

George's steps to maturation



George's Steps to Maturation Winesburg, Ohio, by Sherwood Anderson, is a novel put together by a collection of short stories. Each story focuses on various inhabitants of Winesburg, a small town at the beginning of the 20th century. The accounts are intertwined within each other, and one by one, the character's role in society is revealed through their narrative. Every short story concerns at least one inhabitant as the main character of that story; however, there is one character that emerges in the majority of the accounts—George Willard. Winesburg, Ohio is a novel about his development from a youth to the threshold of adulthood. George Willard is a young man who lives in his mother's hotel. He writes for the local newspaper and dreams of becoming a writer. At the beginning of the book, he is a youth who had new ideas and fancies and sexual adventures with "strange wild emotions" (46). George's journey takes place in the background of the novel; the characters seek George to talk to and to tell their stories. For the most part, he is a listener. By the end of the book, however, especially after his mother's death, George enters manhood and becomes prepared to leave the town of Winesburg to become a writer in the big city. What encourages George to mature is the fact that he is the listener of the other inhabitants' stories. Because he hears each character's stories, George realizes that when people strictly adhere to their ideas, they become unhealthy and stuck in their self-discovered "truths." This realization is what keeps George from becoming a grotesque and is what ultimately urges him to move away from this small town. The "grotesqueness" in the citizens of Winesburg, Ohio seems to stem mostly from two sources—alienation and loneliness. Some inhabitants completely cut themselves off from societal interactions like Wing Biddlebaum and Enoch Robinson. From the first story, we can see

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these characters' influence on George Willard. Wing Biddlebaum, in "Hands," opens the door for the young boy to dream. Wing sees in George, like in most children, the "want to be like others" and how he tries to imitate the other people in the town. Wing recognizes that it is best for the boy to "forget all [he has] learned" and to dream, he recognizes that if the boy follows suite and becomes like the rest of the town folk, George will also only become a grotesque (30). In the story "Loneliness," Enoch Robinson "was always a child and that was a handicap to his worldly development" (167). He was a man who, consumed by imaginary life, estranged himself from people because he became annoyed at their interpretations of his paintings. When he became lonely, he married the girl who sat next to him in school; however he soon felt trapped in his new family engagements and left them to preserve his imaginations. Then, one day Enoch became mad and she left "through the door and all the life there had been in the room followed her out. She took all my people away" (177). Enoch tells George this story because he sympathized with George's despondency; "the sadness was in the heart of George Willard and was without meaning, but it appealed to Enoch Robinson" (173). Through the story of Enoch Robinson, George sees the result of never growing up. Unable to hold on to relationships because of his desire for imagination, Enoch Robinson becomes an inept old man "whimpering and complaining, 'I'm alone, all alone here'" (178). The stories of Wing Biddlebaum and Enoch Robinson demonstrate to George the middle ground required in dreaming and imagination. In his development, George sees the two extremes. One is Wing who encourages dreaming because he himself has given up on dreaming. Wing is trapped in isolation because he is not longer able to dream of the possibilities of the future, and thus, he

withholds encouraging his pupils to dream. The other extremity is Enoch who was fixed in his dreams and, as a result, lived his life in "loneliness." George matures as he comes to realize the importance in finding a happy medium for balance in life. This importance of a middle ground is emphasized in his lesson learned from his mother, Elizabeth. George sees her trapped in her loveless marriage; she despises the thought of her son becoming a man like his father. To Elizabeth, Tom is seen as "something threatening [to her] boy." Also, she can no longer use the "traveling men" to add more excitement in her life (45-46). George learns from his sympathetic mother that there must be a medium in life. She was wild and had a bad reputation in town when she was young and then she became almost dead and colorless-nearly anonymous when she was older. Even when she goes to kill her husband, she feels like she must become someone else by masking herself in her old theater make-up. She was never able to find her happy medium in life. Other characters afflicted with the curse of alienation and loneliness are especially seen in the women of Winesburg, Ohio. These characters represent the intimate feelings that a young boy would have towards girls and women as he matures from curiosity, confusion, and manipulation towards wanting "mutual respect" in his relationship (241). Louise Trunnion, Kate Swift, and Belle Carpenter were the women that represent George's immature flings before he finds himself in love with Helen White. "Nobody Knows" is a story about George's mistaken rite of passage into manhood. After George receives the message from Louise that she would be his if he wanted her, George walks to her house and stands in the fields calling to her. Like teenagers, she plays hard to get when they meet. George uses the opportunity to feel like a man and uses Louise as his challenge. George only

wants to touch Louise because he can; " he became wholly the male, bold and aggressive. In his heart there was no sympathy for her. " His justification for wanting to have sex and for persuading her was that " there won't be anyone know anything. How can they know? " Louise uses this opportunity for her confidence; she tells George " you think you're better than I am. Don't tell me, I guess I know"(61). George recognizes Louise's weakness and vulnerability and uses her to feel like a man. George feels extremely satisfied after the experience. He smokes a cigar and wants to talk with a man, symbolizing his newly found masculinity and maturity. However, the story ends with George afraid that he has changed his life too much and that Louise will have a claim on him now. He cannot yet accept the responsibility with being adult and forming valid relationships, he relieves himself by thinking that " she hasn't got anything on me. Nobody knows" (62). Kate Swift, the teacher of Winesburg, sees a genius in George because of his ability to use words to express himself. This is in stark contrast to the majority of the inhabitants of Winesburg, in whom the emphasis was placed their hands as a means of expression. She became inspired by the boy and " a great eagerness to open the door of life to the boy...had possession of her" (164). She wanted someone to understand her and to be loved by a man. To Kate, George " looked no longer a boy, but a man, ready to play the part of a man" (165). Again, we see a false representation of George's entrance into manhood. He could not understand why she began to beat him and then ran away; " I have missed something. I have missed something Kate Swift was trying to tell me" (166). Because he is unable to grasp her message, he has not yet transitioned into being the man that he wants to be and he is left confused about love and women. In " An Awakening, " we see the cliché

manipulative relationship in which Belle Carpenter uses George to become closer to the man she really loves, Ed Handby, and leaves George, again, hurt and confused. Although Belle was in love with the bartender at Ed Griffith's Saloon, Ed Handby, she had a "love affair, about which no one knew, " with George Willard. She would let George kiss her because she felt like she could handle and manipulate George as she wished, unlike the larger, " tall, broad-shouldered man" Ed (180). One night George walked to her house, and knowing that Ed was watching her, went out with George to make Ed jealous, " she wanted to make him suffer. " Also, when George tried to kiss her, she " did not resist, but looked over his shoulder into the darkness" probably making sure that Ed was watching. Earlier that night, George had in his mind that " now he had suddenly become too big to be used" (186). He was proved wrong once again, being decreased to a lesser man when " Ed Handby appeared" and threw the young reporter into the bushes. George felt humiliated but the result of this experience was that he was humbled again. Before the incident, George felt a " new force" manifest within himself but after everything " seemed to him utterly squalid and commonplace" (188-189). In the closing stories, however, after his mother's death, George steps forward into manhood and prepares to leave Winesburg for the larger world. He was " fast-growing into manhood and new thoughts had been coming into his mind. " He knew that he was going to leave Winesburg to try to find work on a city newspaper and he " felt grown up" (233-234). George and Helen experienced the " animalism of youth" as they transitioned into becoming comfortable with respect. They " played like two splendid young things in a young world" as they laughed and " pulled and hauled" at each other rolling down a hill (242). George changes from being a

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headstrong, certain boy into a young man who realizes that he is "not sure at all" about himself or his future. He sees himself as part of society, like "a leaf blown by the wind through the streets of his village." He begins to doubt himself as "the sadness of sophistication" had come (234). Now, he only wanted someone to understand the feeling that had taken possession of him after his mother's death. George begins to think about the time, when he was 18, and boasted of his manhood to Helen White; "he tried to make her think of him as a man when he knew nothing of manhood" (235). He now wanted her to see the real change that had taken place within him after his mother's death; "he wanted to love and to be loved by her...and mutual respect grew big in them." George had experienced "the thing that makes the mature life of men and women in the modern world possible" and was then ready to leave Winesburg for a new beginning (243). George's departure for the city is a fresh start for him in being a man. He looks back on Winesburg before he leaves, separating himself from his youth. On the train when he stopped day dreaming, "Winesburg has disappeared and his life there had become but a background on which to paint the dreams of his manhood" (247). When George leaves, he separates himself from the other inhabitants of Winesburg who are trapped in a cycle of loneliness and alienation. Through Wing, Enoch, and his mother, George learned of the importance of finding a happy medium to be successful in life. Through the female characters in Winesburg, Ohio, George matures into manhood, and at the end, forms a relationship with a woman in which there is mutual respect. He learned from each of the other characters in Winesburg, Ohio and matures into a young man from the boy he used to be.