SHERWOOD ANDERSON AND HIS WINESBURG, OHIO AS A BILDUNGSROMANS

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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”.

However, if Winesburg, Ohio is approached from the direction not of the subjects of the tales but from that of George Willard, a boy growing to manhood and becoming involved in the perplexing world of adults, developing from an aimlessly curious boyhood to an intensely conscious adulthood, the work composes as bildungsroman, the ‘novel of formation’ or ‘novel of education’ which portrays the development of the protagonist’s mind and character as he passes from childhood through varied experiences into maturity and the recognition of his identity and role in the world.

Among the more famous novels of formation are Charles Dickens, David Copperfield and Great Expectations, George Meridith’s The Egoist and James Joyce’s Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man. There is a difference between these and Winesburg, Ohio. In all the others the focus is invariably on the growing protagonist, and his growth is traced or is traceable from stage to stage. But Anderson’s work is a collection of tales about a number of people and also the story of a growing young man, George Willard, George appears in sixteen of the stories in different capacities. There is no mention of him at all in Paper Pills and all the four parts of Godliness. In three of the tales-Adventure, Tandy and The Untold Lie there is only a passing mention of his name or reference to him. In only four of the tales-Nobody Knows, An Awakening, Sophistication and Departure- he may be said to be the protagonist. And in the remaining stories he is a secondary character of varying importance.
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”.

In a letter of his to Waldo Frank dated November 14, 1916, Sherwood Anderson made what seems to be his earliest comment about Winesburg, Ohio: “It is my own idea that when these studies are published in a book form, they will suggest the real environment out of which present day American youth is coming”.1 Much later in his Memoirs (1942) he wrote: “I felt that, taken together, they (i.e. the stories) made something like a novel, a complete story (which have)---the feeling of the life of a boy growing into young manhood in a town”.2 These statements and a reading of a work indicate that the “boy” Anderson refers to is obviously George Willard. But Winesburg, Ohio is not entirely about him, though he has certainly an important function to perform in the work, which, as Malcom Cowley puts it, “lies midway between the novel proper and the mere collection of stories”.3 George Willard is a central figure and performs a unifying function in it as he appears and reappears in more than half of Winesburg, Ohio either as a leading character or as an audience or as a casual observer, and thus shares importance in the narrative with other characters. In developing the theme of loneliness, isolation and defeat, which is the burden of the work, George Willard’s role is indeed important, as he serves since “a symbolic counterpart to the grotesques of Winesburg”.4 As David Anderson puts it “in the last analysis it (i.e. Winesburg, Ohio) is about people and George Willard is secondary in importance to the individual on whom each story centers”.5

However, if Winesburg, Ohio is approached from the direction not of the subjects of the tales but from that of George Willard, a boy growing to manhood and becoming involved in the perplexing world of adults, developing from an aimlessly curious boyhood to an intensely conscious adulthood, the work composes as bildungsroman, the ‘novel of formation’ or ‘novel of education’ which portrays the development of the protagonist’s mind and character as he passes from childhood through varied experiences into maturity and the recognition of his identity and role in the world. This approach to Winesburg, Ohio is complementary to approaching it as a
collection of tales of so many grotesques of the small town, closely observing and getting to know them and listening to their confessions and enjoying their “supplies a pattern for Winesburg, Ohio”. As bildungsroman, Winesburg, Ohio, presents two mutually related and inseparable aspects of facets of George Willard’s growth and development: his growth from adolescence to adulthood and his growth towards becoming an artist or creative writer. Both strands of growth are simultaneous and interdependent.

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Although Anderson’s people are highly individualized in their microcosmic setting, characterization is not fully developed. Instead, each person is defined by a controlling characteristic and the nature of his grotesqueness—characterizations in these stories are achieved through depth rather than breadth; each is a narrow area deeply explored.

George, who appears frequently sometimes listening to another’s experience and sometimes involved in an experience, seems to be the only character who is in a way developed. But even he is not portrayed linearly from scene to scene, episode to episode. His character emerges from glimpses and flashes provided in the varied situations in which he appears.

George, son of Tom Willard and Elizabeth of the New Willard House, grows up in the small country-town of Winesburg, which is full of solitary persons who have become grotesques. They are, as seen already, a sensitive, lonely, isolated, inarticulate and misunderstood lot who are unable to communicate and experience a sense of communion. They feel a pressing need to make human contact to free themselves of their sense of loneliness and isolation. Though young George lives amidst them, he has not as yet caught the contagion from them. This is rather surprising since even at home, as he himself is aware, the relations between his father and mother are bitter and irreparably strained though there is no open clash or confrontation. He begins as a newspaper reporter for the Winesburg, Eagle, even as an adolescent, curious and enthusiastic about his profession and remains so until he leaves the town to meet the adventure of life in the
wider world. Most people are drawn to him because of his moral freshness, his Adamic innocence, capacity of feeling, his responsiveness and openness to experience, his generally friendly nature. From the grotesque point of view, he is unspoiled as yet by the world from which they have been isolated, he can be bumptious now and then though in a harmless way. They seek him eagerly, surprisingly become articulate in his presence to explain themselves and confide in him. Some of them feel such concern for him that they even advice him and warn him against corrupting forces. For, as he has the gift for language and expression and wants to become a writer, he represents for them “the line of communication and gives them opportunity to restore communication with the world from which each feels excluded”.9 Further it is their hope that he will someday “speak what is in their hearts and then reestablish their connection with mankind”.10 Actually George is much too young at that time to understand them, some of whom are much older than him, and their problems and anxieties. In fact understanding of their lives comes to him only gradually when he is shocked and startled into a mood of insight, during his contact with different people. When the book ends with his departure from Winesburg, there seems to be the promise that he will become one day the spokesman of inarticulate men and women like them wherever they may be found.

George Willard appears in the very first story, Hands which tells the pathetic story of Wing Biddlebaum. He is introduced as the young reporter of the local newspaper the Winesburg Eagle. Biddlebaum, the nervous alienated recluse who was once a but persecuted and driven out from his place owing to a gross misunderstanding of his nature and gestures, has had to seek asylum in Winesburg. He who has grown old before his time and prefers his anonymity, however choose to make friends with young George. George who is friendly by nature seeks him as much as he does him. In his presence Biddlebaum loses some of his timidity and occasionally walks with him along Main street, and eagerly looks forward to spending an evening with him. This young man symbolizes for him innocent love that has been denied to him, and in his presence he feels quite at ease and comfortable. He talks excitedly in a shrill and loud voice striving to put into words the ideas accumulated in his mind during the long years of enforced silence. Observant George is naturally curious about Biddlebaum’s eccentricities and his hands. Sensitive as he is, he guesses that there must be a strong reason for the strange restless activity of the other’s hands and his anxiety to keep them hidden. But despite his overwhelming curiosity, he wisely refrains from asking his old friend about them because he is touched by the horror sweeping over Biddlebaum’s face and the terror in his eyes when he suddenly becomes aware of the activity of his hands. George sympathizes with him and does not try to probe into his background. This reveals his capacity for intuitive understanding. What is noteworthy is that old Biddlebaum feels a strong concern for this impressionable young man, who has the gift of imagination and the capacity for intuitive understanding. What is noteworthy is that the elderly man feels a strong concern for this impressionable young man, who has the gift of imagination and the capacity to “dream”, but who may ruin himself by imitating others, instead of being himself, you have the inclination to be alone and to dream and you are afraid of dreams. You want to be like others in town here. You must try to forget all you have learned. You must begin to dream---”.11 Biddlebaum hungers for the presence of the boy whom he regards “as the medium through which he (expresses) his love of man”.13 He hopes that George would serve the purpose provided he resists the corrupting influence of the people around him.
George Willard grows both as man and writer-to-be over some years. He “grows from passive observer of life to active participant, from aimlessly curious boy to intensely conscious adult”.13 However his growth cannot be traced and graduated from story to story. As Edwin Fussel puts it, “throughout Winesburg runs the slow and often hidden current of George Willard’s growth towards maturity, often the stream is subterranean and we are surprised to see where it comes out; sometimes it appears to lose itself in backwards of irrelevance and naivete. But all the time the book’s current is steadily towards the ultimate ‘Departure’ of George”.14

For the sake of convenience, approximately three stages of development in George may be discerned. The first stage is covered by the early chapters from Hands to Nobody Knows and respectability, in which he appears “as the object of actions initiated by other people or as the recipient of their advice”. This is a stage of ‘passiveness and limited understanding of others’.15 In the next stage, covered by stories from The Thinker to The teacher, George takes on a more aggressive role in the incidents in which he becomes involved”. He is still an adolescent, though he enjoys a place of distinction since it is generally accepted that he is to become a writer someday. He begins to understand something of the complexity of human motives and behavior. These stories show his sensibility coming to “full maturity as he develops an awareness of the complicated motives and contradictory instinctive demands in life and comes to fed compassion for its victims”.16

As a newspaper reporter, George is readily put in touch with a large number of people in the town, and it gratifies his idle curiosity. He is also enabled to receive the confidence of many whom he meets. He runs here and there as the narrator of the story Thinker tells, “as an excited dog” all day noting on his pad of paper little facts of no significance to be published in the newspaper, striving to mention as many of the inhabitants of the country town as possible: “A.P. Wringer had received a shipment of straw hats. Ed Byerbaum and Tom Marshall were in Cleveland on Friday uncle Tom Sinnings is building a new barn on his place on the valley road”.17 Such jottings as these clearly show that “he is committed to the surface of life, not to its depths”, as reporter he is “concerned with externals, with appearances, with the presumably solid, simple, everyday surface of life”.18 But his growth towards adulthood and maturity depends upon his learning to see beneath the surface of lives and try to understand them, and also his outgrowing his earlier immature ideas about his vocation as a writer. In most of the stories of Winesburg, Ohio in which George Willard has a role to play, he is seen either in the office off the Eagle or in the company of his friends or walking outdoors alone or with someone else. Only two stories, Mother and Death show him in relation to his family and within the four walls of his house for a short while. Significantly, the former story is placed almost at the beginning of the work and the latter almost its close, spanning considerable length of time. The distance George traverses emotionally and intellectually between these two points, indicate his growth towards attaining maturity. In both stories, which are primarily concerned with his mother Elizabeth Willard, he is secondary but important character. In either story the mother-son relationship is an important strand of the narrative, and sheds light on the growth and development of young George. The tragedy of Elizabeth Willard’s life her loneliness, isolation and estrangement, her futile groping for happiness and fulfillment, frustration and defeat, and her intense but inarticulate bond with her son, and her strained relation with her husband is discussed.
Nobody Knows concerns George more immediately than the other stories preceding and some following it. It tells the story of his ‘adventure’ with Louise Trunnion, whose letter he mistakes for an invitation to a mere sex adventure. He is still so adolescent and immature that it never occurs to him that the brief letter to him may have a different implication and that possibly it is Louise’s ineffective and unsuccessful attempt at communicating with someone outside her narrow orbit. He never considers even once that her needs may be something other than mere sexual gratification. As David Anderson remarks, this episode “demonstrates that George at this stage, like the society of which he is a part, does not at all try to understand what Louise really hungers for or what she is seeking in her lonely and restricted life. What makes her pathetic is that she herself does not know what she wants or how to get at it. In response to her letter George goes to meet her secretly, walking stealthily along the dark lanes avoiding people like a nervous thief. When they are by themselves he initially lacks self-assurance and bursts forth with a flood of words. Then he behaves towards her like a bold aggressive male. But in her heart he has “no sympathy for her”.19 He is “coldly insensitive” and after the encounter “he is simply impressed that his pleasure is free”, as Marilyn Judith atlas notes”20 Once it is over, he dismisses the girl and exults over his first sexual conquest. This experience perhaps gives him some physical satisfaction but nothing more. After he sends her away he begins to get nervous and worry about his reputation and what would people think of him. But he feels relieved and sighs a cowardly sigh of relief as he remembers; “She hasn’t got anything on me. Nobody Knows”.21 as Rex Burbank remarks, George’s “nervous effort to assure himself---indicates that his adolescent responsiveness to public opinion---rather than a mature understanding-still dictates his moral consciousness”.22 If his encounter with Louise Trunnion gives him a feeling of entirely self centered masculine pride, it also leaves him with a sense of guilt for having violated the overt moral code of the community.23 George who adulates himself and power now learns little from this experience. But, as it will be seen in some of the later stories, he has to encounter in his career towards maturity some more women of different dispositions who make an impact on him and from whom he derives some healthy capacities.

There are two closely related and mutually informing aspects to George Willard’s growth and development towards maturity: his efforts to understand with sympathy other people and their essential but buried lives, and his desire to become a creative writer and his growing awareness of the meaning of this vocation. The Thinker is mainly the story of Seth Richmond in which George figures as an important secondary character. It also directs attention to George’s growing interest in creative writing not mentioned till then. His mother and Dr. Parcival know that he has a gift for writing, which he has to develop, so that he can become a competent writer and be their spokesman. But George himself does not refer to it until this story, though writing appears to have been an interest he has had for some time. He talks about it continually to Seth Richmond. With this story George emerges as a respected person in Winesburg where he is given “a place of distinction” because it is established that he “would some day become a writer”.24 Two facts concerning George are revealed in this story: his conception of writing and his attitude to his profession as writer; secondly his interest in Helen White, the Banker’s daughter. In general he appears to be so much absorbed in himself that he does not seem to take any interest in Seth Richmond and his vexing problems although he has been courting this younger man. In Winesburg it is the grotesque that generally seeks George, but in the case of Seth it is the other way about Seth deserves, sympathetic attention and listening. George seems to prattle in his
presence endlessly about himself rather than make an attempt to encourage him to talk or understand him.

George appears to be conscious of the attention shown to him in the town as a promising writer, and is both vain and complacent about it. He is supremely satisfied with himself and rather supercilious towards others. “At this point his conception of writing”, as Walter Rideout points out, “centers in externals, in the opportunities the writer’s life offers for personal freedom and for public acclaim”.25 Writing is a matter of fun and fame, as writer he is his own master wherever he may be. He tells Seth boastingly: “It is the easiest of all lives to live. Here and there you go and there is no one to boss you. Though you are in India or in South seas in a boat, you have but to write and there you are. Wait till I get my name up and then see what fun I shall have”.26 That this view of himself and writing, is naïve and myopic if not silly, hardly needs to be pointed out. It is quite characteristic of his immature youth to think of writing a love story and the cocksureness with which he speaks of it to Seth is utterly ridiculous: “I know what I’m going to do. I’m going to fall in love. I have been sitting here and thinking it over and I am going to do it”. Going a step further with supreme complacency he says that he has chosen Helen White to fall in love with, for “she is the only girl in town with any get-up to her”,27 as if he is doing her a favour by doing so. Though no overt comment is made by the narrator on George’s plan to fall in love first and then write a story about it, is implied that it is not how one writes a story and that it is a naïve and superficial view of both love and creative writing. It is time that one ought to write from experience in the naïve of George. This story reveals his immaturity, inexperience, vanity and complacency. He is yet to learn the fundamentals of creative writing, notwithstanding the distinction he enjoys in the town as a writer of promise. As an individual he is a complete contrast to Seth Richmond who is introspective, thoughtful analytical and unpretentious, whatever be his other limitations.

The next two stories, The Strength of God and The Teacher, shed light in the growing George, and show that his “adolescent attitude toward love and literature changes to puzzled wonderment”.28 In The Strength of God there is only a fleeting glimpse of the change gradually and unobtrusively coming over him. First he is seen one night in the office of the Eagle “tramping up and down in the office undergoing a struggle of his own”,29 when Rev Curtis bursts into his room to tell him about the revelation he has been granted by God. His struggle could be about how to write the story he has in mind as well as the confusion in his mind about his view of his teacher Kate Swift, as the next story shows. In any case he is not any longer the merely self-satisfied adolescent of the story The Thinker, and does seem to have made some advance.

The remaining stories of Winesburg, Ohio, in which George appears as a character of secondary and primary importance, show him growing visibly towards maturity outgrowing his adolescence. All those whom he has met so far and whose confidence and confessions he has listed to, have impinged on his consciousness. But it is in the last phase that the impact they and others make on his sensibility sharpening it becomes visible in his responses to them and in his understanding of their conflicting behavior and motives and his sympathy and compassion for them. More importantly, this development is seen in his attempt to know himself, because of his realization how little he knows about himself and how much more he has to know about himself and life. To trace this phase of his development it is convenient to take for consideration first
Loneliness, Queer and Drink together in which his role is secondary, and then take up An Awakening, Death, Sophistication and Departure, in three of which he is the protagonist.

In Drink George appears only for a short while towards its end, and his role is strictly secondary, since it is the story of Tom Foster. The brief contact George has with him reveals that he has attained some maturity and that he is on his way to fall seriously in love with Helen White. Tom, who is a little younger than George, is an interesting character. He is not a grotesque like the others that George comes into contact with. He is innocent and childlike and knows to be happy wherever he is. When he has Cincinnati before he and his grandmother moved into Winesburg, he “had found out many things, things about ugliness and crime and lust. Indeed, he knew more of these things than anyone else in Winesburg”.30

George Willard has now reached the last phase of his growth and development. That he is close to attaining maturity transcending his adolescence is seen already in Loneliness, Queer and Drink. His maturity has been coming on for a long time. In the stories An Awakening, Death and Sophistication, his passage from adolescence to maturity is complete. It is worth noting that in these stories, two of which have him as the protagonist, women characters figure prominently and they impresses and influence George.

With his mother’s death George’s education in Winesburg is almost complete. The means of his release are provided by her death, which breaks the ties, which have bound him to the small town. Sophistication, the next story of George’s formation, “provides the final lesson that leads to George into complete manhood”.31The full impact of his mother’s death, which draws together all the lessons he has learnt unconsciously and half-consciously to form a whole, becomes visible now. He is older and wiser now. Emotionally he is mature now. The story Sophistication, which is exquisitely told, gains in depth of meaning remarkably only when read in relation to and against the background of all the preceding stories in which George Willard appears and in which his gradual growth and formation towards emotional and mental maturity are subterraneous presented. This tale in which George’s maturity is fully realized, is most appropriately titled. Anderson uses the word ‘Sophistication’ only in a favourable sense to imply awareness, understanding of one’s own self and other people, refinement of feelings and emotions. George Willard on whom attention is chiefly directed acquires all these largely because of the people he has come into contact with and the experiences he has gone through.

Viewed as a whole George Willard who helps the grotesques of the town to make some sense of themselves by listening to their confidences and advice, receives much more from them than he can ever give them. It is they who unconsciously help him to enlarge his sympathies, become empathetic, and thus make keen his powers of understanding and receptiveness to all human feelings. He also must have realized that they were imposing on him a burden of responsibility for which he is not equal, by expecting him to speak for them. But he begins to learn before he leaves Winesburg the lesson that Kate Swift, his learn to understand people before he can think of writing about them. By the time the work is brought to a close with Departure, which serves as an epilogue to it. George Willard, the man and the potential responsible writer, has grown and developed. The work ends on a note of promise. It is apposite to cite here Malcolm Cowley’s observation:
All the grotesques hope that George Willard will someday speak what is in their hearts and thus reestablish their connection with mankind. George is too young to understand them at the time, but the book ends with what seems to be the promise that, after leaving Winesburg, he will become the voice of inarticulate men and women in all the forgotten towns.

NOTES AND REFERENCES


9. Ibid., P.45.


12. Ibid., P.33.


15. Rex Burbank, pp.69-70.

16. Ibid., P.70.


22. Rex Burbank, p.70.


26. Ibid., P.135.

27. Ibid., P.137.

28. Rex Burbank; P.70.

29. Ibid., P.155.

