

ANALYSIS

“Queer” (1919)

from *Winesburg, Ohio*

Sherwood Anderson

(1876-1941)

“In the story “Queer” these meanings receive their most generalized expression, for its grotesque, Elmer Cowley, has no specific deformity: he is the grotesque as such. ‘He was, he felt, one condemned to go through life without friends and he hated the thought.’ Wishing to talk to George Willard, he loses courage and instead rants to a half-wit: ‘I had to tell some one and you were the only one I could tell. I hunted out another queer one, you see. I ran away, that’s what I did.’ When Elmer Cowley does call George Willard out of the newspaper office, he again becomes tongue-tied in his presence. Despairing over ‘his failure to declare his determination not to be queer,’ Elmer Cowley decides to leave Winesburg, but in a last effort at communication he asks George Willard to meet him at the midnight local. Again he cannot speak. ‘Elmer Cowley danced with fury beside the groaning train in the darkness on the station platform.... Like one struggling for release from hands that held him he struck, hitting George Willard blow after blow on the breast, the neck, the mouth.’ Unable to give Elmer Cowley the love that might dissolve his queerness, George Willard suffers the fate of the rejected priest.

From the story ‘Queer,’ it is possible to abstract the choreography of *Winesburg*. Its typical action is a series of dance maneuvers by figures whose sole distinctive characteristic is an extreme deformity of movement or posture. Each of these grotesques dances, with angular indirection and muted pathos, toward a central figure who seems to them young, fresh, and radiant. For a moment they seem to draw close to him and thereby to abandon their stoops and limps, but this moment quickly dissolves in the play of the dance and perhaps it never even existed: the central figure cannot be reached. Slowly and painfully, the grotesques withdraw while the young man leaves the stage entirely. None of the grotesques is seen full-face for more than a moment, and none of them is individually important to the scheme of the dance. For this is a dance primarily of spatial relationships rather than solo virtuosity; the distances established between the dancers, rather than their personalities, form the essence of the dance. And in the end, its meaning is revealed in the fact that all but the one untouched youth return to precisely their original places and postures....

The first three stories of *Winesburg* develop its major theme, which, after several variations, reaches its most abstract version in ‘Queer.’ The stories following ‘Queer’ seem somewhat of a thematic afterthought, though they are necessary for a dull disposal of the characters.”

Irving Howe
Sherwood Anderson
(William Sloane 1957)

“Only in ‘Queer,’ the story of Elmer Cowley, does the grotesque resent the person of George Willard. Just as the others have seen Willard as the symbol of whatever will free them from their isolation, Elmer sees George as the manifestation of the society that rejects him. In this story Elmer resents George and yet attempts to establish satisfactory relations with him. Failing this, he assaults George, leaving him behind bewildered and half-conscious. As he hops a freight, Elmer voices his frustration by crying, ‘I guess I showed him. I ain’t so queer. I guess I showed him I ain’t so queer.’

In this story Elmer Cowley points out the difficulty that the other grotesques thus far have failed to perceive: George Willard does not understand. All of the others had seen him as an extension of self that could not fail to understand and that could ease their passage into the intimacies of human life, and each believed that he did somehow understand, even as he left in sympathy but baffled or, as in the case of Louise Trunnion, completely misunderstanding. But Elmer sees him as society, as the symbol of rejection,

and finding himself tongue-tied in George's presence, he can do nothing else but assault George and then run off, defiant but defeated. Elmer sees that George as society does not understand, while the others fail to see that as son, as lover, as mirrored self, he does not understand either."

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

Michael Hollister (2015)