

The impotence of words and the vagueness of truth in winesburg, ohio



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Sherwood Anderson, in his masterpiece *Winesburg, Ohio* was “ writing against the notion that stories have to have a plot which reveals a moral idea or conclusion” (Prof. Fisher, lecture). Like the “ tales” that Doctor Parcival tells George Willard in “ The Philosopher,” Anderson’s short stories also seem to “ begin nowhere and end nowhere” (51). We as readers must, like George Willard, decide if such stories are little more than “ a pack of lies” or if rather, “ they contain the very essence of truth” (51). The ability (or lack thereof) of both his characters and his narrator to distinguish between “ lies” and “ truth” is one of Anderson’s central preoccupations. The people who inhabit *Winesburg, Ohio* are acutely aware of the impotence of words in the face of expressing any form of truth or meaning. Words, instead, serve as obstacles in uncovering “ truth.” It is not only Anderson’s characters, however, which comprehend the impotence of words. The narrator, as we shall see, also struggles to find words that can express “ truth.” It’s not surprising then that “ truth”, in *Winesburg, Ohio* takes on a “ vague” and amorphous shape that can be described using only the most vague and amorphous of words: “ thing.” Present in nearly all the stories of *Winesburg, Ohio* is a form of what Lionel Trilling has called the “ American Laconic,” a kind of masculine refusal of words and language (Prof. Fisher, lecture). Anderson’s characters are intensely aware of the inability of words to capture, express and explain any form of truth or meaning. In “ Mother,” Elizabeth Willard prays that her son, George, will “ be allowed to express something for us both” (40). She thinks to herself, “ He is groping about, trying to find himself...He is not a dull clod, all words and smartness. Within him there is a secret something that is striving to grow. It is the thing I let be killed in myself” (43). In this instance, “ words” are portrayed as an obstacle

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in both finding oneself and expressing a vague “ something,” a vague “ truth” of some sort. Similarly, Kate Swift admonishes George to “ not become a mere peddler of words. The thing to learn is to know what people are thinking about, not what they say” (162). Again “ words” are seen here as impotent, “ mere”; it matters not what words people say, but the feelings and thoughts that are behind the words. Helen White realizes “ that the world was full of meaningless people saying words” (239), George Willard decides not to use “ speeches” as they “ seemed utterly pointless” (237) and the artist Enoch comes to realize that “ he knew what he wanted to say, but he knew also that he could never by any possibility say it” (169). Enoch’s case provides an apt example of Anderson’s belief in the impotence and uselessness of words in conveying truthful meaning. Enoch is an artist who hangs out with “ talking artists” who “ talked and talked” and believe that talking “ matters much more than it does” (169). Not only are words portrayed as impotent, they are also viewed as irrelevant. No words could ever capture the truth of Enoch’s paintings; as he puts it “ The picture you see doesn’t consist of the things you see and say words about” (169). Words don’t exist in the same realm as the “ truths” of Enoch’s paintings, and as such, are not only utterly useless, but, given the context, completely absurd. But what exactly are these mysterious “ truths” which Anderson’s characters are unable to name with “ mere words?” Unlike words, which are fixed and unyielding, “ truth” in Winesburg, Ohio never takes on a definite shape, and as such, is incapable of being captured by concrete words. In the “ Book of the Grotesque” Anderson tells us: That in the beginning when the world was young there were a great many thoughts but no such thing as a truth. Man made the truths himself and each truth was a composite of a great many

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vague thoughts. All about in the world were the truths and they were all beautiful...And then the people came along. Each as he appeared snatched up one of the truths and some who were quite strong snatched up a dozen of them. It was the truths that made the people grotesques...It was his notion that the moment one of the people took one of the truths to himself, called it his truth, and tried to live his life by it, he became a grotesque and the truth he embraced became a falsehood (24). "Truths" are composed of "many vague thoughts," they're essentially formless and "vague" without definite shape or definite meaning. "Truths" become "falsehoods" when Anderson's characters try to possess them, like one would possess a solid, ownable object. In Anderson's world, when persons try to "call" a truth their own, when they try to define it, to give it a name and a form, to use it as a "model" which can be explained and talked about, it is then that the truth becomes a "falsehood." "Truths" resist naming, they resist labels and words and are constantly changing and reforming shape. For instance, in "Paper Pills," Doctor Reefy erects "little pyramids of truth" and "after erecting knocked them down again that he might have the truths to erect other pyramids" (35). Later he forms a "truth that arose gigantic in his mind. The truth clouded the world. It became terrible and then faded away and the little thoughts began again" (37), thoughts which he eventually stuffs into his pocket to "become round hard balls" (38). "Truths," therefore, resist definite shape, they are "pyramids" which are knocked down, they are "round hard balls," and they resist singularity; which is to say, no single "gigantic" truth can ever take the place of the multitude of truths which exist. In essence, "truth," as it functions in Winesburg, Ohio is shapeless, vague, un-nameable and multitudinous in nature. It is not only, however, Anderson's

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characters which are unable to name “ truth” or express it through words, but Anderson’s omnipotent narrator as well. In “ Sophistication,” Anderson’s narrator repeatedly uses the intentionally vague word “ thing” to describe (or at least hint at) the truth and meaning of what his characters are experiencing. For example, when Helen and George walk together in the night, Anderson writes, “ In the mind of each was the same thought. ‘I have come to this place and here is this other,’ was the substance of the thing felt” (241)... “ She took his arm and walked beside him in dignified silence. For some reason they could not have explained they had both got from their silent evening together the thing needed. Man or boy, woman or girl, they had for a moment taken a hold of the thing that makes the mature life of men and women in the modern world possible” (243). Notice first of all, as was pointed out before, that it is only in “ silence,” (without words), that the characters can grasp this truthful “ thing.” Words are again portrayed as an obstacle to truth. But this vague “ truth” is not only un-nameable and indescribable for Anderson’s characters. Anderson’s narrator, similarly, is only able to describe it as a “ thing.” What, then, is this “ thing” to which the narrator continually refers? Put tritely, it is a form of truth that allows Anderson’s characters to survive and persist in the “ modern world.” But as with any Andersonian form of “ truth,” it must necessarily be without definite shape, name or form. Thus to attempt to describe such a truth in any more specific or concrete terms than as a “ thing” would be, for Anderson’s narrator, to turn it into a “ falsehood.” For example, in the “ Book of the Grotesque” the old writer becomes “ filled with words” which puts him in danger of “ becoming a grotesque” (24). What ultimately saves him is “ the young thing inside him” (24). The old writer doesn’t allow himself to become

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filled with a definite “ truth,” a truth that would then, inevitably, become a falsehood. Ironically what allows him to survive, to find an Andersonian form of “ truth” can only be described as a “ thing.” We see again that to describe it otherwise would be to metaphorically “ kill” it, would make it into a concrete, describable, singular falsehood. But how can we assert confidently that Anderson’s use of the word “ thing” is meant to point to some form of “ truth”? The old writer in “ The Book of the Grotesque” has a dream where “ He imagined the young indescribable thing within himself was driving a long procession of figures before his eyes...They were all grotesques. All of the men and women the writer had ever known had become grotesques” (22). The old man understands people for what, he believes, they are: persons clinging to falsehoods, living their lives by a single, concrete, nameable (and hence essentially un-truthful) truth. Conversely, in “ Sophistication” the young writer, George Willard, “ Looks out upon the world, seeing, as though they marched in a procession before him, the countless figures of men who before his time have come out of nothingness into the world, lived their lives and again disappeared into nothingness” (235). Both writers have a vision of “ figures of men” who are living seemingly meaningless, pointless lives; they are people living falsehoods, people who come and go through “ nothingness.” There is therefore a direct correlation between George Willard’s use of the word “ nothingness” and the old writer’s use of the word “ grotesqueness” (i. e., the “ falseness” of men). “ Nothingness” is an interesting word choice given that the two words which compose it are “ no” and “ thing.” Remember, moreover, that that which sustains the old writer, that which allows George Willard and Helen to have a night of shared truth and understanding, and that which, in general, “ makes life possible in the <https://assignbuster.com/the-impotence-of-words-and-the-vagueness-of-truth-in-winesburg-ohio/>

modern world” is repeatedly described as that “ thing.” Therefore a “ no-thing” takes on a symbolic meaning here, representing the inherent falseness of men whom attempt to name and possess a single “ truth.” Sherwood Anderson, by understanding the inherent impotence in words in describing and capturing the very nature of truth and what it means to be human, has created a powerful and deeply moving novel. Although Anderson understands the impossibility of ever fully capturing “ truth” in words, I believe he comes closest when he writes, “ One shudders at the thought of the meaningless of life while at the same instant, and if the people of the town are his people, one loves life so intensely that tears come into his eyes” (241). To attempt to analyze this passage would only kill the inherent truth that its words express.