

The fine line between  
dreams and  
memories: comparing  
my antonia and  
"hands"



**ASSIGN  
BUSTER**

Dreams are usually experienced when a person is sleeping, but idealizations and memories can turn into dreams as well. Sometimes it is hard to distinguish between dreams and reality, especially when thinking of the past. People may mistake what they hoped to have happened as what has actually happened, or the past can come back in a haunting way. Willa Cather's novel *My Antonia* explores the idea of the past carrying both nostalgic and dream-like qualities, while Sherwood Anderson's *Winesburg, Ohio* presents dreams and dreaming in a whole other abstract and complex way. However dreams and memories are portrayed, they strongly affect the characters in each of these stories.

*My Antonia* is a highly nostalgic narrative that recounts Jim Burden's memory of life on the prairie and his dear friend Antonia. The introduction of this piece details a train conversation between Jim Burden and the "narrator" of the story. As it is suggested by Jim that the mystery narrator should write a story about Antonia, it was decided that "[he/she] would set down on paper all that [he/she] remembered about Antonia if he would do the same. [They] might, in this way, get a picture of her." (49). This introduction already suggests the fact that the story that is written down may not be entirely accurate or true. As the story progresses, it is quickly noted that the character of Antonia seems to be greatly idealized by Jim and the story itself becomes almost dream-like. Jim clearly thinks very highly of Antonia and of life on the prairie and many of his stories seem slightly exaggerated. It is never truly known whether or not the tales recounted in *My Antonia* are entirely true or even true at all, but nevertheless this story is the product of the dream Jim has chosen to remember.

Sherwood Anderson's collection of stories *Winesburg, Ohio* similarly reflects on the idea of dreams versus reality and how these two can oppose each other. George Willard is a seemingly impressionable young man living in the town of Winesburg, Ohio. He has found the company of Wing Biddlebaum, a strange, nervous old man who prefers the company of children to that of adults. Biddlebaum is seen to be somewhat of a hermit by the townsfolk as he usually keeps to himself, but "in the presence of George Willard, Wing Biddlebaum...[loses] something of his timidity..." (265). George Willard, seemingly most enamored by the nature of Biddlebaum's hands, often comes to visit the old man. Dreaming is a very important aspect to Wing and his life, and he believes it to be a key element in a person's individuality and freedom, telling George, that "[he] must begin to dream. From this time on [he] must shut his ears to the roaring of the voices" (266). The concept of dreaming is so important to Wing that he condemns George for "want[ing] to be like the others in town" (266) and even goes as far to say that he is "destroying [himself]" (266). Wing seems to be constantly living in a dream state, oblivious to reality and those who occupy this space, other than George. Wing creates a divide between his world and the real world, and requests that George chooses his world.

Although Wing seems captivated by the notion of dreaming and encourages George to the same, dreams and memories are not always a positive experience for Wing. One day with George, Wing reaches out to caress his face, but a look of horror quickly occupies his face: "Tears came to his eyes" (267). In this moment, his dream-like reality is shattered as he is thrown back into the nightmare of his past. He has attempted to forget or alter his

past in his mind, but this incident with George sends him back into the horrible reality that he was once apart of. On the contrary, George Willard's father confronts George angrily telling him that he's "got to wake up" (271). He compares George's actions to those of a "gawky girl" (271) as he is often seen wandering aimlessly in thought. Tom Willard claims that George is living too much in his head and he is obsessed with the success of his son in the future. In this sense dreaming is seen as not only bad but something that is effeminate...something highly inappropriate for a boy to be doing. Tom Willard's opinions directly oppose Wing Biddlebaum's when it comes to dreams versus reality, but Tom lives a sad and negative life. His hotel is constantly on the edge of failure, he has a terrible relationship with his wife, and he is all around just a miserable person (269).

For Jim Burden, dreaming seems to have little negative effect. He feels so much nostalgia for his past and for Antonia that he is compelled to have this story written down. Although he hopes for his friend to write the story, what he has written down is so thoughtful and well-written that his writing becomes the actual story. His writing is reflective of a positive memory, one that Jim seems to be constantly carrying. It seems as though Jim thinks of his past life quite often. It is obvious that Jim has thought very highly of Antonia for his whole life, and he even recounts their first meeting recalling that her eyes were "big and warm, and full of light, like the sun shining on the brown pools in the wood" (57). This imagery is so vivid that it seems as if Jim is actively looking into Antonia's eyes versus looking into a memory. His memory of her is very idealized and nostalgic, just as the rest of his

memories of his former life are. It is interesting to consider the idea of selective memory and how this affects these two main characters.

Both Jim Burden and Wing Biddlebaum are living in a dream world to some extent. In Jim's case, he has chosen to remember only what he wants to from the past and these memories cumulatively become the story of My Antonia. It is difficult to say whether or not Jim ever had any truly negative experience, because his writing mostly focuses on the positive main events, most including Antonia. Winesburg, Ohio, however, presents Wing's interactions with dreaming and memories a bit differently. It seems as though Wing attempts to live in a dream world in order to suppress his past and the desires that he still seems to feel. By choosing to live this way, he can attempt to forget the misery and pain of his past in order to live in the present. When something triggers his memory to the past, he is snapped back into reality and must face the consequences of his actions. This in turn affects his current relationships, in this case his relationship with George.

Whether or not Jim's past was as great as he remembers, or Wing's was as awful as he seems to recall, both men experience great emotion when visiting these past memories. While Jim's memory seems to be more constant, Wing seems to subconsciously carry these memories that are triggered by certain actions. Wing lives happily in his current dream world, but his past is a haunting nightmare. Sometimes it can be hard to distinguish between dreams and reality, especially when thinking of the past. My Antonia explores the idea of the past carrying both nostalgic and dream-like qualities of a positive experience or one that is at least perceived in this way, while Anderson's Winesburg, Ohio shows quite the opposite. The way in <https://assignbuster.com/the-fine-line-between-dreams-and-memories-comparing-my-antonia-and-hands/>

which dreams and memories are portrayed in these two texts, greatly affect the main characters in contrasting ways.

## **Works Cited**

Baym, Nina, and Robert S. Levine. The Norton Anthology of American Literature. Vol. D. New York: W. W. Norton, 2012. Print.