

The Universality of *Winesburg, Ohio*

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〈Abstract〉

Winesburg, Ohio is Sherwood Anderson's first collection of tales. It describes a group of isolated people living in a small imaginary Mid-American town during the post-civil war age, which is one of the most significant transitional periods in the history of America. Most of the characters in the stories were taken from Anderson's fellow lodgers in a large rooming house while he was living in Chicago. Those whom Anderson knew in Chicago had never lived in a small town before. This explains why the stories of *Winesburg, Ohio* have the universal quality.

Love and understanding which are the main ideas of this story are recurring through the development of the stories. Anderson shows that man can break down the walls which separate him from other people and that man can make life worth living only through love and understanding. Love is also the weapon used by Anderson to penetrate human isolation. Most of the characters could be called grotesques, but in fact they are not. The disease they have is universal in that they all need to be loved by others. In the image of grotesques, Anderson shows the objective human experiences which only literature can give.

“*Winesburg, Ohio*”의 보편성

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〈요 약〉

*Winesburg, Ohio*는 Sherwood Anderson의 첫번째 단편집인데 이 작품은 미국 역사에서 가장 의미있는 전환기의 하나인 남북전쟁 이후 중부지방의 한 가문의 소도시에서 사는 일단의 소외된 사람들을 묘사하고 있다.

작품에 나오는 대부분의 인물들은 Anderson이 Chicago에 거주하고 있을때 같은 집에 지내던 동료 하숙인들로부터 태해진 것이다. 그가 알고 있는 이들은 이전에 한번도 소도시에서 살아본 경험이 없는 사람들인데 이러한 사실은 *Winesburg, Ohio*의 보편적 성질을 말하는 이유가 되기도 한다.

작품의 중심사상인 사랑과 이해는 작품의 전개를 통하여 반복되어지는데, Anderson은 인간은 자신과 다른 사람들을 가로 막고 있는 장벽을 허물어 버리고 오직 사랑과 이해를 통하여 인생을 가치있는 것으로 만들 수 있다고 하고 있다. Anderson은 또한 사랑은 인간의 소외를 극복하는 길이 된다고 말하고 있다. 작품에 나오는 대부분의 인물들은 grotesques라고 불리어 질 수도 있으나 사실에 있어서는 그렇지 않다. 그들이 안고 있는 병은 그들 모두가 다른 사람으로부터 사랑을 받기를 원한다는 점에서 보편적인 것이다. Anderson은 grotesque image를 통하여 문학만이 보여줄 수 있는 객관적인 인간경험을 묘사하고 있다.

I

Winesburg, Ohio is Sherwood Anderson's fourth book and his first collection of tales, and was published in 1919. This book is a collection of unified stories about a group of isolated people living in a small imaginary Mid-American town at the turn of century, which is one of the most significant transitional periods in the history of America.

In the writing of *Winesburg, Ohio*, Anderson gave us understanding pictures of confused adolescents and frustrated men and women who fail to communicate with others. His characters in this book are what we call grotesques, and sometimes seem abnormal, but perhaps they are more true people who might have been normal if life had not wounded them too deeply. They were, Anderson thought, typical of American everywhere at the turn of century. While exposing various aspects of the hidden reality of their lives, Anderson shows the meaning of American experiences as he had known and lived it.

It is important to remember that the grotesques are not merely small town characters. They are universal people, defeated by their false ideas and dreams. At the bottom of *Winesburg, Ohio* lies the nostalgia for a lost moment of American pastoral and an attempt to make possible the mature life of men and women in the modern world.

In this paper I will show my longstanding view where the universality of *Winesburg, Ohio* lies as a literary work. By doing so, I am certain that a better understanding of this work would be made.

II

It was widely known that Sherwood Anderson

(1) William L. Phillips, "How Sherwood Anderson Wrote *Winesburg, Ohio*," in *Sherwood Anderson: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. Walter B. Rideout (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1974), p. 24.

(2) Sherwood Anderson, *The Portable Sherwood Anderson* (New York: The Viking Press, 1972), p. 45. From now on, all subsequent page references are from this edition.

wrote *Winesburg, Ohio* in a crowded tenement district of Chicago. The hint for almost every character was taken from his fellow lodgers in a large rooming house. Many of them have never lived in a small town before.

William L. Phillips said:

One is naturally curious about the conception of the first, how its basic idea and the details of its rendering came about. ... On a late fall day in 1915 Anderson had come home from his desk at the advertising office of the Critchfield Company to the third floor of a rooming house at 735 Cass Street in Chicago. ... He had perhaps stopped on a bridge over the Chicago River to try to fathom the expression on a face he had passed in the street, and then he had gone to his room to write at a long table with a bare electric light over it... He searched himself by throwing himself into the imagined life of another. (1)

These statements explain what it meant when some critics said that the characters in this book never bore any relation to the real people. In other words, they explain the reason why the stories of *Winesburg, Ohio* have a universal quality, although each story is set in the unique atmosphere of a small town in America.

The opening section of *Winesburg, Ohio*, "The Book of the Grotesques", which Anderson used as a statement of purpose, furnishes the key to the foundation of a main framework for this story. "The old writer with a white mustache" in this story had once conceived a manuscript called "The Book of the Grotesques". This work, which he had never published, had one central idea:

That in the beginning when the world was young there were a great many thoughts but no such things as a truth. Man made the truths himself and each truth was a composite of a great many vague thoughts. All about in the world were the truths and they were all beautiful...

It was the truths that made the people grotesques. It was his notion that the moment 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. (2)

These grotesques are the people about whom Anderson is going to write in this book. They are no doubt isolated people and this isolation stands for more broadly the essential metaphysical human condition. As Anderson puts it in the opening section, many characters are occupied with one thought or truth which they believe to be their own living condition. They do suggest the significant notion that the grotesques are those who have thought the truths that disfigure them.

The grotesques are those whose humanity has been outraged and who have had to suppress their wish to love to survive in Winesburg. They are also separated from the basic emotion and from the world in which they live but to which they have no longer an active relationship. These grotesques strive to tell their life stories to George Willard, young newspaper reporter of Winesburg, who is also a main character in this story.

Anderson's view which is revealed in this story is that of a man who joins sympathy and understanding to detachment and imperiturbability. Anderson means that what saved the old writer from becoming a grotesque himself is that he didn't publish the book. The artist must remain free from entanglement in order to express the common passion. To remember that the grotesques are distorted and misshapen by their involvement with life itself is to show the perception of normal and ordinary people. Edwin Fussel reminds us what Anderson implies, "Actually it is almost useless to attempt to retain any usual conception of 'normality'—except in the use of more or less 'developed'—when dealing with Anderson, for at the heart of feeling is his uncommon ability to like people for what they are."⁽³⁾

Instead, Anderson's dominant concern is no

doubt human isolation. Love is the weapon used by Anderson to penetrate this isolation. We all need to be loved. And then if anyone is to be called a grotesque for this, all the people in the world would be called grotesques. The disease they have, as everybody knows, is universal.

III

After the opening sketch, a series of stories about individual grotesques follow. The two dozen central figures in this book are hardly characters in the usual novelistic sense. They are not shown in depth or width and with the exception of George Willard, this work's hero, they do not grow or decline. In the consequence of some crucial failure of their lives, these figures usually show to a large extent a condition of psychic deformity. They strive to extend their personality and love.

The first three stories in this work suggest a complete thematic statement. The story, "Hands," through several symbolic references, describes the loss of creativity in the use of human body. "I'll not ask him about his hands," he thought, touched by the memory of the terror he had seen in the man's eyes. "There's something wrong, but I don't want to know what it is. His hands have something to do with his fear of me and of everyone." (p. 50)

In "Hands," Wing Biddlebaum was led to be suspected of homosexuality with his caressing hands. So he was driven out of the school he had been teaching in the evening. He was so sensitive and articulate that his desire and aspiration were thwarted by a repressive conventionalism that had offered little opportunity for fruitful human relationships.

The second story, "Paper Pills," directly

(3) Edwin Fussel, "Winesburg, Ohio: Art and Isolation," in *Sherwood Anderson: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. Walter B. Rideout, p. 45.

pictures the progressive ineffectuality of human thought, pocketed in paper pills so that no one can read.

And the third story, "Mother", relates these two themes to a large variant: the inability of Elizabeth Willard, a mother of George Willard, to communicate her love to her son. Her sincere love for her son is expressed in the prayer:

"Even though I die, I will in some way keep defeat from you," she cried.... "If I am dead and see him becoming a meaningless drab figure like myself, I will come back," she declared. "I ask God now to give me that privilege, I demand it. I will pay for it. God may beat me with his fists, I will take any blow that may befall if but this my boy be allowed to express something for us both."... "And do not let him become smart and successful either."(p.59)

I think this prayer is the best example in regard that this work contains the universal quality. There were a deep unexpressed bond of sympathy between Elizabeth Willard and her son. But she was timid and reserved in her son's presence. Since she could not express her true affection, the only thing she could do is that "in the room by the desk she went through a ceremony that was half a prayer, half a demand, addressed to the skies."(p.59)

The second section of *Winesburg, Ohio* is the area of religion. In this section it is shown that the moral value of Christianity in the small town society has been distorted into the illusions. The misguided idea of Puritanism is strongly shown in the four-part story, "Godliness."

Rex Burbank illustrated it as follows:

Yet the presence of this story emphasizes the importance Anderson placed upon the social and historical factors that help shape the grotesques, and it gives dramatic expression to Anderson's conception of the egoism that lies behind the two chief social forces in American life: a repressive Puritan and moralism, shorn of its relation to God, and its concomitant materialism.⁽⁴⁾

Part one is a tale concerning Jesse Bentley

among the four-part tale about Bentley family. It describes the course of modern individualism from the beginning of its Old Testament to its secularized present. In this tale it is demonstrated that Jesse Bentley's religious mysticism is transformed into materialism. Jesse Bentley "had grown into maturity in America in the years after the Civil War and he, like all men of his time, had been touched by the deep influences that were at work in the country during those years when modern industrialism was being born."(p.92)

His strong desire for material value makes his vision of life more narrow. His religious passion changes to avarice under the impact of the most materialistic age in the world history. He lives in the world, when "men would forget God and only pay attention to moral standards, when the will to power would replace the will to serve, and beauty would be well-nigh forgotten in the terrible headlong rush of mankind toward the acquiring of possessions."(p.93)

His greedy mind is to make money faster by tilling the land. When he attempts to sacrifice the lamb in the last part of this tale, his new materialistic religion becomes almost analogous to paganism. The parallel with David and Goliath myth approaches incredibility as his grandson, David Hardy, fell him with the sling. The inherent human shortcomings of the Bentley family made them unable to see what understanding and communicated love can bring to human life.

After describing the perversions of Christian faith in the grotesques, the third section returns to a procession of individual grotesques. Most of the characters in this section from the story, "A Man of Ideas" to the story, "Death," are the persons who isolated themselves from society so that they can find their identity as a human being. They are

(4) Rex Burbank, *Sherwood Anderson* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1964), p. 76.

innocent people who wish to express what they believe the truth of human life and to achieve desirable human relationships by communicating with others. But the society in which they live does not permit them to realize their wishes. In a sense their ardent need for love has itself become a barrier to its realization.

What they want of George Willard is to have their stories told, and at the same time they wish to have a stake in the way the stories are going to be told. Each character comes forward to offer his secret to George Willard, who is at first expressing so easy-going progress compared with the more explosive gesture of the grotesques.

George Willard is on the whole a passive participant, himself a victim like the others, incapable of distinguishing between love and desire until the last part of this section, at which time he is awakened by his mother's death. From the passiveness and limited understanding of others, he moves gradually to a more aggressiveness in the incident in which he gets involved.

In the story, "The Strength of God," the Reverend Curtis Hartman appears as a man filled with physical torments. In his prayers he is always pleading, "Give me strength and courage for Thy work, O Lord!" (p.151)

Though he is a minister, he does not know what human love really means and what human sufferings really are. When he thinks of Kate Swift, a school teacher, he considers it as a temptation. He declared, "I have been tempted and have surrendered to temptation. It is only the hand of God, placed beneath my head, that has raided me up. As he has raised me, so also will he raise you. Do not despair. In your hour of sin raise your eyes to the skies and you will be again and again saved." (p.154)

So when he saw her naked body, he could

not understand her human suffering. He cried to George Willard that God has appeared to him in the person of Kate Swift, "I smashed the glass of the window. Now it will have to be wholly replaced. The strength of God was in me and I broke it with my fist." (p.159)

In the story, "Teacher," Kate Swift's passionate desire to have George Willard understand the import of life, to learn to interpret it truly and honestly in his writing confused George Willard's mind with her physical desire. As he begins to understand something of a complexity of human motives and behaviour, he realizes that he has missed something Kate Swift was trying to tell him.

The story, "Loneliness," is about the failed artist, Enoch Robinson. He was raised by his mother on a farm near Winesburg. When he was twenty-one, he went to the city to study art. Though young painters would come to his room to talk about art, he could not be moved by their passionate talking about art. Since he could not communicate with them, he at last shut his door and filled his room with people from his imagination. He retreated to the ineffectual realm of fantasy. These imaginary people are described as "out of real people he had seen and who had for some obscure reason made an appeal to him." (p.173) Enoch was for some time happy in his room with this imaginary people until a woman entered his room. Even though that woman understood him so thoroughly, he felt overwhelmed by her and finally drove her away from his room. But along with this, all the life which had been in his room was driven away too. In denying mature realities, he betrayed his past and the source of his imaginative inspiration.

Elmer Cowley in the story, "Queer," has no specific deformity to be called a grotesque. He declares to himself that he would not be queer to be looked at and listened to by others. "I'll be like other people. I'll show that George

Willard. He'll find out. I'll show him!"(p.191)

Though he wishes to talk to George Willard, he soon loses courage and yelled at a half-wit. "I have to tell someone and you were the only I could tell. I haunted out another queer one, you see. I ran away, that what I did."(p.194)

When he calls George Willard out of his newspaper office, he again lost control of his tongue in his presence. His mind not to be a queer itself made him a queer. But he could not know it. With the failure to declare his determination not to be a queer, he left the small town to which he would have challenged. Again George Willard suffers the fate of the rejected priest with the failure to give him the love and understanding that might dissolve his queerness. Love and understanding are thus a recurring theme with the development of the stories.

The climax in the third section comes in the story, "Death." His mother's death liberates George Willard. With the money she has hidden away he can leave the town to begin a new life in a city. And also her death enables him to take the backward view of life for the first time in the sadness of sophistication.

In this story Elizabeth Willard and Dr. Reefy embrace in a moment of confession, although their approach to love is interrupted by a stray noise. "The thing that had come to life in her as she talked to her one friend died suddenly."(p.222) Later Dr. Reefy meets George Willard at her deathbed and extends his hand to greet him and then draws it back again. The ritual of communal love remains unrealized.

II

Throughout *Winesburg, Ohio* runs the slow and often hidden current of George Willard's

growth toward maturity. He achieved maturity when he realized and accepted loneliness as the essential human condition and understood the value of all human suffering. This understanding comes only when he has come out of the influence of Winesburg. And his sensibility also comes to full maturity as he develops an awareness of the complicated motives and contradictory instinctive demands in life. He comes to feel compassion for those grotesques who have not anyone who will impose a meaning upon them. That's why they are drawn to George Willard who accepts and gives ultimate meaningful expression to their feeling.

He grows from passive observer of life to active participant, from aimlessly curious boy to intensely conscious adult.

Brom Weber talks about his role as the stories develop:

He observes, feels, digresses, analyzes, and generalizes. Yet he is often wrong, shortsighted, naive. He has become a major character in the tales who, like the symbolic objects liberally strewn about the pages of *Winesburg, Ohio*, must be metamorphosed into full meaning by the imaginatively stirred reader.⁽⁵⁾

George Willard's full awareness of life comes in the story, "Sophistication." He comes to be conscious of the limitations of life and of his own insignificance in the scheme of existence. In this climatic story his maturity is to be realized. When he crossed the line into manhood, he reflects on life for the first time with a backward view:

The eighteen years he has lived seem but a moment, a breathing space in the long march of humanity. Already he hears death calling. With all his heart he wants to come close to some other human, touch someone with his hands, be touched by the hand of another. If he prefers that the other be a woman, that is because he believes that a woman will be gentle, that she will understand. He wants, most of all, understanding. (pp.227-228)

(5) Brom Weber, "Sherwood Anderson," in *Seven Novelists in the American Naturalist Tradition*, ed. Charles C. Walcutt (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1974), p.186.

As he walks with Helen White, they both become aware that isolation is the essential human condition and that in a meaningless world human feeling and emotion are of supreme importance and meaning. He is now able to separate closely related and confused feelings. He is also able to distinguish passion from compassion. He does not want passion to obtrude upon this moment of discovery and compassion. Both he and Helen White discover that in that dark lonely spot they stand for human isolation in the world. But they feel also that human isolation is cured by love and understanding.

This insight into life makes them understand that love and understanding are what people need to overcome the sadness they felt. "One shudders at the thought of the meaninglessness of life while at the same instance, and if the people of the town are his people, one loves life so intensely that tears come into the eyes. (p. 232)

For some reason they could not have explained they had both got from the silent evening together the thing needed. As a boy and a girl, or man and woman, they had for a moment taken hold of the thing that makes the mature life of men and women in the modern world.

This kind of maturity also appears in the story, "Departure," when George Willard leaves Winesburg to start life in the city. "The young man's mind was carried away by his growing passion for dreams.... He stayed that way for a long time and when he aroused himself and again looked out of the car window the town of Winesburg had disappeared and his life there had become but a background on which to paint the dreams of his manhood." (p. 238) Life in Winesburg impinges upon young Willard in sharp, memorable moments. For him those moments

follow a pattern of progression toward increasing consciousness. He is the nascent man serving his apprenticeship to life and he is a man who is liberated from the confinement of a narrow and oppressive environment. By the act of leaving his town he has gained an intense love for the people of the town. His departure is prompted by a determination to broaden the range of his imaginative experience. He strives to know the many truths of life and grasps the wonder of life through his receptiveness to all of it.

Malcolm Cowley sums up this work in his "Introduction to *Winesburg, Ohio*" as follows:

Winesburg, Ohio is far from the pessimistic or destructive or more badly sexual work it was once attacked for being. Instead it is a work of love, an attempt to break down the walls that divide one person from another, and also, in its own passion, a celebration of small town life in the lost days of good will and innocence.⁽⁶⁾

The impact of *Winesburg, Ohio* has remained permanent in American literature. This was in the center of Sherwood's long and troubled search for a meaning to our modern existence.

V

Winesburg, Ohio portrays the midwestern town's people during the post-civil war promotor age. None of the characters in the stories are real people that Anderson has known. The town of Winesburg is imaginary and people living there are formed from his fellow lodgers of a rooming house while Anderson was living in Chicago. This tells that *Winesburg, Ohio* has the universal quality even though almost all the stories are set in the unique atmosphere of a small town.

The theme of *Winesburg, Ohio* is love and understanding. Man can break down the wall

(6) Sherwood Anderson, *Winesburg, Ohio*, ed. Malcolm Cowley (New York: The Viking Press, 1960), p. 15.

which separates him from other people and with love and understanding man makes life worth living. The characters are most of all inheritors of a great Christian culture who have been abandoned by the invasion of the modern industrialism. However, these lives are transfigured by a mature character, George Willard, who helps crystalize what is eternal in them.

Unlike other novels which deals with the surface details of life in a small town, *Winesburg, Ohio* shows the hidden meaning of life. Anderson tried to show us the necessity of archetypal images to clarify the meaning of American experiences. In the image of the grotesques, Anderson shows us the objective human experiences which literature can give through its own way.

In *Winesburg, Ohio*, as Rex Burbank indicated, Anderson shows "complete and authentic plea for freedom of expression of the inner life and for sympathetic receptivity to the needs of the human heart."⁽⁷⁾

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(7) Rex Burbank, *Sherwood Anderson*, p.77.