

ANALYSIS

“Paper Pills” (1919)

from *Winesburg, Ohio*

Sherwood Anderson

(1876-1941)

“In ‘Paper Pills’ Anderson again writes of the relationship between a man’s hands and his inner being, this time in the person of Doctor Reefy, a conventionally wise and perceptive country practitioner. Doctor Reefy is as cut off from effective communication with others as Wing Biddlebaum, but his problem is his inability to communicate his thoughts without being misunderstood. Because he recognizes this shortcoming, he writes his thoughts on bits of paper and puts the bits into his pockets, where they become twisted into hard little balls, which he throws playfully at his friend the nurseryman as he laughs.

Here Anderson carries further his introductory comment that there is no such thing as a truth, that there are only thoughts, and that man has made truths out of them through his own short sight. On bits of paper Doctor Reefy knows that he is writing mere thoughts, but he knows that they would be misinterpreted if communicated directly, so to prevent them being reduced to the grim joke of misinterpretation he prefers that they become the means of a lesser joke in the form of paper pills. Cut off from attempts at direct communication through his knowledge of its inevitable misinterpretation, Doctor Reefy prefers that his paper pills be considered as bits of paper and no more; in effect, the hard shells of the pills represent the barriers of isolation that surround human minds, and Doctor Reefy, voluntarily isolating himself rather than trying to overcome those barriers, deliberately avoids inevitable misunderstanding.

Waldo Frank sees this story as representing the ineffectuality of human thought as it is isolated and fragmented on the bits of paper, but Anderson indicates no such shortcoming in the thoughts themselves. The difficulty, he points out, lies in the process of communication, which, as Reefy indicates, is something that cannot be carried out directly with any assurance of success. Rather than risk misinterpretation, he lets the paper pills be considered products of his hands rather than his mind. Yet even while he throws them playfully at his friend, he hopes that his friend will see them in the light in which every craftsman hopes his work will be regarded—as a product that has taken shape through the work of his hands but that is expressive of his soul. Reefy knows that this intuitive understanding is as unlikely as direct understanding, and he lets himself become a grotesque because he is unable to find a satisfactory means of communication. The shortcoming lies not in the thought but in the process of communication, and he prefers to convey his thoughts ironically in the form of a joke, even while he knows that faulty communication of the intimacies of human life is life’s inherent tragedy.”

David D. Anderson

“Sherwood Anderson’s Moments of Insight”

Critical Studies in American Literature: A Collection of Essays

(U Karachi 1964)