

## ANALYSIS

“The Egg” (1921)

Sherwood Anderson

(1876-1941)

A fertilized egg is literally a potential new life. Hence it is a natural symbol of hope, growth, and the promise of fulfillment. Here in the context of this story it becomes a symbol of the American Dream. Before chicken farming got taken over by large corporations—an example of industrialization displacing traditional rural life that is the main subject of Anderson—raising chickens was a common way for families to get ahead in America. The “literature” on chicken farming “declares that much may be done by simple ambitious people who own a few hens.”

In several World War II movies, during a lull in combat, soldiers in foxholes would talk about what they wanted to do after the war and one would say, “I wanta have a farm and raise chickens.” After the war a humorous memoir by a woman about her frustrating experiences as a chicken farmer with her husband from 1927 to 1931, *The Egg And I* (1945), became a bestseller. The book was made into a film with secondary characters who went on to make 8 “Ma and Pa Kettle” movies and also inspired a television series and the founding of a restaurant chain.

Back then raising chickens represented independence, opportunity, free enterprise and a pastoral way of life that contrasted to life in a city. Although life on a farm is “pastoral,” farming is in fact very hard work. *Agrarian pastoralism* is a synthesis of the *pastoral* and the *puritan*—a *transcendental* ideal difficult to attain. In this story the father lacks the necessary character, in particular the capacity to patiently endure frustration, to succeed as a chicken farmer. Chicks are susceptible to 37 different diseases. Most eggs intended for human consumption are unfertilized, nullifying the symbolism of the egg as a source of new life and making it represent instead the failure of the father.

The father was a farm hand for a man named Butterworth, evoking the worth of his life by associating it with butter. Butter then was homemade by hand on farms and the father had a simple life as a farm hand that was rich enough for him and went along as smooth as butter. He enjoyed drinking beer in town on Saturday nights, in “social intercourse”—a very positive value in Anderson—with other farm hands at Ben *Head*’s saloon. “Songs were sung and glasses thumped on the bar.” The word “head” applies to a glass of beer and to the town, where people go from the countryside to “get a-head.” Anderson’s symbolism is archetypal like Hawthorne’s: primarily the country represents the values of the heart, the town the values of the head. The spaces overlap. The story becomes an allegory portraying the pursuit of the American Dream near the town of Bidwell, but the parents of the narrator do not bid well.

The father displays moderation and good sense by drinking only one night a week and by always going home relatively early. He does not get drunk. He is able to care for his horse and is “quite happy in his position in life. He had at that time no notion of trying to rise in the world.” Then he gets married—to a country school teacher, whose profession associates her with the head. When the narrator was born, his parents “became ambitious. The American passion for getting up in the world took possession of them.” The word “possession” evokes materialism and the demonic. “It may be that mother was responsible.” This attribution is consistent with the myth of the Fall, in which Eve eats the apple (the “hopeful literature” of chicken farming) from the “tree of knowledge.” Previously in *Winesburg, Ohio* (1919), Anderson used “twisted apples” as a metaphor of grotesques, frustrated citizens of Winesburg who have a “sweetness” despite being psychologically twisted, whereas in this story the frustrated father turns bitter.

Though she is implicitly responsible, the mother is admirably unselfish: “For herself she wanted nothing. For father and myself she was incurably ambitious.” This seems laudable in a wife and a mother, though the word “incurably” hints that her ambition may be a disease. Her eyes are “troubled.” American teachers, mostly women, have characteristically encouraged all of their students to rise in the world—to

fulfill their “potential.” Who would disagree with that? She wants to rise from the pastoral myth of the Garden embodied in Huck Finn into the puritan myth of the self-made person embodied in Benjamin Franklin. She wants her husband to emulate a man such as “Lincoln,” despite the fact that a man content to be a farm hand at the age of 34 seems an unlikely candidate for the White House. Today the imperative to rise in the world is exemplified by the pressure on all young people to go to college whether they have the capacity for it or not, leading many to fail, many to take on a heavy burden of loan debt and many to sink into depression. “At any rate she induced father to give up his place as a farm hand, sell his horse and embark on an independent enterprise of his own.”

The narrator expands their chicken farm into a metaphor of Life when he says he got his “first impression of life there.” The chickens enact the “dreadful cycle” of life. He prepares for the implications of the story’s ending when he describes himself as “a gloomy man inclined to see the darker side of life.” Chicks are “so much like people they mix up one’s judgments of life. If disease does not kill them they wait until your expectations are thoroughly aroused and then walk under the wheels of a wagon—to go squashed and dead back to their maker.” His tone is humorously cynical as he contrasts real chicks with those “pictured on Easter cards.” Unlike the Savior, chicks do not represent salvation nor rise from the dead. “Most philosophers must have been raised on chicken farms.”

The conversational prose style of Anderson increases Realism. It creates an illusion of spontaneity, as though he is groping his way along, recalling and digressing as he talks, sometimes even with deliberate awkwardness: “I, however, digress” and “I will tell you of that.” This is opposite to the impression of perfect art most writers try to convey. Anderson was intuitive rather than calculating. He claimed that he wrote a story in one burst of inspiration and that he tended to rewrite a story completely—sometimes as many as a dozen times—rather than revising it much. Because the egg is an *archetypal* symbol, having even served traditionally in philosophy as a symbol of the universe—the “cosmic egg”—it must have readily generated multiple implications during his creative process. However, the texture of this story is so much richer in significant details and motifs than most of his fiction that it may be an exception to his usual method. “The Egg” is as perfectly formed as an egg.

After ten years of frustration and failure, the parents of the narrator give up on chicken farming and move close to the town of Bidwell. They formed a “tiny caravan of hope looking for a new place from which to start our upward journey through life.” They are like “refugees fleeing from a battlefield.” By now the father, “from long association with mother and the chickens,” had “become habitually silent and discouraged.” The tone of cynicism, from the later perspective of the narrator as a mature adult, becomes mock heroic when he describes how as a boy he saw the bald path over the top of his father’s *head* as “something like a broad road, such a road as Caesar might have made on which to lead his legions out of Rome and into the wonders of an unknown world.” Despite their lowly circumstances the hopeful boy still dreams that his father has the potential to conquer the world.

The father’s “greatest treasure” is not his wife or son, but his collection of deformed chicks, “little monstrous things that had been born on our chicken farm” preserved in alcohol in glass bottles, some of them with two *heads*, analogous to the two parents and to their two successive ill-conceived ideas about how to get ahead. “Grotesques are born out of eggs as out of people.” The poor man dreams of growing rich by exhibiting his deformities to farm hands at county fairs. He is unable to let go of his failures. “People who have few possessions cling tightly to those they have. That is one of the facts that make life so discouraging.”

The family never makes it to Bidwell. Instead they get themselves into another pickle with their pickled grotesques in a nearby place called Pickleville. They are undaunted by the fact that a mill and a pickle factory there have closed. “Our going to the out-of-the-way place to embark in the restaurant business was mother’s idea,” because she thought they would prosper at a location opposite the railroad station. Of course, as most people know, restaurants fail more often than almost any other business. Yet the father becomes more hopeful than ever before. “The American spirit took hold of him.... In the long nights when there was little to do father had time to think. That was his undoing. He decided that he had in the past not been cheerful enough and that in the future he would adopt a cheerful outlook on life.” Anderson here evokes the tradition in America of belief in “the power of positive thinking.” Now it is the father who takes

the lead in being optimistic, whereas “Mother must have been doubtful from the first, but she said nothing discouraging. It was father’s notion that a passion for the company of himself and mother would spring up in the breasts of the younger people of the town of Bidwell.” Ironically, though he did not get drunk when he was a farm hand, now he is figuratively intoxicated by his idea.

Though he is an “uncommunicative man,” by nature a farm hand, “It was his father’s idea that both he and mother should try to entertain the people who came to eat at our restaurant.” Anderson uses the passive voice—“was to be”—to create a tone of ridicule: “When people, particularly young people from the town of Bidwell, came into our place, as on very rare occasions they did, bright entertaining conversation was to be made. From father’s words I gathered that something of the jolly innkeeper effect was to be sought.” No doubt he thinks his display of deformed chicks floating in alcohol in glass bottles will contribute to the jolly effect—just what diners want to look at while they eat. “It was father’s notion that a passion for the company of himself and mother would spring up in the breasts of the younger people of the town of Bidwell.” His notion is so absurd that the tone here is a blend of ridicule and pathos, comparable to the blend of contradictory tones in *Huckleberry Finn*.

They do their best to be cheerful. “Mother smiled at the boarders and I, catching the infection, smiled at our cat. Father became a little feverish in his anxiety to please.” The word “infection” and “feverish” sustain the theme that becoming desperately ambitious can be like catching a disease. Anderson’s emphasis on psychology rather than plot is evident as he dramatizes the effect of the disaster that reduces the family to tears before he explains the cause. When the father comes upstairs with an egg in his hand and a “half-insane light in his eyes,” trembling and glaring at his wife and son, the fact that he restrains himself from throwing the egg at them and instead “laid it gently on the table beside the lamp and dropped to his knees beside mother’s bed,” dramatizes his defeat and makes him sympathetic before the final episode, in which he behaves like an angry fool. With the broken father on his knees beside the mother’s bed and she stroking “the bald path that ran across the top of his head,” the story proceeds.

A young man named Joe Kane, son of a merchant in Bidwell, comes into the restaurant and waits for an overdue train to arrive at the station. Behind the counter, the narrator’s father suffers an attack of stage fright that makes him nervous and unstable. He tries to entertain Joe by performing a trick with an egg, saying that Christopher Columbus was a cheat for claiming that he could make an egg stand on end, that he had done it by breaking the end of an egg just enough to make it stable. (Actually this legend pre-dates Columbus.) He claims that he can make an egg stand on end without breaking it. Muttering and swearing as he denounces Columbus, he appears to Joe to be angry.

In American literature a reference to Columbus evokes the history of the American Dream, which began with a mistake. Columbus wanted to reach the Far East, but initially he bumped into South America and thought he had discovered the original Garden of Eden. The apparent anger of the father and his claim that Columbus was a fraud expresses his own disappointment at failing to attain his goals. Boasting that “No one knows more about eggs than I do,” for half an hour he tries to stand an egg on end by massaging and warming it with his hands, to create “a new center of gravity,” symbolizing his own effort to master the problem of attaining the American Dream by becoming warm and entertaining—by being, in the slang expression, “a good egg.” It takes him so long that Joe loses interest and looks away, and when he finally succeeds in standing the egg on end for a just a moment, it falls over before he can attract Joe’s attention to his brief triumph over the egg.

So then he resorts to showing Joe one of his monstrosities floating pickled in a bottle. “How would you like to have seven legs and two heads like this fellow?” He himself has become like this grotesque. The sight makes Joe feel ill and he gets up to leave. Now the father gets truly angry and pulls Joe back to his seat. Desperately he resorts to a more extreme method of trying to triumph over the egg. “I will heat this egg in this pan of vinegar...Then I will put it through the neck of the bottle without breaking the shell. When the egg is inside the bottle it will resume its normal shape and the shell will become hard again. Then I will give the bottle with the egg in it to you. You can take it about with you wherever you go. People will want to know how you got the egg in the bottle.” Joe decides that the man is “mildly insane but harmless.” Ironically, the father has already trapped himself. He tries and tries to make his trick work “and a spirit of desperate determination took possession of him.”

The train arrives in the station and Joe gets up to leave. “Father made a last desperate effort to conquer the egg and make it do the thing that would establish his reputation as one who knew how to entertain guests who came into his restaurant.” Sweating and swearing, he tries to force the egg through the bottleneck and “The egg broke under his hand. When the contents spurted over his clothes, Joe Kane, who had stopped at the door, turned and laughed.” That breaks the man. He roars in anger and throws the egg at Joe—“just missing the head of the young man as he dodged through the door and escaped.”

Anderson then has his narrator repeat the scene describing the father going upstairs with an egg in his hand looking as if he wanted to destroy all eggs. He learned the technique of repetition from reading Gertrude Stein. The father is calmed by the presence of the mother and “He laid the egg gently on the table and dropped to his knees...” The narrator recalls himself as a boy wondering about the meaning of life as represented by the cycle of chickens and eggs and the question remains a problem to him “because I am the son of my father.” He concludes only that his experience is “evidence of the complete and final triumph of the egg—at least as far as my family is concerned.”

Clearly the father and his family would have been happier had he remained a farm hand. Yet Anderson and his narrator do not reject the American Dream, as symbolized by the father when he refrains from breaking the egg in the presence of the mother, placing it “gently” on the table and dropping to his knees in a posture associated with submission and reverence. The triumph of the egg applies only “as far as my family is concerned,” and to others for whom ambition becomes a disease that turns them into grotesques. The last sentence implies that, despite the example of his broken father, the son caught the disease himself. Ambition is epidemic in America.

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