LONELY GROTESQUES OF WINESBURG – SHERWOOD ANDERSON

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ABSTRACT

Sherwood Anderson (1876-1941) was a prolific, profound, provocative and perceptive writer of short stories. Further, it is acknowledged that he “remained a profound, provocative and perceptive writer to the end, and that he has much to say” to the present time. The short story became the most popular of fictional forms at the beginning of the twentieth century, especially in America. Frank O Connor, who had an acute sense of national values, was led on to declare way back in 1963 that “the Americans have handled the short story so wonderfully that one can say that it is a national art form”. “Anderson reshaped the American short story, making it his own, and at the same time prepared the ground work for the revolutionary writers who would follow them”.

The most impressive and the most recurrent theme of Anderson which appears virtually in all his works and forms their ground bass is human loneliness and isolation and all the feelings that accompany it. Anderson explores this theme with particular reference to the American society of his times. Philosophers, men if religion and social scientists have been deeply concerned with this phenomenon and are trying to trace its root cause and discover, if possible remedies for it in the modern world. Loneliness is the most striking symptom of the malaise afflicting man in the contemporary world. It is a sickness, which is mental and spiritual rather than physical. Gregarious as man is by instinct, he feels deeply the need to be related to the outside world, his family, his community or society and the world at large.

Surrender, one of the parts of the larger tale Godliness in Winesburg, Ohio, who illustrates the points made. It is a story of misunderstanding and loneliness. All the protagonists are, as noted already, lonely, isolated, alienated, defeated and frustrated persons, their lives distorted, fragmented and broken, their emotional hunger, longing for love, communion, and fulfillment ungratified. They feel estranged from the basic sources of emotional sustenance, living as they do in a claustrophobic atmosphere. However, as human beings they are indeed like the twisted and gnarled apples rejected, but whose delicious sweetness is gathered at the side.
INTRODUCTION

Sherwood Anderson (1876-1941) was a prolific, profound, provocative and perceptive writer of short stories. In the recent decades, however, there has been a revival of considerable scholarly critical interest in his life and all that he wrote including his writings as writer of advertising copy for different advertising companies. He is recognized as one of the really important and significant creative writers of the first few decades of the 20th century. Further, it is acknowledged that he “remained a profound, provocative and perceptive writer to the end, and that he has much to say” to the present time. The short story became the most popular of fictional forms at the beginning of the twentieth century, especially in America. Almost every important writer of fiction during the first half of the century- Scott Fitzgerald, Earnest Hemingway, William Faulkner and others among them handled this form of short fiction with distinction, exploring and revealing its possibilities to give expression to contemporary life and sensibility. Frank O Connor, who had an acute sense of national values, was led on to declare way back in 1963 that “the Americans have handled the short story so wonderfully that one can say that it is a national art form”. The contribution of Sherwood Anderson to this phenomenal development was by no means ordinary and has influence on other writers of short stories among his immediate contemporaries and those of the newer generations. “Anderson reshaped the American short story, making it his own, and at the same time prepared the ground work for the revolutionary writers who would follow them”.

The most impressive and the most recurrent theme of Anderson which appears virtually in all his works and forms their ground bass is human loneliness and isolation and all the feelings that accompany it. Anderson explores this theme with particular reference to the American society of his times. However, experience of loneliness is as old as man and known to mankind from times immemorial. But at no time in human history it was as widespread and pervasive as it is in modern times. It may even be said that it has not only become the badge of contemporary life all over the world but is being experienced by a number of men and women with a keenness of edge and intensity as never before. Today throughout the world we are familiar with lonely crowds, loneliness in crowds, anonymous and lonely existence in crowded towns and cities. One is reminded of the ‘crowd’, which flowed over London Bridge, and ‘each man’ with his eyes ‘fixed’ ‘before his feet’ in T.S. Eliot’s The Waste Land. Philosophers, men if religion and social scientists have been deeply concerned with this phenomenon and are trying to trace its root cause and discover, if possible remedies for it in the modern world. In the world of letters, there is hardly a writer worth the name in the West or East, who is not anguished over it. It has become one of the central concerns of modern literature as of life. For all its universal presence each society, country, and each individual experiences loneliness in a distinct way. They are all lonely but lonely in different ways. Sherwood Anderson, like other important writers of his generation, on either side of the Atlantic-James Joyce, T.S.Eliot, Katherine Mansfield, Earnest Hemingway, William Faulkner and others- contends with the problem of human loneliness and tries to come to grips with it.

Loneliness is the most striking symptom of the malaise afflicting man in the contemporary world. It is a sickness, which is mental and spiritual rather than physical. Gregarious as man is by instinct, he feels deeply the need to be related to the outside world, his family, his community or society and the world at large. He feels mentally and emotionally secure when he feels this
relatedness others, however small the group comprising others be. This relationship need not always mean physical contact with one another. When this relationship snaps, one feels not only utterly lonely but also alienated. In Coleridge’s *Rime of the Ancient Mariner* we have the most impressive example of such a spiritual condition. The Mariner’s experience is exceptional in that he feels most acutely that he is estranged from man, all creation and God and cursed to live in the claustrophobic prison house of his own sterile guilty self. Only when he is able to pray, his anguish is transformed into joy and he is restored to human community. His suffering loneliness and alienation as well as his restoration takes place within a moral and supernatural order.

All loneliness need not necessarily be a symptom of sickness, spiritual or otherwise. For, one may choose deliberately to be alone and withdraw from society and all social contact with others, to an isolated and lonely place to live a life of meditation and contemplation. Monks who retire to their remote monasteries and sanyasis who make their way to distant places in the Himalayas in India to live the life of recluse are of this kind. If they are not in touch with the outside society or world, they are in contact with or strive to be in contact with a higher power. Therefore they are never alone. It is possible that a political prisoner, condemned for life in a solitary cell, may not feel lonely, however oppressive and narrow the goal, because he feels a sense of solidarity with his fellow fighters who share with him his faith in an ideal, a new political order. In a significant sense he is in spiritual contact with others who are like minded. His shared faith sustains him. He experiences his loneliness and estrangements, which are actually forced on him, chiefly at the physical level. In fiction there is the famous example of Robinson Crusoe, created by Daniel Defoe, who is forced to live alone on a desolate island for an unbelievably long period of twenty-eight years before he is able to return home and to civilization. Though frightened out of his wits at the prospect of utter loneliness in a lonely island, Crusoe soon recovers, reconstructs there a miniature version of the ordered Protestant society he knew, devises his own calendar to guide his everyday life and lives according to it. His faith in God and his countrymen remains unshaken all through the years of his lonely existence and struggle to survive. What he experiences in essence is physical estrangement and not loneliness. Recent American history itself provides the example of Henry David Thoreau who deliberately chose to live all by himself in a hut which he himself built for a couple of years (1845-1847) by the side of Walden Pond to live as a recluse according to the values of the society he had come away from. Thoreau was in complete harmony with himself, and in constant contact in spirit with those of his kind, past and present. He neither felt alone nor estranged. The distinguished thinker Erich Fromm observes: ‘Religion and nationalism as well as any custom and any belief however absurd and degrading if it only connects the individual with others, are refuges from what man most dreads: isolation’. One could be living amidst people and yet experience overpoweringly utter isolation and loneliness when there are no related values, symbols and patterns of living shared among them. This spiritual isolation and loneliness is the most agonizing. Several branches of modern thought such as sociology, psychology and others have shown conclusively that modern man has lost his moorings in nature, in religion and simple human relationships which sustained him in former ages through thick and thin, and that these changes have affected him so profoundly that he feels lonely, insignificant and lost. Erich Fromn raises the question, which suggests its own answer, “whether there is not something fundamentally wrong with our own way of life and with the aim towards which we are striving”.

1. One could be living amidst people and yet experience overpoweringly utter isolation and loneliness when there are no related values, symbols and patterns of living shared among them. This spiritual isolation and loneliness is the most agonizing. Several branches of modern thought such as sociology, psychology and others have shown conclusively that modern man has lost his moorings in nature, in religion and simple human relationships which sustained him in former ages through thick and thin, and that these changes have affected him so profoundly that he feels lonely, insignificant and lost. Erich Fromn raises the question, which suggests its own answer, “whether there is not something fundamentally wrong with our own way of life and with the aim towards which we are striving”.

2. Most thinkers would endorse his view.
The experience of loneliness and isolation has remained a constantly recurrent theme in the American literary tradition, but the nature of this experience and how it is experienced, and its motivating factors have changed from generation to generation. The factors responsible for this recurrent phenomenon are bound up with American history, and its first manifestation dates back to the time when the first pilgrims from England landed in the New World and were challenged by an overwhelming sense of isolation, separated as they were from the old world by a vast ocean, and faced by a hostile environment. These first settlers were sustained by their faith in God, and they viewed their estrangement and loneliness as a test of their faith and potentialities, as the entries in the personal journal of William Bradford reveal.3 Tracing historically in any detail the changing phases of this experience of isolation and loneliness and its significance as it finds expression in American literature is outside the scope of the present study. For its purposes it is enough to take note of the recurrent phenomenon and its presence in writers like Sherwood Anderson and others of his generation, so that it may serve as a scaffolding to approach Anderson’s exploration and expression of it in his short stories.

Loneliness as it has been noted by many an Anderson critic is the keynote of his first major work Winesburg, Ohio. This work consists of twenty-one tales. The tables, as Rex Burbank points out, are “self-contained and complete in themselves and may be read individually with enjoyment”. However “they gain an added and important dimension when read consecutively as episodes in a single narrative”.5 They are thematically related sketches about individuals whose lives are in some way connected. Thus the stories together present, as one of the first viewers of Winesburg, Ohio noted, “a continued picture of life in a small inland town”.6 Winesburg is a wholly imaginary Midwestern small country town of Anderson’s creation (somewhat similar to Malgudi created by R.K.Narayan, one of the leading Indian novelists in English, but very different in content and spirit from it.) Its known layout and clearly defined topography offers a tremendous advantage to the creative imagination of one like Anderson who is deeply concerned with human beings. Within the small town’s manageable limits, attention can be focused on individual men and women, their experiences and the problems vexing them—loneliness in the present instance—and probed into with imaginative sympathy. Anderson’s own aim is to commiserate and understand through compassion and a loving concern for them, rather than judge or revile or satirize them.

The men and women who live in Winesburg are ordinary, average and unspectacular people, inconsequential and obscure. It could even be said that it is a small town of solitary persons. There is nothing special about them to attract attention except perhaps some harmless oddities and eccentricities. They are ‘grotesques’ in the sense Anderson uses the term charging it with a new meaning. There are men and women, young and old alike, among them. For one reason or another, either willfully or because of certain circumstances which they are unable to control, they have become isolate form others and lonely. As a result they are “closed off from the full range of human experience”.7 There is no normal sociability between men and women. People move about in Winesburg, come across their acquaintances or strangers, sometimes collide with one another, but rarely establish any meaningful communication and understanding with each other. “There is indeed more muttering than talk”,8 as observed by Waldo Frank. Not only does the word ‘lonely’ occur again and again in the course of the several narratives, but one of the stories is even given the title Loneliness. Almost everyone, regardless of age, experiences in one way or another, and in different degrees, an acute sense of isolation and loneliness, with little or
no opportunities for building up enduring and fruitful human and personal relationships. They hardly participate in each other’s lives, and those who try seem to fail invariably.

Surrender, one of the parts of the larger tale Godliness in Winesburg, Ohio, who illustrates the points made. It is a story of misunderstanding and loneliness. Louise Bently, a young country girl, the daughter of ‘a delicate and overworked mother and an impulsive, hard and imaginative father’, is sent to live with the Hardys in Winesburg, where she attends school. As a child she is ‘silent’, ‘moody’, ‘over sensitive’ and ‘neurotic’ and not happy because her father looks upon her with disfavour. She wants, therefore, ‘love more than anything else in the world’, but does not get it. At the Hardy’s place too she is not happy, as her dreams of freedom do not come true:

For years she had dreamed of the time when she could go forth into the world, and she looked upon the move into the Hardy household as a great step in the direction of freedom---.It had seemed to her that in town all must be gaiety and life, that men and women must live happily and freely giving and taking friendship and affection---. After the silence and cheerfulness of life in the Bently house she dreamed of stepping forth into an atmosphere that was warm and pulsating with life and reality.9

But in the Hardy household she feels lonely and is treated with coldness and disfavor by the Hardy girls. The sharp pain of her childhood loneliness continues there too. “It seemed to her that between herself and all the people in the world, a wall had built up”.10 Possessed by a vague and intangible hunger roused in her by her loneliness, and in her desperate need for love which was denied to her all these years, she risks writing to John Hardy, the son “I want someone to love me and I want to love someone”.11 The next step is to take him for a lover, but her hunger for love remains ungratified. Marriage with him does he make an attempt to understand her unfulfilled longing. She becomes so much frustrated that “she did not know what she wanted”.12 She refuses to give their son David any of her love. Her sharp rejoinder to her reproaching husband is. “It is a man child and will get what it wants anyway. Had it been a woman child there is nothing in the world I would not have done for it”.13 Several other women in Winesburg go through alike share her agonized feeling that each individual is walled in and has to live in loneliness without communication or understanding.

The sense of loneliness is so subjective an experience that it seems easier to sense than define it. It is a state of mind and touches upon a variety of feelings. It is experienced as separation, misunderstanding, failure, feelings or unworthiness, vague hunger, impotence, lostness and lack of communication etc., the grotesques of Winesburg, both men and women belonging to different walks of life, experience it. Few among them have any intellectual interests as such, but is their ordinary humanity rather than t their intellectual brilliance that is stressed by the author. These denizens of Winesburg have their innate weaknesses and limitations, human as they are. However all are subject to the pressures exerted on them by their circumstances of which some of them are victims. They all seek love, fulfillment, and communion in a world where they feel alienated. There is hardly anything heroic about them, despite some of them like Dr.Reefy of Paper Pills exhibiting a quiet courage. All are seemingly minor characters, naive, simple, pathetic, sometimes shrinking into themselves, caught as they are in struggles, conflicts and thwarted desires. Most of them groove for joy and happiness in life, which elude them. They are
either inarticulate or half-articulate, but feel the urgent need to make human contact and break away the loneliness and isolation of their broken lives. This is best seen in almost everyone of them eagerly seeking the sympathetic company of the young reporter George Willard, who seems to be the only person in Winesburg who has not yet become a grotesque. The irony of their lives is that they live in a small country town where everyone is likely to be known to everyone else, and therefore where there should be a sense of community, and yet feel lonely, and isolated because there is nothing in their society to connect them with each other.

Contrasting with these sensitive back street grotesques whose humanity has been outraged, are those conventional and banal people who dominate the official life of Winesburg, and exert an intangible but decisive and unhealthy influence over the less fortunate. These clods “present a background of moral decay, calculation, and artifice, of a rampant egoistic individualism”. For Tom Willard, young George’s (Mother), and John Hardy the insensitive husband of Louise Bently and banker (Surrender). The new American ideal of success is their religion. Will Henderson, editor of The Eagle and his saloon keeper friend Tom Willey, both are banal creatures and gossip-mongers. The middle aged Henderson (The Philosopher) is a “sensualist” and enjoys talking of women. Henry Carpenter, father of Belle Carpenter and Book Keeper in a local bank (An Awakening), is such a petty minded bully that he makes life almost unbearable for his daughter. The two persistent suitors of the rich “tall dark girl”, who later marries Dr. Reefy (Paper Pills) profess love for her but actually lust for her body. Three are in Winesburg women like Wash William’s mother-in-law (Respectability) and Helen White’s mother (Sophistication) who “exploit sex with varying degrees of crudity and subtlety to draw young men to their daughters”. The Hardy sisters (Surrender) crush the sensitive country girl Louise Bentley by their hypocrisy and crafty use of sex.

Portrayal of such people as these reveals a society which is culturally moribund and socially degenerating. It appears as a society “that has no cultural framework from which to draw common experiences no code of manners by which to initiate, guide and sustain meaningful relationships among individuals, no art to provide a communion of shared feeling and thought, and no established traditions by which to direct and balance their lives. They live in the midst of cultural failure”. What a decaying and degenerating place Winesburg has become may be gathered from the stories themselves, apart from the occasional but clear hints given in the narrative and dialogue.

Anderson’s endeavour in Winesburg, Ohio is to enter into the apparently uninteresting, defeated and frustrated lives of his characters with imaginative sympathy and empathy to understand and portray authentically their earnings, hopes, deprivations, frustrations and their sense of being alone in a stifling atmosphere. He does not develop their characters fully. Instead he focuses on the crucial and revealing moments their lives. But they are all distinct individuals without exception deserving sympathetic attention and understanding. Anderson is aware of the social and historical factors, which contributed greatly to the plight of these individuals. He senses that a repressive Puritanism without its relation God and the concomitant materialism are the chief social forces lurking behind the prevailing lifeless individualism and gross materialism. However, David D. Anderson presents in the right perspective Sherwood Anderson’s approach to the grotesques and their problems in Winesburg, Ohio. He remarks: “In the short stories of Winesburg, Ohio Anderson is determined to treat isolation as a phenomenon of the individual
rather than as a manifestation of a social evil. As such, he approached the problem in its simplest level, seeking understanding through intuitive perception. This was to be accomplished not through analysis, but through empathy, his purpose being not to diagnose and to cure, but simply to understand and to love--".17

Against the background presented in the preceding paragraphs the stories selected from Winesburg, Ohio, may be briefly examined with particular reference to loneliness and isolation. Anderson’s preoccupation with this theme, as is obvious, is not the result of any philosophical or literary influence. It springs directly from his own observation and experience of life as it was lived during his times. The stories of Winesburg, Ohio form one unit, and are knit together however seemingly loosely. The idea of the first tale, The Book of the Grotesque sets the tone for the subsequent narratives. The imaginative figures, apart from their shared suffering of loneliness, isolation and frustration, are related in their environment. Though each story focuses on one individual man or woman and reflects and presents some emotional reality, the tales are thematically related and interconnected because of some common characters. George Willard the young reporter of the Eagle, for instance, appears in a majority of the stories. He is sought after by others in Winesburg to communicate with or confide in. Helen White, the attractive rich banker’s daughter, is a presence of varying importance in more than one story. She is seen in The Thinker, Drink, Sophistication and Departure, Kate Swift, the teacher is a crucial presence in The Strength of God and is the chief character in The Teacher, Mother, and Death tell the sad and painful story of Elizabeth Willard, mother of George, and Dr. Reefy of Paper Pills also figures in one of her stories. Thus the common characters, common environment and psychic atmosphere, and shared experiences weld the stories of Winesburg, Ohio into a whole. All the protagonists are, as noted already, lonely, isolated, alienated, defeated and frustrated persons, their lives distorted, fragmented and broken, their emotional hunger, longing for love, communion, and fulfillment ungratified. They feel estranged from the basic sources of emotional sustenance, living as they do in a claustrophobic atmosphere. However, as human beings they are indeed like the twisted and gnarled apples rejected, but whose delicious sweetness is gathered at the side.

Rex Burbank has justly remarked on Hands as, “one of the best tales in Winesburg, in which Anderson’s technique of constructing the tales around epiphanies can be seen in the portrayal of Wing biddlebaum”.18 It is about an unfortunate school teacher who comes to live as a recluse in Winesburg from a town in Pennsylvanina literally hounded out of it in disgrace because of a complete misunderstanding of his nature and misinterpretation of his gestures. The story is presented as third person omniscient authorial narrative and told from the point of view of Biddlebaum, who is the first in the series of lonely, isolated and alienated grotesques in Winesburg, Ohio who have suffered psychic damage and whose potential is thwarted. His actual name was Adolph Myers, which he changed into wing Biddlebaum in Winesburg to suit his desire for anonymity. This timid and forever frightened man, “beset by a ghostly band of doubts”, feels so lonely and alienated that he does “not think of himself as in any way part of the life of the town”, where he has lived alone for “twenty years”. His presence in Winesburg remains a “mystery”.19 So complete is his withdrawal from the people and society there. No one seems to be particularly interested in him, except as an occasional but of laughter. He was driven into this condition of helplessness and loneliness by an insensitive, unimaginative, unthinking and narrow-minded community of a town in Pennsylvanina where he worked for some time, years ago as a school teacher. The harassment he was subjected to did him permanent psychic damage.
All of Biddlebaum’s troubles began with his hands. It is “a story of hands”.20 says the narrator in brief pregnant statement. Before telling the reader how it all happened, the narrator gives a brief description of the silent Biddlebaum’s walking restlessly up and down in the dilapidated veranda of his lonely ramshackle house near the edge of a ravine in front of which is a long field with only a dense crop of weeds. The boisterous and laughing berry pickers, youths and maidens, returning from the fields, make fun of him. One of them from a distance commands this awkward bald man who had grown prematurely old, to “comb” his hair. He is so unnerved by it that his “nervous little hands (fiddle) about the bare white forehead as though arranging a mass of tangled locks”.21 This description suggests not only Biddlebaum’s alienation from the town but a possible connection between his twitching and nervous hands and his loneliness. The dense crop of weeds grown in the long field in front of his house also hints at his thwarted potential for creativity.

As the narrative makes its progress, more and more attention is focuses on Biddlebaum’s hands, so that they acquire cumulative meaning and symbolic significance to justify the statement that this is “a story of hands”, and hence the title given to this story. The lonely and alienated Biddlebaum has one and only acquaintance in Winesburg in the young reporter George Willard with whom he has a sort of friendship. He looks forward to the youngster’s visit to him and even ventures to walk with him in Main Street now and then breaking the shell of isolation. In his youthful company he becomes articulate his imagination is enlivened, and he talks excitedly about his dreams, his hands in their excited activity keeping pace with his talk:

The voice that had been low and trembling became shrill and loud. The bent figure straightened---Biddlebaum the silent began to talk, striving to put into words the ideas that had been in his mind during long years of silence. (He) talked much with his hands. His slender expressive fingers, forever active, forever striving to conceal themselves in his pockets or behind his back, came forth and became the piston rods of his machinery of expression.22

Talking to George makes Biddlebaum feel at ease and comfortable. He becomes wholly inspired. In his eagerness to advise him he forgets his hands, which steel forth, rest upon the young man’s shoulders, and rise further to cares him. But suddenly as if he is thunder-struck, horror sweeps over Biddlebaum’s face, and he thrusts his hands into his trousers pockets. Unable to talk any more, he abruptly leaves his company. George who is both perplexed and frightened, senses that there is “something wrong” and that “his hands have something to do with his fear of me and of everyone”.23

It is at this point of the narrative, the hidden story of Biddlebaum’s hands and the secret of his loneliness and isolation are reveled. In his youth he was a school teacher in a town in Pennsylvania. By nature he was meant to be a teacher, and was much loved by the boys under his care. Of his exceptionally gentle nature the narrator says: “He was one of, those rare little-understood men who rule by a power so gentle that it passes as a lovable weakness. In their “feeling for the boys under their charge such men are not unlike the finer sort of women in their love of men”.24 Biddlebaum walked with the students or sat with them upon the school house steps in the evening, “lost in a kind of dream”. He talked to them in a voice “soft and musical”, while his hands went “caressing the shoulders of the boys, playing about the tousled heads”. The
voice, the hands, the stroking of the shoulders and the touching of the hair were “part of the school master’s effort to carry a dream into the young minds”. By the caress in his fingers he expressed himself.25 Unfortunately his loving touch upon his pupils was misinterpreted by half-wit boy who had become enamored of the teacher, and the crude, obscene men of the town. He was beaten black and blue and driven out of the town in dark and raining night, by indignant men, one of whom would have loved to hang the schoolmaster. Poor Biddlebaum did not understand what had happened but felt that his hands were to blame since every one of the furious attackers had warned him to keep his hands to himself. Since then strove hard to conceal his hands, which had become a source of shame to him.

Having sought refuge in Winesburg, Biddlebaum had turned a day laborer, a berry picker, for his survival. His hands, however, could not escape attention, and even became famous despite his frantic effort to hide them, because he could with amazing speed pick “as high as a hundred and forty quarters of strawberries in a day”.26 In Winesburg his hands become his distinguishing feature and the source of his fame. The irony is that this country town is proud of his hands in the same spirit in which it is proud of the race winning bay stallion Tony Tip. The narrator comments appropriately that the hands “made more grotesque an already grotesque and elusive individuality”.27 In Winesburg, Biddlebaum lives a buried life, lonely and isolated, and afraid of being victimized. He also, it must be recognized, is a victim of his own timidity and naiveté. A part if his isolation stems from his human shortcomings. All the same, this battered man rouses our sympathy. Forced to withdraw himself the lives of others, his psyche bruised by insensitive people, he is unable to find as outlet for his creative and imaginative life. Disillusioned and defeated he becomes a human fragment, all because of his hands, which were actually his means of expressing love. The nature of his love was creative and as long as he was a teacher it found an outlet in communicating to his pupils though his gentle caresses, and in his own tendency to dream. But these gestures were misinterpreted. As the narrative progresses the hands “change from image to symbol and the themes of alienation, fear, love and shame become in turn associated with them. And at the end of the narrative Biddlebaum appears as “a kind of defeated, strangely perverted priest of love”.28

Dr Reefy of Paper Pills is the second grotesque to appear in the gallery of grotesque presented in Winesburg, Ohio. It is in telling his story of isolation and loneliness that Anderson uses the very expressive analogy of twisted apples, which are discarded by fruit pickers, to render in terms of a concrete image, the grotesques of his conception. If Wing Biddlebaum presents one kind of psychic unfulfilment or limitation and thwarted potentially, Dr. Reefy offers another. Paper Pills is an unemphatic story and told after effortlessly in a brief compass of five pages. The basic problem in this story too is loneliness and isolation of human beings resulting in an inability to communicate. Anderson’s approach to his characters is amply suggested by the image of twisted apples. It is his conviction that “the sources or natures of their deformities are unimportant compared to their intrinsic worth as human beings needing and deserving of understanding”. He also believes “that one dare not reject because of mere appearance, either physical or spiritual; that appearance may mask significant experience made more intense and more worthwhile by the deformity itself”.29
There is a contrast between Dr. Reefy’s outward appearance and his inward nature. He is a tall old man with a white beard and huge nose and hands. The knuckles on his hands are “extraordinarily large”, and when the hands are closed they look like “clusters of unpainted wooden balls as large as walnuts fastened together by steel rods”.30 As if to match his awkward outward appearance, he is indifferently dressed. For ten years he has “worn one suit of clothes”, “frayed at the sleeves” and with “little holes” “at the knees and elbows”.31 What is more, this country doctor who drives a buggy drawn by faded horse, has chosen to live alone in his nasty office in the Heffner block above the Paris Dry Goods Company’s store. Nevertheless inwardly Dr. Reefy is a different man, sensitive, understanding, insightful and thoughtful. There are in him “the seeds of something fine”,32 which however have not been allowed to sprout and grow to their full potential. The beauty of his inner life is revealed when he marries quietly and thus helps the tall dark girl who comes to confide in him and seeks his help in a desperate situation. Dr. Reefy understands what has happened to her and therefore does not ask her any questions. He merely takes her out for a ride in the countryside in his buggy. We hear nothing of their talk together. She discovers in him “the sweetness of twisted apples”. When she dies and leaves all her wealth to him he is least affected by it. What difference he death after an all too brief married life makes for him and the stunning effect it has had on him is revealed in the following passage:

He smoked a cob pipe and after his wife’s death sat all day in his empty office close by a window that was covered with cobwebs. He never opened the window. Once on a hot day in August he tried but found it stuck fast and after that he forgot all about it.33

Dr. Reefy’s problem is the extreme difficulty of communication with others. Long before he married the young lady he had formed the habit of jotting down on scraps of paper in an epigrammatic form “thoughts, ends of thoughts, beginning of thoughts”.34 During winter he read out to his wife all of the odds and ends of thoughts he had scribbled on bits of paper. He had formed the habit of thrusting these bits into the large pockets of his linen duster, which in course of time became hard pellets and balls. After his wife’s death, Dr. Reefy has none to whom he can communicate his thoughts except John Spaniard, an old man and his only friend and his only human contact for ten years. But instead of reading the thoughts to him, he throws the paper pills in him. Dr. Reefy fears that others, unthinking and insensitive as they are, may not understand his thoughts properly and even misinterpret them. It is also possible that he himself feels the inadequacy of his thoughts in the face of the complexity of life. Either way, he has to prefer lonely silence to communication and allow his potentialities thwarted.

Characteristically Winesburg forgets this old man and ignores him because he has no use for it. The Paper Pills, which Dr. Reefy prefers to vain attempts at communication, “represent the barriers of isolation that surround human minds”. He voluntarily isolates himself rather than try to overcome those barriers and he “lets himself to become a grotesque because he is unable to find a satisfactory means of communication”.35 In a later story, Death, in which Dr. Reefy once again appears, he is shown not only as an understanding and compassionate man but as one who achieves real communication with another kindred soul in a moment of insight, although it does not last long, as death snatches away both of them.
Winesburg, Ohio as whole conveys the feeling of loneliness, isolation and defeat through twenty and odd specific instances of people, both, men and women of Winesburg, who have been transformed into grotesques. Anderson understands them through intuitive understanding and empathy, and presents their tales through the omniscient authorial point of view. For one reason or the other lonely men and women have become, either with fully or because of circumstantial pressures, isolated and closed off from the full range of life’s experiences, and they live narrow, lonely, lives. Denial of love or the death of it is a common experience for most of them. And their yearning for love is frustrated. Women are the worst affected in this respect. Elizabeth Willard, Alice Hindman, Kate Swift, and Louise Bently are all poignant instances of it. Of course men too have their share of it. The lives of Biddlebaum, Dr. Reefy, Wash William and Seth Richardson are empty because of it.

Further, none has any active relationship with the society in which they live, and they have no sense of community, which for them is sterile, insensitive and in capable of any understanding. Loneliness drives some of them to the edge of despair. Religion in their society is reduced to sterile and empty conventional moralism. Few pray because prayer seems ineffectual. As a result they do not have the consolation of philosophy or the comfort of faith. Nothing happens in their lives, as there is little scope for anything to happen. They know inarticulateness and silence rather than meaningful communication. Culturally Winesburg presents a decayed and deteriorating society. The social and historical factors, which have helped to shape the grotesques, are implied in the narrative. But Anderson focuses on the limitations of human nature, ignorance and cruelty as seen in individuals and the community, largely responsible for the psychological damage done to people, and metaphysical homelessness. However the twilight and darkening world of Winesburg, is not entirely without hope. That there is still the possibility of love, affection and human understanding, though they are often disfigured and dislocated, is indicated by the growing and maturing young lovers, George Willard and Helen White.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

7. Waldo Frank, Winesburg, Ohio After Twenty Years, and Winesburg, Ohio: Text and Criticism.

9. Ibid., P.91.

10. Ibid., P.94.

11. Ibid., P.96.

12. Ibid.


14. Ibid.

15. Ibid., P.73.


17. Rex Burbank, p.64.


19. Ibid., P.28.

20. Ibid., P.27.


22. Ibid., p.31.

23. Ibid.

24. Ibid., pp.31-31.

25. Ibid., p. 29.

26. Ibid.

27. Rex Burbank, P.65.

28. Some of Biddlebaum’s gestures may suggest a homosexual strain in him. But the real point of the story is not in it, but elsewhere, to overstress his strain in Biddlebaum’s character would lead to a through misunderstanding of his pathetic story of loneliness, isolation, thwarted potential and mute and unjustified suffering.

30. Ibid., pp.35-36.

31. Ibid., P.35.

32. Ibid., P.37.

33. Ibid., P.37.


35. Winesburg, Ohio: Text and Criticism, P.50.