

Understanding *Winesburg, Ohio*, “Hands” and the Grotesque through the Prism of Modernism

As I was researching the critical literature attached to *Winesburg, Ohio*, I came across an interesting law suit by the firm of Biddlebaum Cowley Reefy & Swift LLP. They are suing the town of Winesburg, Indiana for trademark infringement. Apparently, the Indiana town was marketing such products and services as “meditative introspection, synthetic emotional effects, general literary malaise and cathartic artistic performances *including but not limited to* confessions, coveting’s, and secrets-keeping.” According to the brief, *Winesburg, OH*’s federal trademark provides for the “distribution of Sadness, Fear, Longing, and Confusion itself.” *Winesburg, Ohio*, in short, has “the patent on Madness, owns Trembling and markets Grief.”¹

The student of modernism, however, will see more subtlety in this related-story novel than the wordy, convoluted legal prose above. *Winesburg*, with its innovative short story form, offers the archetypal modernist impulse to sever all ties with the past, echoing Ezra Pound’s call to “make it new.” All the hand gesturing and verbal paralysis recall the modernist view of the “worn-out connotations” of words, like D.H. Lawrence calling language a “dumb show” where “all the great words, . . . love, joy, happiness, home, mother, father, husband, . . . were dying. The Winesburgians’ isolation and loneliness, moreover, dramatize E.M. Forster’s dictum to “only connect.” As inheritors of encroaching materialism and industrialization at the end of 19th century, Anderson’s characters, like Wing Biddlebaum in “Hands,” search for a lost plentitude and are cut off from each other and from themselves. Twist all these modernist branches together and you have what Anderson calls the grotesque.

The meaning of grotesque is basic to the meaning of the novel. In the prologue “Book of the Grotesque” (Anderson’s original name for *Winesburg*), an old writer lies on his bed and watches a procession of people ² pass before his eyes in a semiconscious state. These people have become distorted because each has fanatically seized on one of the numberless truths fabricated by the human mind. According to the narrator:

¹ from *Winesburg, Indiana: A Fork River Anthology*. Eds. Michael Martone, Bryan Furuness. Indiana UP, 2015.

² The phrase, “a procession of people pass before his eyes” is repeated at the end of the novel and refers to George Willard, the artist figure in *WO*. The image is also repeated with painter Enoch Robinson as he talks and befriends a procession of imaginary characters occupying his room.

It was his [the writer's] notion that the moment one of the people
took one of the truths to himself and called it his truth
and tried to live his life by it, he became
a grotesque and the truth he embraced became a falsehood.

The narrator agrees with the old writer when the latter says that not all the grotesques that pass before his eyes are horrible; "Some were amusing, some were almost beautiful." However, it is not always easy to differentiate between who is what. Among the "horribles," Wash Williams in "Respectability" is described as a "simian grotesque for his hanging on to one false truth that "women are bitches." Elmer Cowley in "Queer" has no physical deformities like Wash, but is an outright psychotic and paranoid in his insane jealousy of George Willard. Jesse Bentley in "Godliness," a New World Puritan zealot, fancies himself the fulfillment of the Old Testament patriarchs, his encroaching neighbors as Philistines, his offspring as potential David's. David Hardy, his grandson, flees Winesburg in terror when Jesse, hearing the voice of God, tries to emulate Abraham offering to sacrifice Isaac. Their fanaticism as one critic says, is "motivated by self-aggrandizing visions that estrange them from humanity."

The women of *Winesburg* are grotesque and miserable for another reason. Because female qualities like vulnerability and tenderness are devalued by this patriarchal society, communication between the sexes is blocked. The men frustrate the desire for mutual spiritual and physical fulfillment by turning the women into objects. They can't see or relate to who their wives and lovers really are. Louise Bentley in "Godliness" is starved for love and totally rejected by father Jesse because of his obsession for a son. She suffers in her marriage to John Hardy because he is blind to her dream of men and women as friends and equals. Louise is a sexual object to him. Alice Hindman in "Adventure" suggests to her newspaper reporter lover, Ned Currie, that they leave together for the big city and both work and live unconventionally. He tells her to stay home and wait for him. The narrator tells us, Alice had no understanding of "the modern idea of a woman owning herself and giving and taking for her own ends." Finally, Elizabeth Willard in "Death" manages to find some intimacy with Dr. Reefy because he can see the hidden identity of women. But when the moment is broken for fear of an intruder, Elizabeth turns to death as the only lover who will receive her complete identity.

To understand Anderson's grotesques further, it helps to recall other literary fanatics, like Emily in "A Rose for Emily" by Faulkner (one of Anderson's protégées) or Dickens' Miss

Havisham in *Great Expectations*. Both are sisters to Alice Hindman who become arrested in time the moment their lovers jilt them. Emily's distorted truth of romantic love and denial of her Yankee's rejection lasts for over 30 years as she and his corpse make for rather narcoleptic bedfellows. Or earlier, Hawthorne's grotesques and their fanaticism lead them to commit the unpardonable sin of adultery (*Scarlet Letter*) or there are Flannery O'Connor's militant rationalists (the Misfit in "A Good Man Is Hard to Find") versus her redeemable religious fanatics (the Grandmother in same story). Fanaticism, as the old writer says, can affirm as well as nullify the human spirit.

Wing Biddlebaum in "Hands" is the quintessential grotesque, yet one of the gentle, loveable ones, a sweet twisted apple who we feel sorry for because the community can't tolerate his feminine qualities of vulnerability and sensitivity. The first story in the collection represents both Anderson's new form for the short story, his prose style and his modernist themes. In an essay, Anderson wrote that what he was going for was not plot but "form, character, incident . . . an altogether more elusive and difficult thing to come at." He thought the "poison plot" stories that taught lessons like O'Henry's or Maupassant's were contrived. Loose form corresponds to reality as we experience it. According to Anderson, "no plot short stories had lived in any life I had known anything about."³ The inner life of characters, like their Freudian subconscious gestures, was what he was after. In *A Story Teller's Story* Anderson discusses what he means by the primacy of character and incident over plot. Sitting on a bench in front of the Cathedral of Chartres, he observed a little drama played out before the cathedral door. "An American came with two women, one French, the other American, his wife or his sweetheart. The American man was flirting with the French woman and the American woman was pretending not to notice." Those were enough fragments of lust and jealous behavior to build a story on.

The fragments of Wing Biddlebaum's life include being a teacher of young boys at a school in Pennsylvania. His name then was Adolph Myers and he taught his students to dream and encouraged them with a touch or caress with his hands, which was his medium of expression. ". . . the stroking of the shoulders and the touching of hair were a part of the schoolmaster's effort to carry a dream in [their] young minds." Smitten with the school teacher, tragically, a half-witted boy reports his dreams as facts or false truths and sees Wing's gestures

³ from *A Story Teller's Story*, 1924

as homosexual advances. Wing is driven from Pennsylvania by small-minded hicks who aim to lynch him and punch him with their “fists.” His hands mechanically pick berries now 20 years later on the edge of Winesburg where he lives with his undying dream of educating “clean limbed boys.” He is an object of derision to a group of young berry pickers who harass him for his effeminate traits. George Willard, the young artist figure, is his only friend and like many of George’s mentors to follow in the novel, Wing encourages George to dream and eschew petty conventions of the small-minded others in this small Ohio town. In his excitement, Wing grabs George by the shoulders, recoils and suddenly retreats to his monastic room, dropping to his knees and like “a priest engaged in some service of his church,” eats breadcrumbs off the floor. He reinforces what Dr. Parcival (“The Philosopher”) says later that all men are crucified; all men are Christs.

The conventional interpretation of Wing’s victimization is blamed on the small Pennsylvania town for its taking the truth of homosexuality and making it into a falsehood by accepting appearance for reality. But Wing is grotesque because the truth of his dreams leads to a falsehood in the subconscious denial of his homosexuality. The evidence is in Wing’s repressed desire for George and Anderson’s evoking Socrates, both teacher and pedophile. In Wing’s pastoral dream, “crowds of the young men came to gather about the feet of an old man who sat beneath a tree in a tiny garden and talked to them.” Expelled from this Garden of Eden in real life and now living in a “half decayed veranda” in Winesburg, Ohio, Wing continues his modernist dream of a lost plentitude before the Fall.

Besides the “half-decayed veranda,” Anderson packs within the first paragraph of “Hands” some of the story’s principle issues and is typical of Anderson’s lyrical prose style:

Upon the half-decay of a small frame house that stood
near the edge of a ravine near the town of Winesburg, Ohio,
a fat little old man walked nervously up and down.

Notice the rhetoric of marginality. The house is “near the edge of a ravine,” itself “near the town” Throughout the novel, the narrator imagines characters through a peculiar spatial arrangement. Every character lives at the edge or beyond or in back of or off or behind some store or another. Living on the periphery is a spatial analogue for how these characters view

themselves. The oft-repeated word “decay” points to the general run-down condition of the town. The piled on six prepositional strings, stretching characters out, back, and beyond and off the beaten track are analogues for the characters’ sense of estrangement. Even the second sentence symbolizes a sense of past fertility and present wasteland. A “field that had been seeded for clover” yields instead “a dense crop of yellow mustard seeds.”

But as the narrator tells us, the “story of Wing Biddlebaum is the story of hands.”⁴ Hands are mentioned 30 times in a story of 2,350 words. Wings’ hands caress, touch, touse, play and stroke the young male students back at the school in Pennsylvania. In fact, the story of all the characters’ lives can be reduced to their hands. For example, everything is ugly and unclean about Wash Williams in “Respectability” -- even his eyeballs but not his hands. Dr. Reefy’s knuckles (“Paper Pills”) were “extraordinarily large.” Joe Welling (“A Man of Ideas”) has “nervous little hands.” Elizabeth Willard’s long hands were “white and bloodless.” Hands in general symbolize the inability to express feelings through words. Words can’t capture the ineffable. In “Awakening,” the narrator tells us that George mumbles all these meaningless words:

The desire to say words overcame him and he said words without meaning,
rolling them over on his tongue and saying them because they were brave words .
. . . Death, he muttered, night, the sea, fear, loveliness.

Enoch Robinson in “Loneliness” “wanted to talk but didn’t know how. When he tried, “he sputtered and stammered.” Seth Richmond in “The Thinker” bemoans the fact that everyone just “talks and talks” and he hopes to “get into some kind of work where talk don’t count.” The indefinable hunger within Jesse Bentley made his eyes waver and kept him always more and more silent before people” (“Godliness,” Part 1). George’s mature understanding that he reaches with Helen in “Sophistication” is “almost entirely wordless.” They end up holding hands. The old writer in the “Prologue” and Dr. Reefy are the only ones who can communicate. But Reefy is reduced to “*almost* a poet” and the old writer never publishes his book because the Absolute

⁴ Anderson repeats this phrasing in “Loneliness” when the narrator tells us that “the story of Enoch [Robinson] is the story of his room.” Like hands, rooms are a recurring motif in the related story/novel.

being unutterable, the “thing that makes the life possible in the modern world” can only be articulated in silence.

Related to the failure of language, *Winesburg* echoes Forster’s “only connect,” the last words in his novel *Howard’s End*. Despite the religious imagery and religious fanatics, God is dead in Winesburg, Ohio. Life is meaningless without genuine emotional interaction. The grotesques of Winesburg cannot communicate and cannot connect. Wing hungers for companionship and understanding while repressing his homosexual desires. Elizabeth Willard (“Mother” and “Death”) has “a great restlessness,” Louise Bentley (“Godliness”) some “vague and intangible hunger and Alice Hindman (“Adventure”), a “passionate restlessness.” Enoch Robinson (“Loneliness”) draws down the shades of his house between himself and the world.

So the story of *Winesburg, Ohio* is not reduced to the story of Sadness, Fear, Longing and Confusion as the lawyers in Biddlebaum Cowley Reefy & Swift LLP claim. The story of *Winesburg* is the story of modernism in its creating a frank, new short story form, symbolizing the inadequacy of words in gestures, emphasizing the need for human connection, especially among the sexes, and finally, the grotesque’s unending search for an imagined lost pastoral past. Anderson, while not getting the recognition of fellow modernists Faulkner, Fitzgerald and Hemingway, gets right to the heart of the America of a bygone horse and buggy era -- even in 1919. If we dig deep enough into the novel, we’ll not only see what the grotesque looks like in the sweetness of the twisted apples but also experience the richness of the wine hidden in the title.⁵

⁵ I took the wine metaphor from John Updike in his essay “Twisted Apples” from the Norton Critical Edition of *Winesburg, Ohio*

Questions to Ponder on Sherwood Anderson's *Winesburg, Ohio*

1. What does Anderson mean by the grotesque? What are the narrator's "little truths"? Is there a big Truth? Why or why not? Which characters in the stories best dramatize his concept?
2. Many see the second story, "Hands," as representative of the entire collection? Wings' name, which refers to his hands, was given to him by "some obscure poet." What connotations of wings are appropriate? Why is Wing a better name for Biddlebaum than "Claw," "Hook," or "Picker"?
3. The opening sentence of "Hands" is typical of Anderson's prose style. It's a complex sentence comprised of a series of prepositional strings and one subordinate clause. The independent clause introduces Wing Biddlebaum with a noun modified by several adjectives:

Upon the half-decayed veranda **of** a small frame house that stood **near** the edge **of** a ravine **near** the town **of** Winesburg, Ohio, a **fat little** old man walked nervously up and down.

The deep structure of the sentence would read: "**A man walked.**" What is Anderson's purpose in writing sentences like the above?

4. What is the significance of repeated motifs or symbols in the 23 stories like:

- a. Hands
- b. Fertility
- c. Dreams
- d. Rooms
- e. Adventures
- f. Departures

5. What do Elizabeth Willard ("Mother" and "Death"), Louise Bentley ("Godliness"), Alice Hindman ("Adventure") and Kate Swift ("The Teacher") have in common? What is Anderson's attitude toward women in general?

6. How are the 23 stories related to each other or aren't they?

7. How would you characterize George Willard? Does he grow in the course of the stories? If so, how? How would you characterize the Narrator of the stories?

8. *Winesburg, Ohio* could be viewed as a quintessential modernist text in its dramatizing the following themes:

- An emphasis on the "new," especially as it is manifested in the short story form
- Fragmentation, thwarted desire (especially sexual) and the inability to connect
- A nostalgia for some lost plenitude

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- Freudian shades between mothers and sons
- The inadequacy of language
- The advent and effects of industrialization

Comment on any of the above as they relate to *Winesburg*.

9. Would you like to be a character in one of Anderson's stories? Why or why not?