

Theme of Loneliness : A Study in Anderson's Major Writings

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Abstract. Sherwood Anderson is the precursor of new era in American fiction. He delves deep into the working of inner mind of his characters. He created with rare intensity and insight the obscure men and women living at small towns of America. His stories have poetic flow in expression. He explored life in America through the people he knew closely. The town though many, are its fictional names, is Clyde, Ohio. What gives abiding significance to Anderson's art is his ability to enter deep into the lives of the people. The topic under discussion highlights the victimising spirit of loneliness facing the characters of Anderson. They are not like the characters of Hemingway. Hemingway's characters are strong; they fight for better situation; they are strong and courageous; they don't get defeated; they prove invincible in their belief; they don't surrender even in the face of driest situation. But Anderson's characters surrender to the challenges. They don't have strength of will power to face life. They are caught in the castle of self-made psychological wall. They are the lone sufferers of their tragedies. The paper seeks to deal with the pain of loneliness suffered by the characters of Anderson in their unfulfilled existence. They have been cast in the mould of helpless creatures. Besides, these the paper earnestly shows that love is an antidote to loneliness and absence of love is one of its potent causes. The climate of Winesburg is hostile to love is often the yearning for love is frustrated or it is confused with crude sexuality.

Keywords : Grotesque; torpid habit and vapid norms; thwarted life; solitary; psychic; twisted apple; alination.

Sherwood Anderson was not the first writer to explore the related themes of loneliness born out of frustration and repression. Emerson was painfully conscious of man's solitariness. "How insular and pathetically solitary are all the people we know" (Anderson, 9).

Anderson is the first American writer to give poignant expression to the theme of loneliness or wasted life. His stories are about the psychic cost of denial and repression. The "Grotesques" of Anderson are psychologically deformed because they have been denied the opportunity to grow and blossom like normal human beings. It is a paradox that in our wastage and misery we recognise our kinship with others and lament our alienation from them, which makes it a poignant and universal theme in the world literature. Defeat and destruction are the global phenomena. Shakespeare in his tragedies and T.S.Eliot in his poetry have painted loneliness of wasted life. Life is like a twisted apple, says Anderson. In this way

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grotesqueness and loneliness are the dominant themes of modern American short stories. The experience of thwarted life finds expression in a bewildering variety of feelings and loneliness. Grotesqueness is the negation of life, it is a death in life. Anderson's vision of life has been distilled into his fiction. He paints a dim and monotonous world where pain doesn't acquire the dignity of tragedy and laughter is never purely comic. Like Twain, Anderson was painfully conscious in later years of the dark side of life in his hometown, and it is the dark side we see in his Major work, *Winesburg Ohio*. But where Twain saw the absurdities of an immature culture and could satirize it, Anderson saw the grotesqueness of a culture grown old and tired before it had a chance to grow up and saw absurd people but defeated. After the early years of youth, life in Anderson hometown, Clyde became less than idyllic, and he became increasingly aware of,

The old men ,young men already failure
embraced it (13).

In a life marked by dislocated ties, unappeased emotional hunger and inadequacy men and women suffer alone without even the consolation of hope. The emergence of Anderson as a writer coincided with the growth of the spirit of self-analysis in America. The emotional, cultural, and aesthetic desolation of his environment furnished Anderson with materials of his rebellion against the mechanisation of human beings in an industrial culture and against the flatness and repressive false respectability of American small town.

Loneliness is the keynote of *Winesburg Ohio*. Almost everyone of twenty one sketches is concerned in one way or another with human isolation, even called loneliness and the word 'lonely' occurs over and over again. Each character somehow is cut off from the world around him and is generally troubled by the fact. It seemed that there is a wall. *Winesburg* is a world of individuals who collide but don't meet. Loneliness is the mark of mankind there and each person must live his life alone within transparent walls that no one can enter. "The Book of the Grotesque," the opening tale of the book serves as a prelude - a grotesque is formed, Anderson tells us, when an individual seizes on some single truth and tries to live by that alone. A single truth, a single memory, a single obsession that distorts the self even as it compels it - these are the motivations of Sherwood Anderson's grotesque. But what it is probably a further consequences of these is perhaps more important than the grotesques themselves in their single pursuits, they isolate themselves from distortion into some recognition of truths we dare not face. The grotesque as a clown or scapegoat is both comic or elegiac, revolting and pathetic. He is a born outsider. The criticism is directed against torpid habits and vapid norms and not those who are victims of such habits and norms. Most of the tales convey the feeling of isolation, loneliness and the defeat through grotesque characters. Those grotesque who are the most sensitive and articulate find their desire and aspirations thwarted by a repressive conventionality that offers little

opportunity for fruitful human relationship. Included in this group are wing Biddlebaum (Hands) Elizabeth Willard (Mother's Death) Dr. Parcival, (The Philosopher) and Kate Swift (The Teacher). These are the socially defeated persons who have been beaten by the unresponsiveness and insensitivity of others. Along with Louis Bentley (surrender) and Alice Hindman (Adventure), they illustrate Dr Parcival's assertion that everyone in the world is Christ and they are all crucified. They identify themselves with Christ, the lonely, misunderstood and persecuted one. But they are without inner strength and conviction that gives dignity to the suffering. These people find their instinctive need for love, met by callousness and indifference, and they become outcasts in Winesburg.

Such is the story of Wing Biddlebaum (Hands) a man alienated from the town by misunderstanding. Wing Biddlebaum for ever frightened and beset by ghastly band of doubts, didn't think of himself in any way apart from the life of town where he had lived for twenty years. There is something peculiar about his hands, the finger move continuously and he can't control their movement. He is afraid of his hands because his alienation has been caused by those nervous little hands. The narrative opens with an objective, scenically rendered paragraph showing Biddlebaum's alienation from the town. It then moves in succeeding paragraphs to generalised expression of his more intimate acquaintance with George Willard and Willard's curiosity about the hands. Another short view scene reveals the connection between Biddlebaum's thwarted imaginative nature and his fear of his hands. Establishment of the Biddlebaum's fear shifts the narrative to a review of the events that caused him to flee from Pennsylvania to become a recluse in Winesburg. In that review we see that his hands were his means of expressing love and nature of his love was creative for it found its outlet communicating to school boys through his gentle caresses, his own tendency to dream. But caresses were interpreted as homosexuality by insensitive town's people. In Winesburg he was withdrawn from the lives of the others and unable to find creative outlet for his imaginative life, he has become a human fragment, a grotesque. "The Hands" changes from image to symbol as the narrative progresses and the themes of alienation, fear, love and shame become in turn associated with them. The symbol gathers its meanings, the narrative builds towards the final symbol. The epiphany occurs after Willard leaves, and the full ironic meaning of Biddlebaum's life is felt in the discrepancy between his religious postures, as he kneels, and the meaningless drumming of his fingers as they pluck to break crumbs from the floor. Biddlebaum is a kind of defeated, strangely prevented priest of love :

The nervous expressive finger, flashing in and out of the light might well have been mistaken for the fingers of the devotee going swiftly through decade and decade of his rosary. (The Hands, 17)

His defeat and perversion are the result of his extreme loneliness. The final scene is anti-climatic for nothing happens to the Biddlebaum. Nothing in his life can be climatic any more. His life is characterised by disillusionment, futility and defeat and both the anti-climatic structure and the muted tone of reminiscence support the vision of an inner life quietly but desperately submerged and of static imprisoned external life. All through he still hungered for the presence of the boy, who was the medium through which he expressed his love of man, the hunger became a part of his loneliness and waiting.

In the mind of these grotesque somewhere there is a knot that the understanding of others can unite a crease or fold that their love can smoothen. Since Winesburg can give these they sink deeper into loneliness. Usually they developed a deeper distrust of other and thus cut themselves off from the very source of love and understanding. Dr. Parcival suffers from persecution mania. He is a lone broader. Ideas don't cross his mind. He has planning to gather these in a book but the book never gets written. Dr. Parcival lives in a world of non-happening. He can't create, he can't communicate. His only hope is George Willard whom he exhorts to write a book on the theme of all his broodings the useless crucifixion of man. The fear of useless but inevitable crucifixion is so great in Dr. Parcival's mind that he has virtually withdrawn from the world of man. This fear has prevented natural human sympathies. Thus when a little girl was thrown from a buggy fatally injured, the crowd on the main street began to clamour for a doctor. All the physicians of the town rushed to the spots. But when someone from the crowd ran to Dr. Parcival he bluntly refused to come down. A normal human gesture on an occasion like that might have revived his contacts with people and saved him from loneliness. But by his refusal he compounded his fear and loneliness. The useless cruelty of his refusal had passed unnoticed but his fears became more tormenting. They will come here. We will quarrel and there will be talk of hanging. They will come again bearing a rope in their hand. Dr. Reefy has become fixed in posture of estrangement. Nothing can draw him out of himself out of his little room. His only human contact is with George Willard in whose mind he wants to plant some truths, some ideas wrung from his own bitter and eventless moments. Dr. Reefy shows progressive ineffectuality of human thought. He scribbles his thoughts on piece of paper, crumples them in small balls and pocket them. In course of time many such hand paper pellets are collected in his pocket. The paper pellets are thrown away and thus his ideas go waste. These are communicated to no one. Dr. Reefy's paralysis of will, his ineffectuality and symbolic retreat into himself comes to a sharp focus in these lines :

He smoked a cob pipe and after his wife's death sat all day in his empty office closed by a window that was covered with cobwebs. He never opened window. Once in a hot day in August we tried but he found it stuck fast and after that he forgot all about it. (Philosopher, 18)

Everything in this passage points to the central fact of Dr. Reefy's loneliness, of his virtual death in life, empty office, the closed window covered with cobwebs, and failure of his will and memory as shown by the window that he couldn't open and later on, forgot to open. In *Poor White* Anderson presents an allegory of American's transformation from a quiet agrarian country to an industrial one. But man's state has remained substantially unchanged. The small town or the big city, the dying agrarian civilization on the burgeoning industrial civilization are but prisons that the Americans try in vain to escape. In one case man has been deformed by isolation and is isolated due to his deformity; in the other rendered impotent by isolation and is isolated due to his impotence.

Poor White expresses man's loneliness in an industrial society. The novel is a powerful indictment of industrial civilization. Modern men and women who live in industrial cities are like mice that have come out of the fields to live in houses that don't belong to them. Man has become homeless. He is no longer rooted in nature, in a craft or vocation. He is merely a producer of commodities over which he has no control.

In fact, modern man has himself become a commodity or an object to be used by others. In *Poor White* the loss of self and the state of non relation is symbolised by Hugh's impotence. Thus the novel presents a study of man's decay and degradation. But offers little more than what has already been suggested in the *Winesburg's tales* by way of a solution. Hugh Mcvey, like the grotesque of *Winesburg* affirms man's need for man. Restoration of wholeness and happiness is possible through love communication and creativity. Elizabeth Willard, the mother of George Willard presents a more poignant and desperate picture of loneliness. Unlike Dr. Parcival and Dr. Reefy she is conscious of her alienation from everything that gives meaning, purpose and joy to a human being. In her courtship days, she had known many lovers but no love :

In all the babble of words that fell from the lips of
men with whom she adventured she was trying to
find what would be for her true word. (*Death Page*,
273-274)

Ours is a time of great unrest, stress and strain. Modern man is in acute suffering. He suffers from inner problems leading to isolation and meaninglessness of his life. Sherwood Anderson's work shows mute misery of the grotesque. Due to their constant encounter with some severe challenges, they have become used to pain. They react but fail in realising their purpose. They suffer without being noticed. They are behind self-made wall of emotional estrangement.

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