes itself, as though it used me merely as a medium.... All of my own short stories have been written at one sitting...The short story is the result of a sudden passion. It is an idea grasped whole as one would pick an apple in an orchard." *Sherwood Anderson's Memoirs* (Harcourt 1942)

"All men lead their lives behind a wall of misunderstanding they themselves have built, and most men die in silence and unnoticed behind the walls. Now and then a man, cut off from his fellows by the peculiarities of his nature, becomes absorbed in doing something that is impersonal, useful, and beautiful. Word of his activities is carried over the walls." *Poor White* (1920)

ON WINESBURG

"Winesburg of course was no particular town. It was a mythical town. It was people. I had got the characters of the book everywhere about me, in towns in which I had lived, in the army, in factories and offices. When I gave the book its title I had no idea there really was an Ohio town by that name....There was all of this starved side of American small town life. Perhaps I was even vain enough to think that these stories would, in the end, have the effect of breaking down a little the curious separateness of so much of life, these walls we build up about us....If *Winesburg, Ohio* tried to tell the story of the defeated figures of an Old American individualistic small town life, then my later books have been but an attempt to carry these same people forward into the new American life, into the whirl and roar of modern machines." *Sherwood Anderson's Memoirs* (1942)

RECEPTION

"[The book was rejected by several] publishers. One of them, on whom I called, handed me a copy of a novel by an Anglo-American author he was then promoting. 'Read this and learn how to write,' said he.... Well, it was published. And immediately there was a strange reaction, a strange reception....Criticism had been poured over all my Chicago contemporaries from the start. We had the notion that sex had something to do with people's lives, and it had barely been mentioned in American writing before our time. No one it seemed ever used a profane word. And brining sex back to take what seemed to us its normal place in the picture of life, we were called sex-obsessed.

Still the reception of *Winesburg* amazed and confounded me. The book was widely condemned, called nasty and dirty by most of its critics. It was more than two years selling its first five thousand....I found that, for the most part, it was being taken as the work of a perverted mind...In review after review it was called 'a sewer' and the man who had written it taken as a strangely sex-obsessed man...A kind of sickness came over me, a sickness that lasted for months. It is very strange to think, as I sit writing, that this book, now used in many of our colleges as a textbook of the short story, should have been so misinterpreted when published twenty years ago. I had felt peculiarly clean and healthy while I was at work on it....

That the book did not sell did not at all bother me. The abuse did. There was the public abuse, condemnation, ugly words used and there was also, at once, a curious kind of private abuse. My mail became filled with letters, many of them very strange. It went on and on for weeks and months. In many of the letters there were dirty words used. It was as though by these simple tales I had, as one might say, jerked open doors to many obscure and often twisted lives. They did not like it. They wrote me the letters and, often, in the letters there was a spewing forth of something like poison....

There was a man friend [of mine] who was spending some weeks in a New England town. He was leaving the town one morning on an early train and, as he walked to the railroad station, he passed a small

park. In the park, in the early morning, there was a little group of people, two men, he said, and three women, and they were bending over a small bonfire. 'There were three copies of your book,' he said. The little group of New Englanders...he thought they must all have been past fifty...He spoke of their thin sharp Calvin Coolidge faces... 'They were the town library board.' They had bought the three copies of my book and were burning them....A well-known woman writer of New Orleans...spoke to a friend of mine who asked her if she had seen the book. 'I got fire tongs,' she said. 'I read one of the stories and, after that, I would not touch it with my hands. With the tongs I carried it down into the cellar. I put it in the furnace. I knew that I should feel unclean while it was in my house....'

And the people of the actual Winesburg protested. They declared the book immoral and that the actual inhabitants of the real Winesburg were a highly moral people...And here is something very curious. The book has become a kind of American classic, and has been said by many critics to have started a kind of revolution in American short-story writing. And the stories themselves which in 1919 were almost universally condemned as immoral, might today almost be published in the *Ladies' Home Journal*, so innocent they seem." *Sherwood Anderson's Memoirs* (1942)

NOSTALGIA

"Is it not likely that when the country was new and men were often alone in the fields and forests, they got a sense of bigness outside themselves that has now in some way been lost?...The people, I fancy, had a savagery superior to our own. Mystery whispered in the grass, played I the branches of trees overhead, was caught up and blown across the horizon line in clouds of dust at evening on the prairies. I am old enough to remember tales that strengthen my belief in a deep, semi-religious influence that was formerly at work among our people. The flavor of it hangs over the best work of Mark Twain. That's what makes it so moving and valuable. I can remember old fellows in my hometown speaking feelingly of an evening spent on the big, empty plains. It has taken the shrillness out of them. They had learned the trick of quiet. It affected their whole lives. It made them significant."

Sherwood Anderson
Letters, 23

■

Michael Hollister (2015)

