

The expression of themes in winesburg



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

Winesburg, Ohio is a compilation of short tales written by Sherwood Anderson and published as a whole in 1919. The short tales formulate the common themes for the novel as follows: isolation and loneliness, discovery, inhibition, and cultural failure. In order to examine these themes, Anderson's history must be understood and examined to provide illumination upon why Anderson came to such beliefs about human life. Sherwood Anderson was born on September 13, 1876, in Camden, Ohio.

In 1884, Anderson and his family moved to the small town of Clyde, Ohio. Clyde, Ohio, is the model for the town of Winesburg. Anderson hated his father because of the lack of love shown to his mother and resented his father because of the humiliation and poverty that his father caused. Two major events shaped the feelings of Anderson about life. First, when he was only nineteen years old, Anderson's mother died, and his family pursued to split apart. Second, after marrying and moving to Elyria, Ohio, Anderson had a mental breakdown due to two things.

The pressures of trying to succeed in business and writing and the conflict between his yearning to leave his unhappy marriage to Cornelia and his commitment to his family caused a breakdown that doctors diagnosed as nerve exhaustion. During the mental breakdown, Anderson walked the streets for three days before being hospitalized in Cleveland. Another reason for his beliefs is that he lived in places that contrasted in size. The size of the city overwhelmed him at times, which gave him a feeling of isolation.

Anderson, also, despised industrialism because industrialism emitted a more impersonal atmosphere (White). In "Adventure," Alice Hindman is destroyed

by industrialization and the city. The city and the search for money steal her only true love and her only chance at happiness. At the end of the story “Adventure,” Anderson writes “began trying to force herself to face bravely the fact that many people must live and die alone, even in Winesburg (Anderson, Sherwood).” The themes of loneliness and isolation are expressed by describing the characters as grotesques.

The grotesques are the people who have become obsessed with an idea or mannerism, such that, they have lost contact with their fellow Man. Anderson sets the course for the theme of isolation in the first three chapters, excluding “The Book of the Grotesque.” The first chapter is called “Hands” and involves the sad story of Wing Biddlebaum. Because Biddlebaum is accused of having molested students that he taught, his hands embody the shame that he carries. Fearing that the presence of his hands will be misinterpreted, Biddlebaum hides his expressive hands.

By creating the symbol of hands in this chapter, Anderson creates an effective symbol to express the theme of isolation in the novel. Because a person’s physical hands are used to communicate feeling, “Hands” is a tale about one of the sources of isolation, the inability to communicate feeling. “Paper Pills” is the second chapter of the novel and deals with another cause of isolation, the inability to communicate thought. Because Doctor Reefy is afraid of communicating directly to another person, he writes his thoughts on little pieces of paper to prevent his thoughts from being misinterpreted.

Because Doctor Reefy cannot find an appropriated avenue of communication, he allows these repressed thoughts to become products of

his hands by throwing the pieces of paper, which have hardened into little “paper pills,” at his friends. The intensity of his isolation is magnified through the absence of isolation in brief periods. For example, the short moments of embrace shared between him and Elizabeth Willard. “Mother” is the third chapter of the novel and deals with another cause of isolation, the inability to communicate feelings.

In this chapter, Elizabeth Willard is resented by her husband and has lost all affection from him. The only presence of love in her at this time is focused on her beloved son, George Willard. Anderson writes “She wanted to cry out with joy because of the words that had come from the lips of her son.” This happens when George Willard tells his mother that he is going to leave Winesburg. Elizabeth is unable to articulate her feelings of interest and love to her son, and perpetuates the barrier of communication between them.

The reason that Anderson expresses this type of relationship is because Anderson had the same unarticulate relationship with his mother (Anderson, David 155-170). Anderson conveys isolation and loneliness through other ways. In some of the tales, there is a prevalent sexual atmosphere. Anderson thought of sex both as the beginning and end to love. When George Willard takes Louise Trunnion’s hand in his own in “Nobody Knows,” George is anticipating sexual conduct. Although George thinks that it is just sex, Anderson is conveying that there is an opportunity for love.

This opportunity for love could eliminate loneliness and isolation. The theme of inhibition is expressed through the youth in Winesburg. Inhibition has three major areas of cause and experience that are listed as follows: the

problem of growing up, the frustration that comes when people try to express themselves and are responded to with harshness, and the problem of social opportunity. These problems are the causes of the presence of the grotesques in the novel. The people became grotesques when a disastrous experience happened at the exact moment that they were trying to express love and feeling.

In “Respectability,” Wash Williams faces the frustration of inhibition when the mother of his unfaithful wife sends his wife into the room naked. Wash Williams is destroyed by this action and becomes a grotesque. When Kate Swift flirts with George Willard in the teacher, her actions prevent her from expressing what she truly wants George to know because her emotions are inhibited. George Willard is the main character through which Anderson conveys the theme of inhibition. Because George is proceeding through the process of maturity, the problems that he encounters reflect upon inhibition.

All the grotesques in the novel feel comfortable and see George Willard as a communication to the world because he is innocent to the perils that they have experienced, and he is also a reporter. His mother senses great strength when she is in his presence. Because George makes Wing Biddlebaum feel confident and comfortable, Biddlebaum will walk through the middle of town with George, although his presence is scorned there. Another theme of the novel is discovery. In “The Untold Lie,” Ray Pearson gets Nell Gunther pregnant and is having conflicting feelings whether to leave her or marry her.

He asks Hal Winters what he should do about his situation. When Hal is about to tell him to not marry because marriage is like a noose, Ray looks at Hal and tells Hal that he wants to marry Nell Gunther. At this point, Ray has a moment of discovery. George Willard is the main character that conveys the theme of discovery. Throughout the book, different people try to help George Willard. George finally has his moment of discovery while he is at the fairgrounds with Helen White. The significance of this discovery that human emotions and feelings are the most important concept is silent, not articulated (Walcott 158-164).

The final theme of the novel is cultural failure. This theme is less directly stated or emphasized as the others, but is portrayed through decayed background images. For example, the town's moralism is slowly ebbing toward absence, and the streets are filled with rubbish and glass. One scene that sticks out is the scene when the baker is throwing sticks and objects at a lurking cat hiding behind trash cans. This scene seems misplaced and unnecessary, but it is used to create an atmosphere of deterioration and decay.

This dilapidating atmosphere that the background portrays invades and desecrates the lives of the grotesques (Burbank 73-77). Through the use of short tales combined to create a novel, Anderson is able to communicate many themes. The rough personal history of Anderson relating to humiliation, loneliness, cultural failure and unhappiness help formulate his ideas of people. Anderson was not writing about society in Winesburg, Ohio, but he was writing about people. Anderson conveys the theme of isolation,

discovery, inhibition, and cultural failure to manifest the importance of humans, collectively and individually.