

## ANALYSIS

“The Untold Lie” (1919)

from *Winesburg, Ohio*

Sherwood Anderson

(1876-1941)

“Though certain features of oral telling can be seen in more exaggerated form in some of the other *Winesburg* stories, ‘The Untold Lie’ has most of the basic characteristics: the laying in at the beginning of blocks of background before the story proper is taken up; the apparent wandering away from the story because of some associational interest provoked by the mention of a name, object, or place; the frequent authorial intrusions in the form of ‘insights’ and self-dramatizations; the shifts in time, and the occasional stopping of the story to lay in apparently overlooked materials necessary to the ‘point’ of the tale.

In the opening page of ‘The Untold Lie’ we are summarily told the names of the two characters—Ray Pearson and Hal Winters—where they live, their occupations, ages, marital status. Ray is characterized swiftly as ‘an altogether serious man...quiet, rather nervous...with a brown beard and shoulders rounded by too much and too hard labor.’ So much for Ray Pearson. Anderson then turns to Hal Winters. With the oral teller’s fondness for the associational, he asks us—as if we might know him—not to confuse him with Ned Winters’s family, a respectable family, for Hal is ‘one of the three sons of the old man called Windpeter Winters who had a sawmill near Unionville, six miles away, and who was looked upon by everyone in Winesburg as a confirmed reprobate.’ In oral telling the mention of any person, even though he may have little relation to the story, commonly results in a digression. And so it is here. One of the ten pages of the story is an account of Windpeter’s death (as with most of Anderson’s apparent digressions in these stories, this serves a purpose: Hal Winters comes from a spirited family that does not easily succumb to the traps of life that have defeated the weaker and more respectable Ray Pearson)....

It is not until page four that the tale promised us begins with ‘And so these two men, Ray and Hal, were at work...’ but the story is immediately interrupted by the teller’s addressing us again to insist upon the reasons for Ray Pearson’s ‘distracted mood’... From this point on the story is presented dramatically with only two more brief interruptions; the latter of these—‘Ray Pearson lost his nerve and this is really the end of the story of what happened to him’—is disarming, for the one page that follows is really not the afterthought it appears to be; the teller is enjoying his craftiness. The *Winesburg* stories are ‘oral,’ but are not, of course, merely oral stories written down. Since the meanings with which he was working needed a subtlety of handling that had little to do with the oral story as he knew it, Anderson solved the problem of telling stories in which nothing much happens externally by using a narrator-bard whose sympathetic vision is never far away. His bard is like the writer in the prefatory ‘Book of the Grotesque’ (and not unlike Anderson’s conception of himself as a ‘story-teller’)...”

Jarvis A. Thurston  
“Technique in *Winesburg, Ohio*”  
*Accent* (Spring 1956)

“The best of the moments in *Winesburg, Ohio* is called ‘The Untold Lie.’ The story, which I have to summarize at the risk of spoiling it, is about two farm hands husking corn in a field at dusk. Ray Pearson is small, serious, and middle-aged, the father of half a dozen thin-legged children; Hal Winters is big and young, with the reputation of being a bad one. Suddenly he says to the older man, ‘I’ve got Nell Gunther in trouble. I’m telling you, but keep your mouth shut.’ He puts his two hands on Ray’s shoulders and looks down into his eyes. ‘Well, old daddy,’ he says, ‘come on, advise me. Perhaps you’ve been in the same fix yourself. I know what everyone would say is the right thing to do, but what do you say?’ Then the author steps back to look at his characters. ‘There they stood,’ he tells us, ‘in the big empty field with the quiet corn shocks standing in rows behind them and the red and yellow hills in the distance, and from being just two indifferent workmen they had become all alive to each other.

That single moment of aliveness—that epiphany, as Joyce would have called it, that sudden reaching out of two characters through walls of inarticulateness and misunderstanding—is the effect that Anderson is trying to create for his readers or listeners. There is more to the story, of course, but it is chiefly designed to bring the moment into relief. Ray Pearson thinks of his own marriage, to a girl he got into trouble, and turns away from Hal without being able to say the expected words about duty. Later that evening he is seized by a sudden impulse to warn the younger man against being tricked into this bondage. He runs awkwardly across the fields, crying out that children are only the accidents of life. Then he meets Hal and stops, unable to repeat the words that he had shouted into the wind.

It is Hal who breaks the silence. ‘I’ve already made up my mind,’ he says, taking Ray by the coat and shaking him. ‘Nell ain’t no fool.... I want to marry her. I want to settle down and have kids.’ Both men laugh, as if they had forgotten what happened in the cornfield. Ray walks away into the darkness, thinking pleasantly now of his children and muttering to himself, ‘It’s just as well. Whatever I told him would have been a lie.’ There has been a moment in the lives of the two men. The moment has passed and the briefly established communion has been broken, yet we feel that each man has revealed his essential being. It is as if a gulf had opened in the level Ohio cornfield and as if, for one moment, a light had shone from the depths, illuminating everything that happened or would ever happen to both of them.”

Malcolm Cowley  
Introduction  
*Winesburg, Ohio*  
(Viking/Compass 1960) 6-7

“In ‘The Untold Lie’...two men tenderly meet in order to talk about whether one, the younger, should marry the girl he has made pregnant. The older man, unhappy in his own marriage, wants to see the young man’s life free and charged with powerful action as his own has never been. But it is revealed to him—revelation is almost always the climax of Anderson’s stories—that life without wife and children is impossible and that one man’s sorrows cannot be used by him to prevent another man from choosing the same sorrows. It would be a lie to say that the life of conjugal sorrows is merely a life of conjugal sorrows. The story finally breathes the sadness, the beauty, the necessary risks of grown-up desire. ‘Whatever I told him would have been a lie,’ he decides. Each man has to make his own decisions and live out his chosen failures of ideal freedom.”

Herbert Gold  
“*Winesburg, Ohio: The Purity and Cunning of Sherwood Anderson*”  
*The Age of Happy Problems*  
(The Dial Press 1962)

Michael Hollister (2015)