Ostracism and identity intertwined: sherwood anderson's winesburg, ohio

ASSIGN BUSTER

Perhaps the most poignant dichotomy of the American social condition is the juxtaposition between a tight-knit community and the inevitable outcasts it relies upon to maintain itself amid a changing world. Sherwood Anderson’s Winesburg, Ohio, published in 1919, explores this paradox from the bottom-up — that is, through the individual tragedies of characters who find themselves estranged from the communities in which they live. Anderson highlights the complexity of estrangement by presenting characters that seem to be alienated by their own merits: Wing Biddlebaum by his unwavering guilt, Jesse Bentley by his messianic ambition, and Enoch Robinson by his immense egotism. The ostracism, whether brought on by a communal effort or self-imposed, is the leading contributor to their identity, and furthermore, the cause of a fundamental character flaw that drives them even further from the Winesburg community. In Ostracism: The Power of Silence, social psychologist Kipling D. Williams argues that the idiosyncrasies of an ostracized person often play a large role in the origin of their alienation. “ Some individuals may simply possess certain undesirable characteristics or behave in ways that cause others to ostracize them … Some people elicit ostracism because of what they do or say” (58). Anderson’s characters certainly adhere to this model — but more jarring than the ability of personality traits to spur ostracism is the power of ostracism to shape identity over time. In the very first scene of “ Hands,” Wing Biddlebaum is described as nervously “ walking up and down” upon the decrepit veranda of his house on the outskirts of Winesburg (8). This small detail is significant, for Wing was not at ease in his own home. Indeed, Wing was not at ease with himself. For twenty years he lived in Winesburg as a recluse, connecting only with the young reporter George Willard. For twenty

years, Wing “ did not think of himself as in any way part of the life of the town” (9). For twenty years he lived with the guilt of a horrific episode that left him “ forever frightened and beset by a ghostly band of doubts” (9). It was this horrific episode that drove Wing—then Adolph Myers—from a small Pennsylvania community into Winesburg and into obscurity as a man who, at the age of forty, looked sixty-five. The young school teacher was marked as a pedophile and physically exiled after the accusations of one student created a “ shiver” of hysteria in the town, as “ hidden, shadowy doubts that had been in men’s minds concerning Adolph Myers were galvanized into beliefs” (13). The man took refuge in Winesburg under the guise of a new identity: Wing Biddlebaum, who emerged internalizing the same “ shadowy doubts” of the community from which he was driven. Formerly passionate and vivacious, Wing was overcome with guilt and self-doubt. “ Although [Wing] didn’t understand what happened he felt that his hands must be to blame” (14). The story of Wing Biddlebaum is a story of hands. Their restless activity, like unto the beating of the wings of an imprisoned bird, had given him his name … The hands alarmed their owner. He wanted to keep them hidden away and looked with amazement at the quiet inexpressive hands of other men who worked beside him in the fields, or passed, driving sleepy teams on country roads (10). Wing’s ostracism from the Pennsylvania community shaped his identity so significantly that despite reinventing himself in Winesburg, he still marked himself as different and fundamentally “ wrong.” Williams discusses such a characteristic in Ostracism: “ Targets inferring [the punitive] motive assume that they are being ostracized as a form of punishment” (54). These targets often become “ highly self aware,” argues Williams—a psychological state that can draw attention to perceived

inadequacies. Wing’s glaring self-doubt, manifested in his nervous obsession with hands, his perpetual silence, and his overall social trepidation, spurred further alienation from his surrounding community. “ There’s something wrong, but I don’t want to know what it is,” remarks George Willard. “ His hands have something to do with his fear of me and of everyone” (12). Likewise, Wing’s hands had a lot to do with why the people of Winesburg failed to understand his peculiar lifestyle, and why he could never truly “ belong” there. Like Wing, Jesse Bentley never belonged in Winesburg. He also did not belong in his era. “[He] was a fanatic,” describes the narrator. “ He was a man born out of his time and place and for this he suffered and made others suffer” (49). Anderson addresses Jesse’s alienation from the Winesburg community directly after we are introduced to him, thus implying that his social distance from the town occupied a dominant role in his life. Over time, his fervent ambition and ostracism would become fundamentally intertwined. Fate thrust the “ odd sheep” Jesse Bentley to the helm of his family farm, and for this he faced endless rumblings of doubt and scrutiny from the Winesburg community. The skepticism was not unfounded. At twenty-two, Jesse was “ slight,” “ sensitive-looking,” and “ womanish of body”—a far cry from the brawn and brute strength of his elder brothers who had brought success to the Bentley farm in the preceding years. “ By the standards of his day, Jesse did not look like a man at all” (48). Consequently, “ the neighbors were amused when they saw him” (49). When he came home to take charge of the farm, that had at the time grown to more than six hundred acres, everyone on the farms about and in the nearby town of Winesburg smiled at the idea of his trying to handle the work that had been done by his four strong brothers (48). Riddled by the doubts of his neighbors

in Winesburg, young Jesse aspired to usher in an era of industrialization that would create a great shift “ in the lives and in the habits and thought of [the] people of Mid-America.” Thus began Jesse’s “ absorption in himself and in his own destiny” (51). Motivated in large part by cynics in the Winesburg community, he sought to become a new man—an “ extraordinary man.” Within this new identity, Jesse “ wanted terribly to make his life a thing of great importance, and as he looked about at his fellow men and saw how like clods they lived it seemed to him that he could not bear to become also such a clod” (51). The wedge was driven. Jesse began to view himself as fundamentally different than the other men in Winesburg, declaring himself “ a new kind of man” who would serve as leader of an emerging “ new race of men” (52). Entrenched in his vision, Jesse withdrew from society and “ everyone retired into the background” (49). When he was summoned back to Winesburg by his father, “ he shut himself off from all his people and began to make plans … It was the indefinable hunger within that made his eyes waver and that kept him always more and more silent before people” (50). With his mind “ fixed upon the things he read in newspapers and magazines,” Jesse Bentley cared little about the affairs of the small community of which he was still a part. “ Something like an invisible curtain appeared to have come between the man and all the rest of the world” (80). The break was mutual. In line with Williams’ theory, Jesse’s individual characteristics seemed to cause further segregation from the community. In his model of ostracism, Williams cites “ insensitivity to others,” “ obnoxiousness,” and “ perceived dangerousness” as traits that can cause such a break from society. Given the rhetoric of the time, it is probable that Jesse was ostracized from Winesburg because his cosmopolitan mentality

presented a threat to their agrarian way of life, though this is not explicitly stated in the text. If Jesse Bentley's curtain was his ambition, Enoch Robinson's bulwark was his egotism. " He always was a child and that was a handicap to his worldly development," explains the narrator. " He never grew up and of course he couldn't understand people and he couldn't make people understand him" (152). Quite simply, Enoch lacked the most basic capacities of human communication. He could never truly connect with people, and for that reason nearly all of his thoughts, feelings and emotions centered on himself. Throughout his time in New York, Enoch's small apartment was filled with " talking artists"—young urbanites who, like Enoch, had a deep appreciation for art. In his Washington Square apartment, the artists observed and discussed his paintings, which depicted pastoral scenes from his native Winesburg. Amid their banter, Enoch remained silent. Tortured by his own ability to communicate with the artists and convinced that no one would ever understand the meaning behind his paintings, Enoch " began to doubt his own mind." In an act of self-ostracization, he " stopped inviting people to his room and presently got into the habit of locking the door" (154). Alone in his room, Enoch invented a social circle to replace the real people with whom he could never speak. Amid his " shadow people," Enoch was unafraid to speak freely and boldly. For the first time in his life, " he talked last and best" (155). In the deepest fantasies of his mind, Enoch was an orator and a socialite. In the grim realities of the world, Enoch was alone. When finally he longed " to touch actual flesh-and-bone people with his hands" (155), Enoch married the girl he sat next to in art school and sought to resume his life as a social being. For awhile, he was pleased with himself, for he saw him self as a " real part of things" (156). This sentiment

proved fleeting. In his years of solitude, Enoch was never conditioned to be a social being. At heart, he remained an egotist. One night something happened. I became mad to make her understand me and to know what a big thing I was in that room. I wanted her to see how important I was. I told her over and over. When she tried to go away, I ran and locked the door … A look came into her eyes and I knew that she did understand. I was furious. I couldn't stand it. I wanted her to understand, but don't you see, I couldn't let her understand. I felt that then she would know everything, that I would be submerged, drowned out, you see (160-1). Enoch drove the woman from his apartment and from his life—and his shadow people " all went out through the door after her" (162). Defeated, lost, and alone, Enoch returned to Winesburg a stranger. Enoch was incapable of building meaningful social relationships, thus he became more and more distant in the eyes of the community. For years, Enoch ostracized everyone around him out of his sheer terror of vulnerability. Williams' calls this motive " defensive": "[A] source may intentionally ostracize another person … preemptively to defend against being harmed in some way" (47). Enoch's self-imposed alienation shielded him from socialization to the extent that when he finally craved human interaction, he was inept. Moreover, society was unwilling to accept him. " Nothing ever turned out for Enoch Robinson" because he would not allow it (152). Later, Winesburg would not allow it either. The primary purpose of Williams' model of ostracism is to " delineate the consequences of ostracism on the person or groups who are being ostracized" (45). Through much research and analysis, he concludes that continued exposure to incidents of ostracism leads to " detrimental psychological consequences," much like those evident in Anderson's characters in

Winesburg, Ohio. Indeed, the social, and at times physical, isolation of Wing Biddlebaum, Jesse Bentley and Enoch Robinson is both self-imposed and perpetuated by society. Williams accounts for this behavior in his model: " Instead of making deliberate attempts to regain his or her lost or threatened needs, the target will succumb to the lost needs and internalize the meaning that their loss represents" (64). Through Williams' conclusions and the experiences of Anderson's characters, we see how ostracism and its effects are cyclical. An initial alienation from society develops characteristics that cause the men to be even more distant from the community. In recognizing a difference between themselves and the " others," the victims become self-stigmatized. Within Williams' theory, the " continued diminution of their self-esteem [leads] to negative expectations and self-fulfilling prophecies resulting in a downward spiral toward lower self-esteem and undesirable behaviors" (62). The tragedy of ostracism in this form, and therefore the tragedy of these characters, is the gradual process by which they fade into oblivion. Their pain is prolonged, and lasts over the course of their troubled existences. Their ostracism is like an undertow pulling them farther and farther out to sea. Works CitedAnderson, Sherwood. Winesburg, Ohio. New York: Bantam Books, 1995. Williams, Kipling D. Ostracism: The Power of Silence. London: The Guilford Press, 2001.