

## ANALYSIS

“Sophistication” (1919)

from *Winesburg, Ohio*

Sherwood Anderson

(1876-1941)

“George Willard’s adolescent receptivity to the grotesques can only give him the momentary emotional illumination described in that lovely story, ‘Sophistication.’ On the eve of his departure from Winesburg, George Willard reaches the point ‘when he for the first time takes the backward view of life.... With a little gasp he sees himself as merely a leaf blown by the wind through the streets of his village. He knows that in spite of all the stout talk of his fellows he must live and die in uncertainty, a thing blown by the winds, a thing destined like corn to wilt in the sun.... Already he hears death calling. With all his heart he wants to come close to some other human, touch someone with his hands...’ For George this illumination is enough, but it is not for the grotesques. They are a moment in his education, he a confirmation of their doom. ‘I have missed something. I have missed something Kate Swift was trying to tell me,’ he says to himself one night as he falls asleep. He has missed the meaning of Kate Swift’s life: it is not his fault: her salvation, like the salvation of the other grotesques, is beyond his capacities.”

Irving Howe  
*Sherwood Anderson*  
(William Sloane 1957)

“‘Sophistication’ is nocturnal, but not that nightmare climate common to so many of the *Winesburg* stories, and as pleasantly informal as the evening stroll that provides its slight framework. First we see George Willard alone, ‘taking the backward view of life,’ and anxiously waiting for the hour when he can share his new sense of maturity with Helen White and perhaps compel her admiration of it.

Helen White is undergoing a rather parallel transformation into womanhood, a transformation only vaguely felt by George Willard, and comparatively unfocused for us, since her imputed maturity—real or not, significant or not—is presented less for its own interest than as a complementary background for George Willard’s achievement of tranquillity. (‘The feeling of loneliness and isolation that had come to the young man...was both broken and intensified by the presence of Helen. What he felt was reflected in her.’) Finally the two young people come together (each one from an atmosphere of ‘noise,’ meaningless superficial talk), and walk silently through the streets of Winesburg to the deserted grandstand at the fairgrounds. So far as the story informs us, they never say anything to each other.

In the grandstand they are confronted by ‘ghosts, not of the dead, but of living people.’ One paradox leads to another: ‘The place has been filled to overflowing with life...and now it is night and the life has all gone away.... One shudders at the thought of the meaninglessness of life while at the same instant, and if the people of the town are his people, one loves life so intensely that tears come into the eyes.’ This is perhaps the climax of the story—and thus of *Winesburg, Ohio*—for at this point Anderson’s own ambivalent attitude toward experience, and toward the art that arises from it to proclaim its ineradicable dignity, is fully embodied, not in terms of ideas (which Anderson never learned to manipulate) but in terms of their corresponding emotions encompassed in images.

Now that the summit of George Willard’s emotional and aesthetic development has been attained, we have a final look at the artist’s social role. It is all comprehended in a single sentence, again paradoxical: ‘He wanted to love and to be loved by her, but he did not want at the moment to be confused by her womanhood.’ (Presumably she feels the same.) The point is that they recognize and respect the essential privacy (or integrity) of human personality: ‘In that high place in the darkness the two oddly sensitive human atoms held each other tightly and waited. In the mind of each was the same thought. ‘I have come to this lonely place and here is this other,’ was the substance of the thing felt.’

The loneliness is assuaged—there is no other way—by the realization that loneliness is a universal condition and not a uniquely personal catastrophe; love is essentially the shared acceptance by two people of their final separateness. But these are truths beyond the comprehension of the grotesques, and one reason why they, who will not accept their isolation, are so uniformly without love; like Enoch Robinson, they never grew up. The artist, then, is not necessarily different from other people, after all. Primarily, he is defined in terms of maturity and in terms of the practical mastery of his craft (throughout *Winesburg*, George Willard has been busy as a reporter, learning to fit words to life felt and observed)... It is one of the few stories in the book which has a happy ending and it concludes with what is for *Winesburg* a startling statement: ‘For some reason they [George Willard and Helen White] could not have explained they had both got from their silent evening together the thing needed. Man or boy, woman or girl, they had for a moment taken hold of the thing that makes the mature life of men and women in the modern world possible.’ It would be difficult to imagine a passage more explicitly pointing to the presence of the book’s overarching meaning.”

Edwin Fussell  
“*Winesburg, Ohio: Art and Isolation*”  
*Modern Fiction Studies* VI  
(Summer 1960)

“Where ‘An Awakening’ records a defeat, ‘Sophistication’ records in all ways a triumph. Though Anderson presents the moment in essay rather than dramatic form, there comes to George, as to ‘every boy,’ a flash of insight when ‘he stops under a tree and waits as for a voice calling his name.’ But this time ‘the voices outside himself’ do not speak of the possibilities of universal order, nor do they speak of guilt. Instead they ‘whisper a message concerning the limitations of life,’ the brief light of human existence between two darks. The insight emphasizes the unity of all human beings in their necessary submission to death and their need for communication one with another. It is an insight that produces self-awareness but not self-centeredness, that produces, in short, the mature, ‘sophisticated’ person.

The mind of such a person does not ‘run off into words.’ Hence Helen White, who has had an intuition similar to George’s, runs away from the empty talk of her college instructor and her mother, and finds George, whose first and last words to her in the story, pronounced as they first meet, are ‘Come on.’ Together in the dimly lit fairgrounds on the hill overlooking the town of Winesburg, George and Helen share a brief hour of absolute awareness. Whereas his relationship with Belle Carpenter had produced in George self-centeredness, misunderstanding, hate, frustration, humiliation, that with Helen produces quite the opposite feelings. The feeling of oneness spreads outward, furthermore. Through his communication with Helen he begins ‘to think of the people in the town where he had lived with something like reverence.’ When he has come to this point, when he loves and respects the inhabitants of Winesburg, the ‘daylight’ people as well as the ‘night’ ones, the way of the artist lies clear before him. George Willard is ready for his ‘Departure’.”

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

Michael Hollister (2015)