

Loneliness and isolation in sherwood andersons winesburg ohio essay

[Sociology](#), [Women](#)



Sherwood Anderson's novel, *Winesburg, Ohio* (1919), is interestingly constructed. It consists of a series of short stories really which are connected by the town of Winesburg. There is a good case for saying that the town itself is the central character. Characters re-appear sometimes in other stories, and it is also possible to trace the coming-of-age of George Willard who knows most of the residents of the town, partly because his parents rent out rooms, but also because he becomes the town newspaper's reporter. In that sense, George Willard holds the novel together, but Winesburg is the real focus. It is a typical small town in America and, although everyone seems to know everyone else, almost all the characters are alone and isolated, and often have secrets or secret desires - which creates tension and irony given the small town setting of the novel. Their loneliness and isolation leads to despair and unhappiness, but because of the social norms of small town America, their feelings must remain hidden and unspoken.

The two opening stories set the tone for the whole novel. 'Hands' portrays a man who has had to suppress his real feelings, change his name and moved to a town where he knows nobody. Wing Biddlebaum's only friend is George Willard and even that relationship is full of tension, since Wing is terrified that his hands will do something inappropriate and isolate him further. His past as a teacher in Pennsylvania remains a powerfully dark secret. 'Paper Pills' deals with the grief that Dr Reefy still feels for the death at a very early age of his wife. It is something from which he has never been able to recover, and, despite being the town doctor and having lots of acquaintances, he has no friends.

Several of the stories present unhappy marriages. George Willard's mother

features in two stories - ' Mother' and ' Death'. The state of the boarding house she runs with her husband is symbolic of their marriage; her husband, Tom, thinks of the " old house and the woman who lived ther with him as things defeated and done for." In the story it emerges that Elizabeth Willard had great hopes for the future which she now hopes can be realized through her son. Anderson writes without emotion about her unhappy marriage: Although for years she had hated her husband, her hatred had always before been a quite impersonal thing. He had been merely a part of something else that she hated. Now... he had become the thing personified.

She imagines stabbing him so that they can both be free of this sterile marriage: " It will be a release or all of us." But she does nothing. When Elizabeth re-appears in ' Death' she is dying, but she goes to see Dr Reefy because she enjoys his company and conversation. Elizabeth reveals that in her youth she had been considered an " adventurer", but now feels her life has been wasted. She longs for death to end the agony of her life: " The sick woman spent the last few months of her life hungering for death." There is one crucial moment when she follows her feelings and allows Dr Reefy to kiss her: " When she came and knelt on the floor beside his chair he took her into his arms and began to kiss her passionately." This small act of love becomes, she feels, the only highlight of her life, but they never meet again. ' Surrender' also deals with an unhappy, unfulfilling marriage. Anderson tells us that Louise Bentley had " a vague and intangible hunger... that was still unsatisfied." She finds her husband unsympathetic to her needs:

Filled with his own notions of love between men and women, he did not listen but began to kiss her upon the lips. That confused her so that in the

end she did not want to be kissed. She did not know what she wanted.

'The Untold Lie' also reveals an unhappiness on the part of Ray, who, having been asked for advice by Hal Winters, starts to think about his own early marriage and the unhappiness it has brought him:

Every time he raised his eyes and saw the beauty of the country in the failing light he wanted to do something he had never done before, shout or scream or hit his wife with his fists or something equally unexpected and terrifying. But by the end of the story, he sees things in a different light and "some memory of pleasant evenings spent with the thin-legged children in the tumble-down house by the creek must have come into his mind," and the end of the story sees him reconciled to his life and marriage.

Three stories in particular present people isolated and living lives of emotional solitude. In 'Adventure' Alice Hindman has spent her whole life believing that Ned Currie will return to her, but in the story she realizes - "I will never find happiness. Why do I tell myself lies? She wanted to be loved, to have something answer the call that was growing louder and louder within her." But because of the constraints of small town life, the story ends in frustration. Kate Swift in 'The Teacher' is also possessed by unfulfilled desires, but small town morality and the difference in age between her and George Willard conspire to keep them apart. Wash Williams' hatred of women and his appalling neglect of his own physical appearance in 'Respectability' also has at its roots the emotional trauma of his wife's infidelity.

In conclusion, we can see that several characters - male and female - are

alienated and looking for love: Wing Biddlebaum, Dr Reefy, Elizabeth Willard, Alice Hindman, Kate Swift, Louise Bentley - all lost and lonely characters.