

Emotional and sexual repression in winesburg, ohio



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In the short stories "Hands," "Paper Pills," and "Drink" by Sherwood Anderson in the collection *Winesburg, Ohio*, Anderson shows that American emotions and sexuality are so repressed that people often choose isolation over human connection by revealing his character's inner struggles against their deepest desires, even though these desires are natural and human. The main character of "Hands" is haunted by the claims of pedophilia that ended his life as a teacher, and is now living in constant fear that touching other people will have him beaten and brutalized again. The doctor of "Paper Pills" struggles to express himself emotionally after the death of his wife and closest confidant. In "Drink," the reader follows a young man traumatized by his experiences of prostitutes growing up in an inner-city slum, and how his perception of women and sexuality changes after falling for a girl who is unlike the women he knew as a teenager.

Wing Biddlebaum, the main character of "Hands," is terrified by human touch after the friendly, innocent touching between him and his students was construed into accusations of pedophilia and molestation. After he was forced to flee twenty years before the events of the story, Wing begins to constantly flap and move his hands to avoid touching other people. Despite this forcing a permanent outcast status upon him, Wing is so deeply traumatized that he does not stop moving his hands. This causes him to have just one friend, who is the young George Willard. Wing's fear at human contact is shown after he touches George in a moment of passion and introspection. Anderson says, "Again he raised the hands to caress the boy and then a look of horror swept over his face. With a convulsive movement of his body, Wing Biddlebaum sprang to his feet and thrust his hands deep

into his trousers pockets. Tears came to his eyes." Wing's visceral panic with physical contact serves to show and emphasize the feelings of emotional disconnect suffered by other characters in other stories. Considering that Wing's is the first story in the anthology, "Hands" provides a lens through which all other stories can be seen through.

Dr. Reefy of "Paper Pills" lives an extremely isolated life after his young, beautiful wife dies. His "paper pills" were little bits and ends of thoughts he collected, and after they were married, he shared these thoughts with his wife. Despite the fact that they were married for less than a year and many found the pairing of a young wealthy girl and an old, jaded doctor strange, his wife still fell in love with him. This is because after having many suitors whom she did not love, she found him, who had been kind and sweet, much like the gnarled but delicious apples that grow in the Winesburg orchards. Anderson directly makes this analogy between Dr. Reefy and the hideous but exquisite apples by stating, "On the trees are only a few gnarled apples that the pickers have rejected. They look like the knuckles of Doctor Reefy's hands. One nibbles at them and they are delicious." While they were together, his wife had been his close confidant, the person to whom he could share his deepest thoughts with. After her death, Dr. Reefy found himself once again alone and isolated from others, with no close friend to share his ideas with. Dr. Reefy's emotional loneliness shows how American society at large has difficulty expressing deep, meaningful, or intimate thoughts and emotions to others.

The protagonist in "Drink," Tom Foster, thought of women as pure, gentle beings due to his close relationship with his grandmother. However, his

feelings change after he loses his virginity to a prostitute in his native Cincinnati slum. He is traumatized by this experience of having sex with a woman who is so unlike his naive and childlike vision of womanhood and sexuality, and so for years he completely closes himself off to the idea of ever being with another woman, even after he leaves the slums of Cincinnati for the cleaner town of Winesburg. Eventually, the sight of other young people around him falling in love gets to him and he begins falling for Helen White, and despite his feelings, he never pursues her and finds himself attempting to put all thoughts of her out of his head. Anderson describes his struggle as “ a fight, a quiet determined little fight of his own, to keep his desires in the channel where he thought they belonged, but on the whole he was victorious.” Tom’s internal conflict to keep his longing at bay and avoid connection with another person illustrates Anderson’s message of emotional and sexual repression.

These three short stories all demonstrate, to some extent, characters aversion to human connection. In the story “ Hands,” Wing Bibblebaum’s aversion to human touch stems from him being accused of pedophilia, and he can not connect to others even decades later. Dr. Reefy’s isolation after he loses his wife means that he suddenly has no outlet for his deepest and most personal thoughts. Tom Foster isolates himself from the idea of love with a woman due to his troubled and complicated past with the prostitutes of his hometown. The thread that binds all of these characters is that they all feel extremely isolated and repressed in their emotional and sexual desires, much like American society at large.