

ANALYSIS

“Hands” (1919)

from *Winesburg, Ohio*

Sherwood Anderson

(1876-1941)

“‘Hands,’ the first chapter, tells of Adolph Meyers, alias Wing Biddlebaum, the unfortunate schoolteacher with sensitive, wandering, caressing hands, who gets into trouble because his loving touch upon his pupils is misinterpreted by a half-wit boy and the crude obscene men of the town. Because the tale is concretely, poetically realized, its symbolism is true; and because this symbolism is not intellectualized, not schematized, it would be false to tear it from its flesh-and-blood texture. Suffice it to say that the story suggests the tragic ambivalence of hands, which is the fate of all the characters of Winesburg. Hands, at the turn of the century, were making machines, making all sorts of things (‘the thing is in the saddle’); making the world that was unmaking the tender, sensitive, intimate lives of the folk in their villages and farms. Hands are made for loving; but hands making mechanical things grow callous, preoccupied...fail at love....”

Waldo Frank
“Homage to Sherwood Anderson”
Story (September-October 1941)

“Let us examine for evidence of his working habits the manuscript of ‘Hands,’ which Anderson most admired... Anderson was first of all aware that he would have to avoid any details about Wing’s case that would disgust the ‘normal’ reader if he were to treat the homosexually inclined character with sympathy. He must avoid the suggestion that Biddlebaum’s attraction to George Willard is wholly erotic in nature. Thus he added the qualifying ‘something like’ in ‘With George Willard...he had formed something like a friendship’; instead of ‘he still hungered for the boy’ he wrote ‘he still hungered for the presence of the boy’; and he replaced ‘[Biddlebaum’s hands] stole to George Willard’s shoulders’ with ‘[Biddlebaum’s hands] stole forth and lay upon George Willard’s shoulders.’... Anderson once suggested that the impulse to write about Wing Biddlebaum came from his jokingly calling a friend ‘Mabel’ in a bar and watching the knowing looks of the other men at the bar...the story was ‘an idea grasped whole as one would pick an apple in the orchard.’ But...the manuscript indicates that after Anderson had picked the apple he examined it carefully for bad spots and polished its minor imperfections.”

William L. Phillips
“How Sherwood Anderson Wrote *Winesburg, Ohio*”
American Literature XXIII
(March 1951)

“Wing Biddlebaum becomes a recluse because his wish to blend learning with affection is fatally misunderstood.”

Irving Howe
“The Book of the Grotesque”
Sherwood Anderson
(William Sloane 1957)

“‘Hands’ tells the life story of Wing Biddlebaum, an eccentric and unhappy old man who feels a longing to befriend George but holds back through some gigantic and unnamed fear. As the story unfolds we learn the root of this fear. Biddlebaum was originally Adolph Myers, a sensitive young school teacher in Pennsylvania. His soul was extraordinarily concentrated in his hands; they were in constant movement, flitting about incessantly as he talked. Myers genuinely loved young people and was fine and devoted teacher. But one day an idiot boy repeated his perverted dreams of his relations with Myers as a fact, and the town turned against him. Several boys told how he used to rumple their hair; Myers was driven out by

the outraged citizens and barely escaped with his life. He has lived the rest of his years in constant fear of his sensitive hands, which he is afraid will reveal his repressed homosexual tendencies.”

Donald Heiney
Recent American Literature 4
(Barron's Educational Series 1958) 298

“The first of the stories, ‘Hands,’ immediately and symbolically approaches a problem that as a phase of the overall problem of human isolation recurs in Anderson’s later work. The story begins by describing the remarkably active and expressive hands of an old recluse in the town. George Willard, a young reporter on the *Winesburg Eagle* and the unifying figure in the stories, is fascinated by the old man’s hands, and in time the old man tells Willard his story: once, as a schoolmaster, he had been accused of homosexuality because in moments of excitement or affection he would tousle the hair of his students or touch them. Instead of being a means of expression, the old man’s hands had become a source of shame to him, and he tried to keep them hidden. In the town he is a pitiful and fearful creature, always expecting the spontaneous actions of his hands to be misinterpreted.

The concept of hands as the basic tools of expression of the craftsman is very important in this story as it passes beyond the immediate and takes on overtones of the universal. As Anderson points out with increasing frequency during both this and the next periods of his career, man’s efforts to communicate with his fellows have traditionally depended upon his hands because for many things words wither do not exist or have been rendered meaningless. Hence, the hands of a craftsman, a painter, a surgeon, a writer, a lover communicate indirectly something of the truth and beauty that each of them feels inside.

Although Anderson is fascinated by the idea, nevertheless he knows that the language of hands is as subject to misinterpretation as any other. In this story he points out that this is not only possible, but it is probable, that the widely held truth in this case, the existence of homosexuality, has become a falsehood because appearance has been accepted in place of truth. Symbolically he shows how such widely held truths become falsehoods have inhibited the forces in man that allow him to express himself intimately and creatively. Fortunately, however, he shows that the forces still exist, making their possessor the more human and the more deserving of compassion, because he has been deprived of the power to express his creativity.”

David D. Anderson
“Sherwood Anderson’s Moments of Insight”
Critical Studies in American Literature: A Collection of Essays
(U Karachi 1964)

“The first story of *Winesburg*, ‘Hands,’ affords a vivid illustration of one of the ways in which Anderson manipulates his story-line in such a way as to evoke a maximum resonance from the events narrated. Normal time sequence is almost obliterated as Anderson penetrates with the reader further and further into the mysterious recesses of Wing Biddlebaum’s mind. The tragedy of Wing Biddlebaum is of course presented by means of the things that happened to him—not even the lyric story can totally dispense with the ‘epic’ elements essential for the narrative genres—but the events of Biddlebaum’s life are presented neither straightforwardly and in a conventional flashback sequence. Rather, Anderson uses a kind of box-within-box structure as he takes us into the interior mystery of his character by means of a series of vignettes in which Biddlebaum is revealed first through the eyes of the townspeople and the casual berry-pickers who pass his house, then through the eyes of George Willard (whom Anderson cunningly utilizes as both the confident the plot requires and as an objective correlative for all that Biddlebaum seeks), and finally through the protagonist’s own sense of himself.

But these sections flow so smoothly through the story-teller’s hands, and are so completely suffused with Wing Biddlebaum’s consciousness, that we are not aware of any awkward juncture between sections. In this structure, the first event in Biddlebaum’s ‘chronological’ life becomes the last in the record of his emotional life, because the beating of the schoolmaster was the one event which both precipitated and contained the entire mystery of the man. With the presentation of this event, also, Anderson has brought his story to its maximum level of universalization, for without resorting to allegory but by remaining wholly within the confines of realism Anderson has made us feel that we are all Wing Biddlebaum and that we are

also the men who cast him out of the village half dead, and that Biddlebaum's situation enfolds within it the entire condition of man. The last section of the story is a beautifully falling cadence; coming after the event of the beating, it simply shows us Wing Biddlebaum as he now is, as we have made him."

Sister M. Joselyn, O.S.B.

The Twenties / Poetry and Prose

(Everett Edwards 1966)

Richard E. Langford and William E. Taylor, eds.

Michael Hollister (2015)