

## UNIT 7

**SHERWOOD ANDERSON (1876-1941)**

***THE UNTOLD LIE & I'M A FOOL***

### I. INTRODUCTION: BIOGRAPHICAL NOTES

Naïf + earnestness on craft of writing & catalyst in literary world of 1920s

*Winesburg, Ohio* = masterpiece of American prose fiction

Southern Ohio + 3rd of 7 children + family drifted north + father from harness-making to odd jobs & sign-painting

1894, Clyde memories of rural town ==> *Winesburg*

Mother's stamina + tenderness & father's wanderlust (storyteller)

Autobiography: *A Story-Teller's Story*, 1924; *Tar*, 1926 & *Memoirs*, 1942

Family's migration & jobs = irregular schooling + worked Chicago + Spanish-American War + Wittenberg Academy (editors, artists, advertising) 1904,

married 1st of 4 wives + moved to Ohio --> mail-order business & paint firms = successful businessman but fiction in secret

1912, disappeared several days (nervous collapse) --> Chicago "renaissance"

(Floyd Dell, Carl Sandburg & Theodore Dreiser) + reading Poe, Whitman,

Twain, British poets (Keats & Browning) & English novelists (Arnold Bennett & Thomas Hardy & George Borrow) --> Later readings: D.H. Lawrence,

Sigmund Freud, Turgenev & Gertrude Stein

*Windy McPherson's Son* (1916) + *Marching Men* (1917) + *Winesburg, Ohio*

(1916-1919) (<== Turgenev's *Sportsman's Sketches*, 1852 & Edgar Lee

Masters's *Spoon River Anthology*, 1915)

Character = "grotesque" (pathos of inhabitants' isolation & quest for fulfillment + young reporter/future writer, George Willard + ties)

Surrealistic or expressionistic --> narrative's simple but bold imagery & stylization of Anderson's prose --> species of elegiac poetry

Simple vernacular diction + declarative sentence structure + repetition of words/phrases + recurring restatements of ideals/feelings --> power of colloquial speech (<-- Twain & Gertrude Stein)

*The Triumph of the Egg*, 1921; *Horses and Men*, 1923; *Death in the Woods and Other Stories*, 1933 & *Poor White* (1920), *Many Marriages*, 1923 & *Beyond Desire*, 1932, *Kit Brandon*, 1936, *Mid-American Chants*, 1918, *A New Testament*, 1927, *Winesburg and Others*, 1937, *Perhaps Women*, 1931 & *Puzzled America*, 1935, *No Swank*, 1934 + autobiographical volumes

(=> Hemingway's "simplification" & Nathanael West's violence/grotesques)

1922-23/1924-25, Anderson had known William Faulkner in New Orleans

Search for roots --> 3rd wife to Virginia, 1927 + 2 local newspapers + leftist political activity, early 1930s + interest in public issues --> 1941, died

## II. FREUDIAN FEAR IN OLD AMERICA

Myth of Sherwood Anderson = repudiated money-making ethics --> writer (ironic reversal of Horatio Alger's myth; Anderson Manufacturing Co.)

Waning of pastoral life + shrinking significance of human being

"American Freudian" --> *A Story-Teller's Story*, 1924 (father + mother) Dream

= artist's birthright --> Floyd Dell & Chicago "Greenwich Village" Leader in

American fight against repression (frustration & sex expression) Forgotten

America (old slumbering village towns, religious stirrings, village workmen +

saloonkeepers + stablemen) ==> heroes rebel against material + unconscious of it + loneliness + lies for conventionality + twilight darkness

His only story = search for freedom out prison house of life

Chasm of fear in America (sex + telling the truth + making stories same as lives + restoring to books slackness & disturbed rhythms of life)

True history = history of moments ==> fiction broke with rules of structure

### III. LITERARY & STYLISTIC DEVELOPMENT

Philip Rahv's theory --> Anderson = Redskins with Paleface blood

Redskins = resonant/colorful words (+ interior reality & emotions, sentiments, subjective impressions -- material appear & sensory experience) Vocabulary = limited (flat/banal) --> familiar tone

Life absurd & love + poetic art (rhythm, assonance & musical repetition)

Stories in one go, never revising --> lack of polish in style

(= Transcendentalists & romantics) = "organic" form

Naturalism: character without orthodox moral yardstick + what orders our

Cosmos (man's place) + social attitudes (left-wing + critical)

2 main themes: discovery (recognition of Spirit) + inhibition (3 areas of cause & experience: growing up + frustration + social opportunity)

Union of surprise & insight + grotesque = mannerism/idea/interest

Failure of communication in *Winesburg* (standards & taboos)

Order = people thinking of several things at once + past/present experience (relevant) + emotions they cannot understand + absurd thoughts

Language: "literary" (educated) + biblical poetic (repetition, expanded, rounded cadences) + American colloquial (oral story-telling) + English & American informal (middle diction and syntax) --> basic stock

Extreme simplicity of syntax (SVOC) --> accumulation/juxtaposition ("ands")  
 ==> impression of story told by word of mouth, but not really familiar  
 (aversion to relative & personal pronouns --> repeat nouns)

No difference in tone between pure narration & dialogue or characters --> life = fruit of imagination ==> style that lacks style (no "perfect sentences")  
 = Whitman's "Song of Myself" + primitive idealism (= Rousseau) ==> innocence & purity versus machines --> idealized love & friendship

Lyric poet ==> not painting the outside but suggesting what is inside  
*hands* == communication (metaphors = personal language)

Women == holy power + earth-mothers, rarely individual living creatures  
 Perpetual adolescent in love with love + primitive emotions of childhood  
 Help to create image Americans have of themselves as Americans

#### **IV. THE UNTOLD LIE (1916-1919) (<-WINESBURG, OHIO)**

*Winesburg* stories = not merely oral stories written down --> narrator-bard = central to stories + wisdom + naïveté (wise old man + "entered into lives" + "young thing" = sleeping/waking --> vision of truth = grotesques)

Suggest more than say (<== confused characters & narrator + heart -- head)

*Winesburg* = nonrealistic (twilight/darkness) + not novelistic characters  
 (no depth/breath, complexity, ambiguity + no variations, no growing)

Fable of American estrangement + theme = loss of love + central action = effort of grotesques to establish intimate relations with George Willard

"The Untold Lie" --> not fit in pattern (distance middle-age/youth)

Simple & effective symbols --> stories related to book's larger meaning

Economy impossible to oral narration (varies beat of accents)

Unity of feeling + sureness of warmth + accept lost grotesques

Authorial self-effacement ("I'm a Fool" & "I Want to Know Why") =

uncharacteristic <==> narrator = wise epic poet ==> close relationship

teller/audience + authorial "wisdom" + apparent artlessness of episodic struc.

+ time back & forth + moving in/out of story narrator/commentator

"The Untold Lie" = blocks of background at beginning + apparent wandering

away from story + frequent authorial intrusions ("insights"/self-

dramatizations) + shifts in time + occasional stopping of story (-> "point")

Ray Pearson & Hal Winters (≠ Ned Winters' family)

Oral telling = mention of person results in digression: Windpeter's death -->

get back from digression --> teller to address his listeners

Page 4: tale begins + interruption + dramatically with only 2 interruptions Two

men tenderly meet --> sadness + beauty + risks of grown-up desire ==> own

decisions + live out chosen failures of ideal freedom

Only in *Winesburg* = some success of structure larger than single story Novel

superimposed upon tales at late date (not reworked)

George Willard = protagonist + secondary character + mentioned

Novel + book of stories in same volume ==> inconsistencies + unnecessary

endings + ambiguous/limited meanings --> Midwestern artist as young man

Structurally serious flaws = held together almost only by consistency of

author-narrator's attitude & theme toward subject & audience

## V. *I'M A FOOL* (1922) (<-- *HORSES AND MEN*)

Attic room, boarding house near Michigan Boulevard -> unhappy childhood

Mind of character receiving impressions (-- judging, classifying, speculating + catch experience as received) ==> not reasonable order

Beginning story at end & ending at middle => surprise & satisfaction

Incoherence --> disorder caused by emotion (discloses & cause of its telling)

Indignant narrator = mixed up about money, horses & girls + ignorant & disorganized ==> naïveté & confusion of values + absence of "manners" (no intimacy with girl) + universal in provincial story (men brag & ashamed)

Disorderly arrangement of details --> quite orderly at end

Anderson's impressionism = questions established social & moral orders ==> true reality = mystery + characters discover complex world (evil/good) Young boys growing up towards manhood = linking theme

Abandoned author-narrator role ==> objectivity of uneducated character

Race-track setting + sounds/smells of stables + closeness of horses/men = easy, intimate & idyllic relationship between human beings & natural world

Resistance to loss of boyhood innocence & reluctant initiation into manhood ==> emotional tone = boyish bewilderment + frustration + vulnerability

(inferiority social/sexual & guilt + confusion --> come to terms)

Unskilled speaker = unable to control responses + rambles & runs on + in & out of time + compulsive desire to make himself look cheap

Colloquial conversation to serve needs of modern fiction & drama

Dramatic monologue = artless rambling of boy-man artfully pushes action

Sold cheap to *Dial* --> editors: unfinished + vague + groping (= life) -->

Virginia Woolf = "shell-less" stories (vulnerable areas & secrets)

Crisis in own life = liberated man from business & art + liberated short story from previous dependence on slick plots & trick endings ==> Anderson = provincial in subject matter, but pioneer in narrative techniques  
 ==> Study people, don't try to think out plots

## VI. LAST CRITICAL REMARKS

Greatest influence in adolescence + quarrel with respectable society  
 Lacked mind, energy & spiritedness (walking out not only celebrated but must be developed ==> act of will --> act of intelligence)  
 Love and passion = means of attack upon order of respectable world ==> world without love & passion & not worth being "free" in  
 No sensory experience in Anderson's writing + no real social experience  
 Passion without body + sexuality without joy + no wit/idiom => not there ->  
 Anderson's intention => Crude mysticism <--> philosophical/moral materialism  
 Speaks in visions & mysteries ==> salvation of small legitimate existence (not being deprived of one's due share of affection) ==> truth (impossible?)  
 Exactitude of purity or purity of exactitude (sentimentalist often incorrect)  
 Writing with humility & almost religious, abject faith & patience (Faulkner)  
 "To be a writer, one has first got to be what he is... America aint plastered yet... ignorant unschooled fellows like you and me must write... the important thing is to believe in it even if you dont understand it, and then try to tell it... there's always more ink and paper..." (With Faulkner, 1923)