

"sophistication"- anderson's bildungskurzgeschich te



Of all of the stories in Winesburg, Ohio, one stands out as a clear example of character growth through emotional maturity and connection with another human being. "Sophistication" tells that story, one of the simultaneous climax of two peoples' youth, and their epiphanic transition into adulthood and maturity. Through the internal and shared conflicts of the characters, their subsequent resolution, the structure of the plot, and the fundamental style and word choice of Anderson's writing, a pair of confused and isolated adolescents find the companionship they need for the moment in time they need to grow into adults together. Anderson's choice of words and style throughout the story clearly establish the themes of the story, namely domesticity and coming of age.

First, Anderson begins by setting the story in the wake of the county fair, a place for juvenile merriment for adults and children alike if there ever was one. By combining the adult with the juvenile here, Anderson establishes that this story will discuss the lines between the two, and what separates a man from a boy, and a woman from a girl. Further, Anderson brings up the transience and meaninglessness of life time and again in the story, noting that 18-year-old George "Already... hears death calling", and that "It seemed to [Helen] that the world was full of meaningless people saying words" (151). His concluding sentence to a paragraph describing the emotions one feels at a deserted fairground, "One shudders at the thought of the meaninglessness of life...", further demonstrates this notion. However, the conclusion to that very sentence, "... and if the people of the town are his people, one loves life so intensely that tears come into the eyes", demonstrates that Anderson is not hopeless (154). He reassures the reader

that, though they may be confronted with such problems from time to time, the moments of existential despair are often counterbalanced with moments of equally existential joy, and that life is a wonderful and terrible curse and spell that is placed on us. George's former immaturity is a theme in the center of the story, as an exercise in reflection that George undertakes, and for which he feels shame. This immaturity is displayed through the style in which Anderson portrays the summer night that George and Helen spent together. What is telling about the scene is the complete lack of speech from Helen, and the blustering speech of George.

Anderson makes clear that an insecure George had wanted Helen to respect him, that he wanted "to make himself appear big and significant in her eyes" (151). Anderson makes certain that the reader knows that under the talk, George is a frightened young man, longing for validation from this girl before him. Several phrases cut in one after the other, "The confused boy... His voice trembled... In his desperation George boasted" (152). George is consistently attempting to display an outward front of masculinity, while inwardly he is isolated and alone. What is more, George isolates Helen in his attempt to get closer to her, by removing her agency, as manifested by her lack of dialogue. He says "'I want you to do something. I don't know what. Perhaps it is none of my business. I want you to try to be something different from other women. You see the point. It's none of my business I tell you. I want you to be a beautiful woman. You see what I want.'" (152). Not only is George silencing her, all he is discussing is what he wants for her, not accounting for her desire, and despite stating twice himself that it is 'none of his business'. It is no coincidence that Helen also does not speak over the

instructor who has come as a suitor, despite his many lines of dialogue. This immaturity acts a foil to George's later thoughts in the fall, when " He [has] reverence for Helen" (154). The characters George and Helen go through much of this story with a parallel conflict towards each other, not of contempt or opposition, but of longing. They each think on the other simultaneously, " Helen White was thinking of George Willard even as he wandered gloomily through the crowds thinking of her", and they both want desperately for the other to appreciate them, and to value them as adults worthy of respect (151). From George's perspective, " he wanted to be with her and try to make her feel the change he believed had taken place in his nature", while from Helen's, " She wanted him to feel and be conscious of the change in her nature." (151).

Note that Anderson chooses the word nature to end the lines, because both Helen and George believe that they have become entirely different during their time away. This is true; they have both changed a great deal since the encounter Anderson relates that took place during the summer, and George in particular remembers his former self from that evening with shame (152). However, they are not yet adults, as evidenced by the emotions Anderson expresses that they are feeling. Helen is " no longer a girl, and hungered to reach into the grace and beauty of womanhood", where George's transition is described thusly, " The mood that had taken possession of him was a thing known to men and unknown to boys" (150-151). Through these two lines, the reader sees that the two have begun their transition from adolescence into adulthood. The conflict of longing begins to resolve itself when the two meet to travel to the hill overlooking the deserted county fair. Once George finds

Helen, he is dumbstruck, and despite the fact that he has spent the entire walk over to her house vocally proclaiming his intentions to speak with her, "George wonder[s] what he had better do and say" (153). This line begins the tension of the story, built through an unusual manner of emotional relief for the characters. The key tension of the conflict is whether George and Helen will embrace domesticity and adulthood together. Anderson draws out the slowly fading tension in the characters, using phrases like "the irritation was all gone. The presence of Helen renewed and refreshed him" (154), and "'I have come to this lonely place and here is this other'" (154). The images of domesticity are reinforced by the mention of "Farmers with their wives and children" (154). An apparent climax of this conflict occurs with the simple phrase "Mutual respect grew big in them" (155), and with that moment, the reader is led to believe that they have made their choice, and that they will live and love together. But the exact opposite is true.

In a way, it is a tragedy when Anderson writes, "For some reason they could not have explained they had both got from their silent evening together the thing needed... the thing that makes the mature life of men and women in the modern world possible" (155). With these closing lines, Anderson hints towards the next story, "Departure", and how Helen and George neither speak to nor see each other. In essence, the two have gained what they needed from each other. They were stepping-stones on each other's journey, and will depart from each other's company, possibly forever. To conclude, "Sophistication" is Anderson's attempt to show the way that George and Helen cross the threshold into adulthood simultaneously during one night of chaste emotional ecstasy. Anderson demonstrates the power of an emotional

connection, and the joy that accompanies it. To the reader, he portrays a tragedy, characterized by the realization that they have garnered from each other the lesson they needed, and now they will go their separate ways, perhaps never to meet again.