

ANALYSIS

Dark Laughter (1925)

Sherwood Anderson

(1876-1941)

“Dear Mother:... Thank you for sending me the *New Republic Review* of [Sherwood] Anderson’s book for the *Atlantic Monthly*. Archie MacLeish is very intelligent. He voiced my own opinion of *Dark Laughter*. Except that I regard it as an even more pretentious fake with two or three patches of real writing in it than Archie too politely refrained from calling it.”

Ernest Hemingway

Letter to Grace Hall Hemingway (14 December 1925)

Ernest Hemingway: Selected Letters 1917-1961

(Scribner’s 1981) 175

Carlos Baker, ed.

“John Stockton, a Chicago reporter, drifts apart from his wife Bernice, and decides suddenly to leave his routine life. He travels in an open boat down the Illinois and Mississippi rivers, dreaming of the epic Mark Twain might now write, ‘of song killed, of laughter killed, of men herded into a new age of speed, of factories, of swift, fast-running trains,’ and his story is accompanied by a chorus of ‘dark laughter’ and song by the unrepressed blacks, contrasted with the spiritual sterility of machine civilization. In his childhood home, Old Harbor, Ind., as Bruce Dudley, he becomes a factory hand, painting wheels with old Sponge Martin, an expert craftsman, happily married, and satisfied by his pattern of life. The shop’s owner is Fred Grey, a World War I veteran who met his wife Aline in the bohemian quarter of Paris, where she was under the influence of postwar disillusion. Although she had little in common with this conventional businessman, she married him for love and stability. Bruce and Aline become lovers, and after the birth of their child they elope, leaving Fred bewildered by his wife’s preference for an irresponsible laborer.”

James D. Hart

The Oxford Companion to American Literature, 5th edition

(Oxford 1941-83)

“*Dark Laughter* (1925) returns to the aimless peripatetics of the first two novels—the pilgrimage without a goal. This time it is a newspaper man, Bruce Dudley, who walks out on his wife in Chicago, drifts down the Mississippi to New Orleans, and then back to Indiana, where he becomes involved in a particularly unmotivated love affair with his employer’s wife. Regis Michaud speaks of *Dark Laughter* as ‘a sort of *sotto voce* monologue with musical interludes.’ The chorus is furnished by the deep sexual laughter of the spontaneous and uninhibited Negroes during the period when Bruce and Aline are coming together, a suggestive dramatic device which recalls O’Neill’s chorus in *Lazarus Laughed* [1927].”

Edward Wagenknecht

Cavalcade of the American Novel:

From the Birth of the Nation to the Middle of the Twentieth Century

(Holt 1952) 316

“*Dark Laughter* is a psychological study of the contrast between Negro and white temperament, combined with the usual Anderson themes of the sexual frustrations and inhibitions of the American middle class. Bruce Dudley, a young Chicago journalist, abandons his wife and job to wander off across the country in a restless revolt against the conventionality and monotony of his life. Reaching New Orleans, he gets a job varnishing auto wheels in the Grey Wheel Company, and soon falls in love with Aline Grey, wife of the owner of the company. At the end of the novel the two elope, leaving Fred Grey, the husband, in a state of homicidal despair; he wants to kill either Dudley or himself, but lacks the courage to do either.

Meanwhile Anderson has established the continual contrast between this frustrated and violent love-triangle of the whites and the easy-going hedonism of the New Orleans Negroes who observe them in silent amusement; as Grey returns to his house he hears the 'dark laughter' of Negroes who mock the puritanical guilt-consciousness of his race. *Dark Laughter* was Anderson's most popular novel, although it is considered inferior in quality to the stories of *Winesburg, Ohio* and *The Triumph of the Egg* [1921]. Anderson has admitted that the style of the novel—flowing, lyrical, and impressionistic—is indebted to Gertrude Stein.”

Donald Heiney
Recent American Literature 4
(Barron's Educational Series 1958) 300-01

“The chief character, John Stockton, becomes weary of the shoddy newspaper work he is doing, drifts in an open boat down the Illinois and Mississippi River, under the name Bruce Dudley starts working in a factory in his native town, is involved in an affair with his employer's wife, Aline Grey, and runs away with her. The white man, Anderson seeks to show, has been corrupted by civilization; and today only the Negro, with his 'dark laughter,' has escaped, with scorn for the white man's moral scruples.”

Max J. Herzberg & staff
The Reader's Encyclopedia of American Literature
(Crowell 1962)

Michael Hollister (2015)