

Sherwood Anderson's *Winesburg, Ohio*

- Sherwood Anderson was a master of short story form, moving away from plot and chronology and instead placing more innovative emphasis on character, mood, and impression. An important American literary figure, he and his form of writing has since been eclipsed by others (such as Faulkner) who came afterwards. Faulkner once said that Anderson was “the father of my generation of American writers and the tradition of American writing which our successors will carry on.”
- Anderson's influences:
 - From Gertrude Stein, he developed a style that valued repetition and emphasized simple syntax over artificial literary rhetoric
 - From Edgar Lee Masters, he inherited a character sketch form and an emphasis on the interconnected lives of small-town Midwesterners
 - From post-impressionist painters (he attended the 1914 exhibition at the Chicago Armory), he got the idea to base his narrative on subjective impressions instead of events in chronological time – an emphasis on the ways that experience *impresses* itself upon the consciousness of the artist
 - From James Joyce, the significance of the inner life of the character, especially in relation to epiphanic moments
 - From naturalists such as Zola and Dreiser, a thematic emphasis on determinant forces in the making of unhappy lives – however, unlike Zola and Dreiser, Anderson situates his unhappy figures in a rural, typically picturesque landscape
- The significance of the book's structure
 - “The Book of the Grotesque” as a framing device
 - Grotesque: word derives from Italian *grotte*, decorative ornaments (found in grottoes) consisting of medallions, sphinxes, foliage, rocks, and pebbles. In a literary sense, it usually signifies that which is bizarre, ridiculous, freakish, or unnatural—in other words, that which deviates from desirable norms of balance, harmony, and proportion. It is often used for comic and exaggerated satiric effects; used often in behavioral and physical caricature
 - Characters in *Winesburg, Ohio* are the individual grotesques
 - Directly linked metaphorically to the “gnarled apples” in “Paper Pills”
 - Does the writer's book, “The Book of the Grotesque,” become the text that the reader holds in his/her hands? In this way, the story becomes metafictional

- Emphasizes the conditionality of “truth” linked to the grotesque
 - Writer in this short narrative linked to George?
- Major themes in *Winesburg, Ohio*
- An overarching theme: alienation and loneliness
 - Who in the book isn’t lonely or alienated?
 - The constricting nature of small-town life in America
 - Longing and desire
 - Almost all characters in the book are longing for something that they don’t have and that they feel will make them whole
 - Many times their desires are describes in terms of fire imagery – suggests that desire is both consuming and potentially purifying (e.g., “The Teacher,” where both George Willard and Kate Swift are linked to fire, both literally and figuratively)
 - Observation – looking at others and being looked at
 - The book is a series of short stories, almost all of which include some aspect of observation
 - Even the narrative style itself becomes a point of observation – the “I” narrator looking at the townsfolk
 - The contingency of happiness – it’s always fleeting, always followed by loss
 - There are unhappy marriages and relationships throughout (e.g., in “Mother,” “Surrender,” “Respectability,” “The Untold Lie”)
 - Most of the women in the book are unhappy
 - Who in the book isn’t unhappy? Joe Welling in “The Man of Ideas”? Tom Foster in “Drink”?
 - The longing for freedom – “stripping down,” at times literally (in the case of Alice Hindman in “Adventure”), of the conventions of society
 - Sexuality as a significant force in people’s lives
 - The importance (and at times the tenuousness) of self-revelation
 - Artist figures and their attempts to free themselves from the restrictions of middle-class life
- The significance of the narration
- Who is the narrator? What are the many references to “I”?
 - Who is the narratee?
- *Winesburg, Ohio* as bildungsroman of George Willard
- George grows as the book progresses
 - His relationship with women matures (contrast “Nobody Knows,” “An Awakening,” and “Sophistication”)
 - His self-awareness and growth as a young adult (contrast the epiphany in “An Awakening” to that found in “Death” and “Sophistication”)
 - The story cycle as the growth of a writer – in this sense, an American version of *The Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*

- When George departs at the end of the book, does he become, in some sense, the writer we see in “The Book of the Grotesque”? Do these grotesques we read become those George reveals as a mature artist?

➤ *Winesburg, Ohio* as short-story cycle:

The Short-Story Cycle

- A series of linked stories within a larger narrative framework
- The stories are directly linked in some significant fashion (e.g., through setting, protagonist, or even theme) in ways that encourage a more holistic reading
 - The short-story cycle is like “traditional” story collections in that the individual parts can be separated from the whole (as in an anthology) and still stand alone. It differs from the more “traditional” collection in that the meaning of each individual story is somewhat determined by its context within the whole (setting, theme, protagonist, etc), and as such, loses something when taken out of that context
 - The short-story cycle is like the novel in that there are various narrative elements that more tightly bind the parts together. It differs from the novel in that the individual stories (as opposed to the novel’s chapters or sections) can be removed from their context without significantly undermining or damaging the meaning of the remaining parts
- The relationship between the part and the whole betray a more metonymic structure
 - For Roman Jakobson, metonymy is created through semantic congruity, that is, the joining together through consistency of meaning (**congruity**)
 - Paul de Man emphasizes metonymic meaning through “contingent association” – that is, the meaning of the whole is dependent on the parts, or put another way, the part’s relationship to the whole helps determine meaning (**contingency**)
- The arrangement of the various parts, and the meaning that arises from this, is partially determined by the author – there is a reason the various parts are arranged the way they are
- This arrangement is nonetheless dependent on the reader’s ability to recognize the “larger picture” or the patterns of the various parts – the reader discovers the stories’ connections
- The stories are linked in such a way that the reader’s experience with each one is modified by his/her experience and knowledge of the others

Narrative Structure of *Winesburg, Ohio*

<u>Chapter Title</u>	<u>Central Figure</u>	<u>Central Actions</u>
The Book of the Grotesque	An old writer	Grotesques, and putting “truths” into writing
Hands	Wing Biddlebaum	His role as a teacher and his male students
Paper Pills	Doctor Reefy	His courtship with his wife and his paper balls
Mother	Elizabeth Willard	Wanting to “save” George from his father
The Philosopher	Doctor Parcival	His coming to be a doctor, his lack of much of a practice
Nobody Knows	George Willard	His courting Louise Trunnion, from the other side of the tracks
Godliness		
Part One	Jesse Bentley	Seeing himself as an agent of God, fulfilling divine wishes
Part Two	David Bentley	Feeling alienated from his mother, preferring grandfather
Part Three: Surrender	Louise Bentley Hardy	Feeling out of place at Hardy household, longing for love
Part Four: Terror	David Bentley	Being taken as a “sacrifice” by his grandfather
A Man of Ideas	Joe Welling	Obliviously spouting ideas to anyone who will listen
Adventure	Alice Hindman	Waiting for Ned Currie to come back, longing for love
Respectability	Wash Williams	Hating women, the story of his past relationship
The Thinker	Seth Richmond	Foil to George, unable to put thoughts into words
Tandy	“Tandy” Hard	Wanting to take on a brand new name/identity
The Strength of God	Rev. Curtis Hartman	Tempted by the image of Kate, being “delivered”
The Teacher	George Willard, Kate Swift	Seeing in George an artist spirit, unable to love him
Loneliness	Enoch Robinson	His preference for imaginary friends, ultimately untenable
An Awakening	George Willard	Being unable to seduce Bella Carpenter
“Queer”	Elmer Cowley	Wanting to be seen as “normal,” resisting the gaze of others

The Untold Lie	Ray Pearson	Wanting to keep Hal from making the same mistake he did
Drink	Tom Foster	The necessity of having an adventure
Death	Elizabeth Willard	The need to be understood, first by Dr. Reefy then by death
Sophistication	George Willard	Feeling out of place, needing to put past into perspective
Departure	George Willard	Leaving home in order to begin manhood