

ANALYSIS

“The Book of the Grotesque” (1919)

from *Winesburg, Ohio*

Sherwood Anderson

(1876-1941)

“In the first of the sketches, ‘The Book of the Grotesque,’ utilizing as a statement of purpose, Anderson points out his approach in symbolic terms. As the title indicates, he shows that the individuals he is dealing with in the stories have each been twisted into psychological shapes having, in most cases, little to do with external appearance. This distortion results from both the narrowness of their own vision and that of others; in some cases the first is primarily at fault, while in others it is the latter. From this point the problem inherent in human isolation takes on two aspects: the first is, of course, the specific cause in individual cases; the second and more important is determining with exactness and hence understanding the nature of each grotesque. Thus, in the book he is approaching the understanding that Sam McPherson sought in a way that demands empathy, compassion, and intuition...”

In this sketch, which characterizes an old writer who has attained understanding of his fellow men and has retired from life to observe men and to teach them understanding, Anderson defines his problem symbolically because he has learned that there is no direct, obvious cause but that there are causes as diverse as the individuals who make up the world. In the sketch the old writer reveals his secret knowledge of the nature of mankind, noting: ... ‘It was the truths that made the people grotesques.... The moment that one of the people took *one* of the truths to himself, called it his truth, and tried to live his life by it, he became a grotesque and the truth he embraced became a falsehood.’ [italics added]

Using this symbolic interpretation as a basis, Anderson sets off to use intuitive perception to try to find in the lives of the people with whom he is dealing whatever it is in themselves that has prevented them from reaching their full potential as human beings and that has cut them off from their fellows. He shows, too, his realization that the cause is not something as easily perceived and denounced as modern industrialism but that it is as old as the human race. False ideas, false dreams, false hopes, and false goals have distorted man’s vision almost from the beginning. Anderson is attempting in the stories to approach these people who have had such indignities inflicted on them as to become spiritual grotesques, and most importantly, he is attempting to understand them as people rather than as curious specimens of spiritual deformity.

Anderson’s use of the word ‘grotesque’ is quite important in this context. In its usual sense in reference to human beings it connotes disgust or revulsion, but Anderson’s use is quite different. To him a grotesque is, as he points out later, like the twisted apples that are left behind in the orchards because they are imperfect. These apples, he says, are the sweetest of all, perhaps even because of the imperfections that have caused them to be rejected. He approaches the people in his stories as he does the apples, secure in his knowledge that the sources or natures of their deformities are unimportant when compared to their intrinsic worth as human beings needing and deserving of understanding. This approach is based on intuition rather than objective knowledge, and it is the same sort of intuition with which one approaches the twisted apples; he believes that one dare not reject because of mere appearance, either physical or spiritual; that appearance may mask a significant experience made more intense and more worthwhile by the deformity itself.

In the body of the work proper, following this introductory sketch, Anderson has set up an organizational pattern that not only gives partial unity to the book but explores systematically the diverse origins of the isolation of his people, each of whom is in effect a social displaced person because he is cut off from human intercourse with his fellow human beings. In the first three stories Anderson deals with three aspects of the problem of human isolation. The first story, ‘Hands,’ deals with the inability to

communicate feeling; the second, 'Paper Pills,' is devoted to the inability to communicate thought; and the third, 'Mother,' focuses on the inability to communicate love. This three-phased examination of the basic problem of human isolation sets the tone for the rest of the book because these three shortcomings, resulting partially from the narrowness of the vision of each central figure but primarily from the lack of sympathy with which the contemporaries of each regard him, are the real creators of the grotesques in human nature.

Each of the three characters has encountered one aspect of the problem: he has something that he feels is vital and real within himself that he wants desperately to reveal to others, but in each case he is rebuffed, and, turning in upon himself, he becomes a bit more twisted and worn spiritually. But, like the apples left in the orchards, he is the sweeter, the more human for it. In each case the inner vision of the main character remains clear, and the thing that he wishes to communicate is in itself good, but his inability to break through the shell that prevents him from talking to others results in misunderstanding and spiritual tragedy."

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