

Grotesquery as a literary device (based on sherwood anderson's winesburg, ohio)

[Literature](#), [Books](#)



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

Grotesquery in Winesburg, Ohio

What leads people away from a healthy maintenance of truth in their lives, to submersion in their own inflation of these truths? In Sherwood Anderson's collection of short stories, *Winesburg, Ohio*, one of these tales, "The Book of the Grotesque", answers this question with the notion that someone who allows a certain truth to unhealthily domineer his life can morph into a grotesque, or an extremely negative variant of that once positive truth. In *Hands*, Wing Biddlebaum adopts the truth of expression; he voices his ideas to the world in a fervent, passionate manner, especially with his hands, but then over-owns this truth to become a grotesque of self-doubt and over-zealous expression, leading him to a life of timidity and fear of the emergence of these undesirable qualities.

Though the state in which Wing finds himself may at first appear to be pathetic, the existence of a truth prior to his grotesquery can still be observed. Wing's past, when most knew him as Adolph Meyers, offers the most evidence of his goodness: "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" (31). In his past as a schoolteacher, Wing demonstrates a gentle, tender nature towards his young students. The truth to Wing's life is his goodness, and his kind, moderate nature defines this goodness. Few understand him because this kind behavior is seldom seen in a man. Even though he may not be graced with the truth of

masculinity, Wing's expression through this clemency and temperance provides for him a truth to live by.

Despite Wing's visible goodness in his past as a schoolteacher, his life takes a turn for the worse as his grotesquery surfaces. Though Wing's goodness lies in his softness of expression, he ultimately takes this seemingly incorruptible truth too far:

“ As he talked his voice became soft and musical. There was a caress in that also. In a way the voice and the hands, the stroking of the shoulders and the touching of the hair were a part of the schoolmaster's effort to carry a dream into the young minds. By the caress that was in his fingers he expressed himself.... Under the caress of his hands doubt and disbelief went out of the minds of the boys and they began also to dream” (31).

Wing's truth of expression is evident in this passage, but it is also a poignant example of how he takes it past the point of social acceptability. Serving as the medium through which his grotesquery is manifested, Wing's hands caress the children in a passionate display of expression. Unfortunately, though he is instilling worthwhile ideas in the minds of the children and leading them to “ dream,” it is not something that is socially acceptable to touch them. The hands epitomize the transgression of societal boundaries, for Wing's actions are only grotesque once he begins touching his students, and the lynch mob that chases him out of town convinces him of that. Otherwise, his soft-spoken and gentle nature are good things, but in a properly moderate form.

The life consequences of falling into a life of grotesquery are almost always devastating. For Wing, the change to his life was irreparable: “Wing Biddlebaum, forever frightened and beset by a ghostly band of doubts, did not think of himself as in any way a part of the life of the town where he had lived for twenty years” (27). As Adolph Myers, Wing is chased out of a town in Pennsylvania, narrowly escaping death, to Winesburg where he starts anew. Something has changed though, and even after twenty years there, Wing has become and remained a recluse, living alone in his dilapidated house, full of doubts about himself and his life. Unlike other grotesques, though, Wing is doubtful because he realizes his grotesquery. Though he does not anything to remedy it, he acknowledges its presence, at the very least. In a way, he understands also that his hands are to blame: “Although he did not understand what had happened [the incident in Pennsylvania] he felt that the hands must be to blame” (33). Wing is a different kind of grotesque: He is one who recognizes the evil and its place in his life, but doesn’t know what to do about it. A source of confusion, Wing’s overactive hands are a part of who he is, and it is difficult to change his behavior because of that.

All humans possess an element of grotesquery. What changes between us is how much of a consequence this bit of extremity has on our lives. In addition, if grotesquery is embedded deeply enough in a person, it is sometimes very difficult to eradicate it completely. In Wing’s case, the manner in which he uses his hands in interaction with the world, is

something that is inherent in who he is. Unfortunately for him, it decimated his life, though he didn't have much truth to it in the first place.