

ANALYSIS

“Mother” (1919)

from *Winesburg, Ohio*

Sherwood Anderson

(1876-1941)

“The conflict between practical affairs and dreams is again made explicit in the third story of the book, ‘Mother,’ where it is objectified in the hostility between Tom and Elizabeth Willard and the clash of their influences on their son. *Winesburg* is not a book of suspense, and thus early in the tale the conflict is in effect resolved when George implicitly accepts his mother’s, and Wing’s way, the way of dreams. From this point on both the conflict and George’s resolution of it are maintained in a formal sense by the opposition between the ‘daylight world’ of the minor characters and the ‘night world’ of the major ones, the grotesques. George continues to run about writing down surface facts for the newspaper, but his essential life consists in his efforts, some successful, some not, to understand the essential lives of others. From these efforts, from the death of his mother, from his achievement of ‘sophistication’ with Helen White, he gains the will to leave Winesburg, committed, as the final paragraph of ‘Departure’ asserts, to the world of dreams.”

Walter B. Rideout
“The Simplicity of *Winesburg, Ohio*”
Shenandoah XIII
(Spring 1962)

“The third story, ‘Mother,’ deals with the relationship between George Willard and his mother, Elizabeth Willard. In effect the story is the exploration of a theme that Anderson had adapted from his own experience and used in both *Windy McPherson’s Son* and *Marching Men*: the inability to communicate love between mother and son. The relationship between the two is completely inarticulate, just as it was between mother and son in each of the novels and, more importantly, as Anderson’s autobiographies show, as was the case between him and his own mother. As a result, although this phase is part of the over-all problem of isolation, Anderson feels that understanding in this area is vital.

As the theme unfolds in this story, Elizabeth has been forced, through the ineptness of her husband, to take over management of both the family hotel, a failing business, and the inner affairs of the family proper. She is resented by her husband as a usurper, and, unable to love or respect him, she focuses her interest and love on her son, in whom she sees the potential for the individual fulfillment that her role as a woman and as head of the household had denied her. Inwardly she was a mass of determination that violently defied anything that threatened her son’ outwardly she was perfunctory, almost apologetic in his presence.

Consequently Elizabeth is continually afraid that her life, spent in opposing both the forces of conventional success and her husband, with her son as the stake, is indecisive and meaningless. She can only hope that the boy understands. Finally he announces that he is going away: ‘I just want to go away and look at people and think.’ She is unable to reply, but she knows that she has won; ‘She wanted to cry out with joy...but the expression of joy had become impossible to her,’ and the story ends in perfunctory formality, the barriers still solid between them.”

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

Michael Hollister (2015)