“‘A SECRET SOMETHING THAT IS STRIVING TO GROW’”: SHERWOOD ANDERSON’S COLLAGE OF CHANGING AMERICAN FAMILIES IN WINESBURG, OHIO

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SHERWOOD ANDERSON’S COLLAGE OF CHANGING AMERICAN FAMILIES
IN WINESBURG, OHIO
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ABSTRACT

Sherwood Anderson’s Winesburg, Ohio has received its share of criticism and sometimes condemnation for its depiction of small town life in a fictional Ohio town. Although Anderson’s characterizations of gender and use of biblical allusions have already been widely examined, I build upon scholarship specifically in these areas to apply those findings to reading the work in the context of families. Anderson presents the extended, agrarian, and strongly patriarchal Bentley family as an illogical family structure for the increasingly industrialized nation. Similarly, the many one parent families in the town are also often inadequate for the characters, with boys lacking father figures and girls lacking mother figures. George Willard and Helen White stand out as exceptions to these family structures, since both characters have a small nuclear family with both parents present. Although Anderson by no means upholds this as a perfect situation, it appears as comparatively the most reasonable choice for the modern world. Anderson also provides the possibility for going in new directions altogether by the inclusion of George and Helen’s “sophisticated” but still malleable relationship.
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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Sherwood Anderson’s *Winesburg, Ohio* generally stands as Anderson’s lasting claim to fame since many laypeople would still recognize this work even if they are not aware of any of the author’s other works. A collection of stories set in a small *fin de siècle* Ohio town loosely strung together with George Willard as a recurring conduit for the resident’s stories, the lasting appeal of these “grotesques” might best be expressed by Walter B. Rideout, who claims that the work employs “simplicity…of a complicated kind” (169). Anderson’s note on the coming stories, “The Book of the Grotesque,” explains his desired effect in depicting so many warped and odd characters as revealing the difference between truths, which exist as “beautiful” on their own, and describes a time whenever “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” (9). This perceived split between ideal expectations and more realistic depictions of human flaws sets up an important dichotomy in the book, with which Anderson’s characters continually struggle, upholding and simultaneously questioning it.

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1 All quotes from this work come from the Oxford World’s Classics Edition, edited by Glen A. Love.
2 The sublime effect of Anderson’s work was not appreciated by everyone, since Clyde, Ohio natives are sometimes loathe to claim Anderson as one of their own (Pomorski, “On the Map: Sherwood Anderson; Clyde, Ohio; and the Mythologies of Small Towns”)
Given the time of the work’s genesis, it builds upon nineteenth century aspects, like the inclusion of small town and rural life, but also boldly steps into twentieth century Modernism by “concentrat[ing]…the threatening sense of loss in much of modern life, the sickness of machine civilization, the difficulty of human communication, the alienation of men from women and of both from the earth” (Love x-xi). The attempted interactions, or lack thereof, between men and women in the work surface as major indicators of Anderson’s work, since through examining both the male and female frustrations with experiences of communicating, one finds a multifaceted examination, not only of literature and art, but of an emerging Midwestern American identity that both clings to and struggles with old notions of masculinity and femininity and the Judeo-Christian symbolism pervasive in the biblical parallels.

It is worth noting that in the distribution of the stories in the work, men serve as the main focus of sixteen of the stories and women as nine (counting the four parts of “Godliness” individually). Although the stories more often feature men, the women still serve as an integral, if often overlooked, part. In a similar fashion to biblical stories, many women do not even receive names, but still have an important function in a story, such as the “tall dark girl” in “Paper Pills” (Anderson 19). In the case of this story, abortion, a still hotly debated “women’s issue,” receives some exposure, albeit through the male doctor’s story. These short character sketches build to combine and construct strong and multifaceted characterizations which in turn offer Anderson’s reporter-like commentary on American life as framed in a fictional town. These stories are all defined by the treatment which Anderson places on each with the suggestion that each one “concerns” a different man or woman, automatically bringing up a gendered overtone to
each story. This pattern can sometimes yield misleading results, as in the story “An Awakening,” which supposedly relates to Belle Carpenter, but actually focuses more on George Willard’s own intellectual and sexual awakenings.

The suggestion that some of the stories in the collection might offer some insight on one sex’s experience through another’s lens, or that the stories can examine both male and female characters without exclusion mirrors Anderson’s own experiences with gender. It is commonly known that the book is dedicated to his own mother, a woman with “stoic endurance” (Rigsbee 187). The dedication itself parallels the nature of the book, by mentioning “keen observations on life” and “the hunger to see beneath the surface of lives” (*Winesburg, Ohio* dedication). The importance of this language is that, instead of being a sentimental devotion to one’s mother, Anderson credits his mother with imparting the art of using insights to provide clarity beyond appearances. This sort of link between mother and son translates to the relationship between Elizabeth and George Willard, since it seems that, besides wanting camaraderie with her son, she wants to see him succeed and not be afraid and cornered in life as she was (Coates 138-9). By acknowledging and celebrating his mother’s philosophical bent, Anderson allows his mother’s wisdom to carry through in the dedication and serve as a guiding factor throughout a book that often presents sketches of women along with the sometimes more obvious stories of men.

Anderson’s own memoirs also provide some more day to day information about his mother. His reaction to her pregnancies, he explains, mirrors “the same resentment…in all children born into large families among the poor” (Anderson qtd in White 39). This attitude directly correlates with Ray Pearson’s frustration over his
children as “‘the accidents of life,’” when in fact, Anderson’s younger brother Earl appeared to be unwanted himself (Anderson 170, Anderson qtd in White 39).

Anderson’s childhood distress and jealousy at the growing number of siblings in his life also seems to provide a clue as to why he says “[m]other was never one for explanations. She was always too busy. There were too many children to ask questions” (Anderson qtd in White 40, 34). Anderson’s early memories exhibit a feeling of powerlessness at observing his mother’s situation in life and the portrayal of a harried mother tiring of children’s questions seems to counteract Anderson’s dedication portrayal of his mother as a more thoughtful and curious person. Anderson’s conflicting portrayals suggest both the recognition of the hardships and economic circumstances of everyday life, which many of his characters struggle with in Winesburg, and the desire to move beyond such practical concerns to seek for a more transcendent meaning to life. In fact, the fictional mother, Elizabeth, in his story of the same name for *Winesburg, Ohio*, Anderson describes as “a woman who seem[s] to me a rather fine mother” and just happens to have some sexual experience outside of marriage, a realization that Anderson decides does not always have to shame a woman (Anderson qtd in White 409).

Although Anderson’s recollections do present some helpful insights, it is also helpful to examine another source in order to avoid too much of Anderson’s own bias. According to Walter B. Rideout, in his biography of Anderson, Anderson’s good relationship with his mother actually produced “writ[ing] more accurately than of his father” (13). Rideout does reveal one instance where Anderson appears to have taken dramatic license, though. Anderson’s description of his mother as a “‘bound girl’”
apparently sounds more dramatic than the reality of the situation, since his mother “seems to have been treated very much as one of the family [by her employer]” (Rideout 15).

Rideout also attempts to provide more insight on Anderson’s mother, but cautions that “[n]o one now knows for sure how Emma Anderson really felt about her husband…[since] [s]he was not one to complain to the neighbors” (28). He also notes that Anderson and at least one of his siblings harbored some resentment toward their father for exposing their mother to “the deprivations, anxieties, and humiliations of poverty…[and] turning their mother, who could not get rid of [her troubles], into a drudge” (Rideout 29). This recalls Anderson’s description of his mother’s short answers to endless children’s questions in his memoirs and offers that Anderson expressed some concern at his mother’s situation in life, which might translate to the descriptions of some female characters in Winesburg, Ohio.

Rideout also adds another dimension to Emma Anderson’s personality by noting that she appeared to place a high value on Christianity, because “[r]eligion very probably helped to console her for a life that, whatever her husband’s personal charm, contained all too much economic privation, hard work, and family cares” (41). This also explains some of Anderson’s familiarity with biblical stories, since “[u]nder the firm pressure of his mother  [Anderson] probably attended church and Sunday school at least in his boyhood…[and] often read in the King James Version for its tales and prose rhythms” (Rideout 41). Growing up with a religious mother also probably allowed Anderson a firsthand look at the complex role that gender and spirituality could play in a person’s life; combined with the literary lessons he learned from the Bible, this part of Anderson’s youth appears to hold strong connections with the text.
The dichotomy set up in “The Book of the Grotesque” describes the grotesque figures that flawed humans become when shaping ideal truths for their own use, and the book continues on this theme through an exploration and questioning of gender roles and even reworking the time honored tradition of biblical allusions. Anderson’s questioning of gender roles and biblical motifs suggests an awareness of the changes facing turn of the century American families, expressed through the lens of George Willard’s coming of age story set against the tensions of his own family background. Anderson’s exploration of truth and obsession in both religious and secularized arenas also reveals in a sense that the more things change, due to industrialization and modernization, the more they stay the same. People will always seek meaning and eventually twist it to their own purposes, and the definition of family must also retain old characteristics and adapt to newer ones in order to survive the changing times.
CHAPTER II
GENDER AND GENDER ROLES

Anderson’s characterization of townspeople in *Winesburg, Ohio* often draws attention to the constraints placed by gender roles that are too rigid, both for men and women. Mark Whalan suggests that the work reveals “Anderson’s often-overlooked sense of unease about the effect of the First World War on white American masculinity” (229). This observation suggests that, even if specific mentions of World War One are not obvious in the text, the work complements the historical context in which it was written and expresses a feeling of uncertainty toward male identities at the time.

Belinda Bruner also draws parallels with Whalan’s article between primarily male frustrations. Acknowledging that much of previous scholarship focuses heavily on hands, which usually do not achieve meaningful connection, Bruner suggests that the “masturbation motif, [which] whether intentional or unconscious, serves to emphasize the isolation of the grotesques as well as their status as immature thinkers and failed artists” (62). Bruner is not the first to explore the obvious Freudian implications of the text; Yerkes outlines many interesting theories in his article “‘Strange Fevers Burning Within’: The Neurology of *Winesburg, Ohio.*” While carefully explaining that “it would be a mistake to describe Anderson as a Freudian writer,” Yerkes admits that “[r]ather than
condemning the work for its psychoanalytic aspects, we should admire it, as those aspects seem to reveal some deep truths about the way the mind works” (199, 206). This insight by Yerkes suggests that, even if Freudian analysis of literature can go in and out of vogue, some texts can still benefit from looking at the motivations the author gives to the characters to reveal something more about how people’s motivations work in general.

Bruner admits in her fifth footnote that the scope of this article purposely only focuses on male masturbation images, but also notes other critics which investigate the female characters more in depth, and offers that “[w]omen in Winesburg tend to reach out to others or fight men off with their fists as Kate Swift fights George, who misunderstands her and her urges” (65). This suggests that the female characters internalize to some degree the patriarchal expectations of their society and define themselves by their attempts to interact or ward off unwelcome attention as regards men. This internalization can often significantly affect the family dynamic, as suggested by the actions of Louise Bentley. She exhibits a constant effort to thwart male control, to the detriment of her son David who “‘will get what [he] wants anyway’” simply because he is a “man child;” she bitterly hints at a network of support between men through which she, as a woman, cannot successfully find support or fulfillment (Anderson 70).

As Louise Bentley represents frustration at the patriarchy to the extent that she often ignores her son, Elizabeth Willard’s anger at her husband allows her to put her hope in her son, the writer. More points about family structure, including that of the similarities and differences between the Bentley’s and the Willard’s, will be discussed later, especially in regards to Jesse and George representing alternate viewpoints. The important aspect to note with the female characters is that Louise, coming from an
extremely patriarchal background, rejects this and believes that her own role in raising her child is only secondary to the men’s influence.

Though Elizabeth also suffers in an unfulfilling marriage, she has the advantage of her father eventually realizing his parental failings and attempting to afford her some economic independence through offering her a sum of money; later she also gains the sympathetic ear of Dr. Reefy. These slight advantages allow Elizabeth to still retain some greater concern and empathy for her son, since she sees in him “‘a secret something striving to grow…the thing [she] let be killed in [her]self’” (Anderson 26). This seems especially significant, since George, unlike David, has the talent of writing, which includes the potential to tell the stories of people’s lives through the Winesburg newspaper, *The Eagle*. This also suggests a link to Sherwood Anderson’s sharing of stories, including women’s, though fictional means. Perhaps creativity itself, or the courage to reimagine the world around oneself, is what the “secret something” could be that Elizabeth tragically lost (Anderson 26). While Louise Bentley’s general disregard for her son is still potentially harmful, the benefits for Elizabeth encouraging George, no matter how awkwardly, are even more beneficial since he has the creative potential to change the perceptions of the people who read his writings.

Given these observations, it becomes helpful to revisit Anderson’s attitudes towards women again; not toward his mother, but in regard to his own marriages. Though George Willard’s creative potential in the work stands as a positive factor, Anderson details the often trying realities of being married to a writer. He suggests that when a writer becomes involved in his craft, the wife might as well be “married to one of the dummies in a store window” (Anderson qtd in White 8). He then goes a step further
and says that, although creative men can be hard to live with, when a creative man
“makes a failure of a marriage it is, almost inevitably, his own fault. He is what he is.
He should not blame the woman” (Anderson qtd. In White 9). This offers more evidence
of Anderson’s penchant for allowing women a certain measure of reverence while also
suggesting that, when men are at fault for something, they should take responsibility
instead of evading it, as so many of the characters in *Winesburg, Ohio* tend to do.

The dedication to Anderson’s memoirs, in which he states these observations and
reveals that he dedicates his memoirs to his wife at the time, also offers an interesting
perspective on the act of writing itself (Anderson qtd in White 9). Anderson directly
equates the act of writing with the commonly used metaphor of giving birth, describing
his characters like his children and suggests that “[i]t is a changing shifting world, this
world of imagination in which we who work in any of the arts must live so much of our
lives” (Anderson qtd in White 9). This description of creativity is significant because it
suggests that Anderson approached writing from a viewpoint that could be compatible or
sympathetic with femininity, since he identifies writing as a sort of intellectual birthing
process, allowing himself some similar experience to one that many women are uniquely
capable of biologically. His additional admission that the imagination is fluid also
mirrors the presentation of gender roles in the book, that they must ideally reach a more
flexible definition to benefit not only the individual, but the family, as in the case of
Louise Bentley’s frustration in her marriage and family life.

For a fuller discussion of female characters and femininity in *Winesburg, Ohio*,
Sally Adair Rigsbee suggests that “[t]he women are ‘invisible’ because their real
identities are eclipsed by their social roles” (178). Rigsbee’s argument continues in this
vein, explaining that “[t]he deep, intimate communion which the women of Winesburg are seeking can occur only when traditional role expectations and conventional morality are transcended” (181). Although women might serve as the main focus of fewer stories, their stories serve an important purpose in hinting at a political direction toward women’s rights in the future as demonstrated by the frustrations and failures of women like Louise Bentley and Alice Hindman (Rigsbee 179-180).

Rigsbee explains that Anderson stands out among male authors of the time period for pushing so much for equality between the sexes (188). Kim Townsend cautions that “Anderson never wholly freed himself from the idea that women possessed power over life and death, that they were mysterious, natural forces to be subdued” (209). This suggests that even if Anderson possessed some more progressive ideas about women, he also built upon ancient archetypal notions of women as witches and/or goddesses on a separate and dangerous plane, providing a tense but somewhat flexible attitude toward women by recognizing that there was something significant about women as well as men.

Some critics argue that Anderson’s handling of gender does not represent women in a sensitive and complex manner, but instead relies solely on the old stereotypes and assumptions that Townsend identifies. Herbert Gold goes so far as to say that, for the most part, “women are not women in Anderson’s stories...For Anderson women have a strange holy power; they are earth mothers, ectoplasmic spirits, sometimes succubi, rarely individual living creatures” (143). Though Anderson’s representations of women can border on repetitive, especially in their physical descriptions, each one has a distinct story through which, like many of the male characters, some desire remains unexpressed, whether sexual, artistic, or something else. Anderson’s similar physical descriptions of
the women draw attention to the growing sense of anonymity present in an increasingly modernized world, which expects women to conform to the same moral standard and protect the domestic sphere, rather than making them appear simply as multiple manifestations of the same goddess or monster.

For additional explanation as to Anderson’s magnanimous attitude toward women, Rigsbee suggests that “Anderson reveals the needs of men and women in a society where the feminine is devalued, and he presents a vision of the feminine as a source of creative inspiration” (187). This more explicitly links the importance of the female characters’ stories in the work, since they, as feminine, inspire some other characters, like George Willard and Enoch Robinson. More than just that, though, Rigsbee’s observation reveals a true step in an ideal feminist direction, in which society benefits both sexes instead of marginalizing one.

Whether critics agree or disagree with Anderson’s often sympathetic portrayals of women specifically, other critics go beyond gender to examine suggestions of androgyny in the text. Martin Bidney’s article “Anderson and the Androgyne: ‘Something More Than Man or Woman,’” acknowledges and builds upon Rigsbee’s work by considering androgynous aspects of the work instead of specifically feminine or, as in Whalan’s case, specifically masculine. Bidney suggests that androgyny serves as “the unifying vision tying together the remarkably varied stories” (Bidney 447). In fact, the inclusion of a humble carpenter in “The Book of the Grotesque” who “approaches a male-female synthesis” in an androgynous fashion could serve as an elusive Christ figure in the book, who appears outside of Winesburg (Bidney 448-9). The name of Belle Carpenter also
may allude to the figure of Christ as carpenter, providing a male example and a female example.

Bidney briefly summarizes some previous scholarship on the work in terms of androgyny, and, as Bruner mentioned Freud, Bidney mentions Jung’s ideas of the anima and animus (449). This seems to follow since in a story midway through the book, “Tandy,” Tandy Hard is assigned a mission by a passing drunk. His suggestion to the girl is to “[b]e brave enough to dare to be loved. [b]e something more than man or woman” (Anderson 115). One must read between the lines in order to find out how exactly to do so, since the majority of actions and failed communications in the book fall short of this; “[f]emaleness becomes twisted or suppressed into mere passivity, and maleness becomes brutally simplified into mere egotistic assertiveness or gestures of pointless aggression” (Bidney 451). Anderson’s work does not serve as a self-help manual, but merely points in a more open-minded direction while operating within a stifling setting in order to reveal the flaws traditional thinking about sexuality and gender that affect both men and women, especially the characters Reverend Hartman and Kate Swift in the next few stories.

One important note Bidney makes is that “[m]aleness is as hopelessly oversimplified and misunderstood as femaleness in Winesburg” (456). Several instances of similarity between the futilities of action between both sexes draw attention to the shared plight in Winesburg. Through attempting to follow traditional, constrictive gender roles, the people of Winesburg suffer the limits of doing so and often miss the benefits of approaching gender and sexuality with a more open-minded and egalitarian approach. This underlines the importance of realizing the potential for the next generation, as
suggested by the inclusion of Tandy Hard and even George Willard and Helen White, who each eventually mature with mutual understanding for each other, transcending mere physical attraction.

Like Rigsbee, Bidney also suggests that Anderson’s observations on women did not stop at mere idealization, but extended to give them some measure of equality and mutual accountability on par with men, since “Anderson uses…pedestaled goddesses as ironic comments on the imprisoning idealizations practiced by imaginatively gifted but confused and inhibited people” (453). This reveals both the absurdity and harm of assuming a broad stereotype, even if it is a positive one, about a demographic. Bidney also draws a contrast between the more androgynous characters of Elizabeth and Kate against Alice Hindman and Belle Carpenter, who both appear to have internalized patriarchal ideas so much that “neither woman can imagine a valid androgynous synthesis” (453-4). Elizabeth herself allows for a more blatant exploration of an androgynous identity than the overwhelmed little girl Tandy, since Elizabeth actually once “startled the town by putting on men’s clothes and riding a bicycle down Main Street” (Anderson 28). This suggests that although the story of Tandy might seem like the most obvious example of androgyny in the book, examples like Elizabeth Willard can offer more to this aspect when examining to the end of revealing something more about gender and family structure. Otherwise, the heavy analysis of a child can seem unnecessarily overwrought.

In many cases, rigid gender privileges and expectations complement Judeo-Christian beliefs in a patriarchal society. The agnostic viewpoint in Winesburg also falls short since Tom Hard misses something that could lead to a more egalitarian culture. This
suggests once again that Anderson does not provide easy solutions, but at least identifies the extremes of one side or another in religion and/or spirituality and gender roles which potentially limit individual members of society. The structure of the town, and by extension, the changing structure of the family unit, offers opportunities for balance in matters of gender dynamics and matters of spirituality or secularism, but the families Anderson offers as examples suggest that people must adapt to the changing atmosphere to successfully find a workable identity while also learning from the limitations of those before them.
CHAPTER III

A TOWN OF GENDERED EXPECTATIONS

In creating the work Wineburg, Ohio, Anderson creates not only compelling characters, but also the fictional town of Winesburg in which the characters must play out their dysfunctions and missed opportunities. The structure of the fictional town parallels the equally incomplete family units that build the town. The map included in many editions of the book, created by the illustrator Harald Toksvig, only highlights a few locations and many more surface throughout a careful reading of the text. For example, Winesburg does have a town hall, but nowhere in the work does a mayor, governor, or other government official actually act as an authority figure; Glen A. Love describes “a pastoral world organic and yet impervious to time…Implicitly, there is the city, which stands on the horizon of Winesburg’s scenes and events” (Anderson 106, Love xiii). Although the theme of industrialization does loom as a threatening influence, the near lack of law enforcement or civil authority also leaves a curious void, like the continuous fragmented families with only one parent figure.

The constrictive job opportunities in Winesburg affect many characters, but especially women. While saving herself for the return of Ned Currie, Alice Hindman at first feels “glad to be employed because the daily round of toil in the store made the time
of waiting seem less long and uninteresting” (Anderson 87). This distraction does help Alice through, but still comes with hours of monotony and pangs of jealousy at the conveniences of the city, where “‘[t]here is so much going on that [city dwellers] do not have time to grow old’” (Anderson 89). A glaring double standard operates in this system, since Ned refuses Alice’s offer of helping him provide income while they remain unmarried, sets off for the city himself, and leaves her crippled in Winesburg and forgotten (Anderson 86-7).

The true tragedy of Alice Hindman’s story is that, as financially independent and industrious as she is, she buys into the ideal of marriage with Ned so much that she cannot make her own life for herself (Anderson 87). Thus Anderson moors her in Winesburg without much recourse. Ned Currie, who also works for the Winesburg Eagle, mirrors George Willard’s situation as a reporter who eventually leaves town for the city (Anderson 85). Although the reader does not discover what exactly befalls George in the city, Ned succumbs to debauchery and forgets about Alice. The difference is that even if George were to follow the same pattern, he makes no official marriage proposal to keep Helen White waiting and she has the wealth and mobility afforded by her father’s reputation to allow her to go to school in the city instead of waiting for years in Winesburg.

Elizabeth Willard’s situation appears similar to Alice’s, but Elizabeth takes solace in the hope that her son will have a better life than she. Elizabeth’s ambitions cannot reach fruition for her own purposes, so she becomes a martyr to her son’s wellbeing, praying that “[she] will take any blow that will befall if but this [her] boy be allowed to express something for [them] both”’ (Anderson 23). Elizabeth’s cruel irony is that her
work at the hotel allows her to see the people from the city that pass through, but never actually leave. Therefore, she must hope to live vicariously through her son’s success. The often generic interchangeability in the descriptions of the female characters suggests that, as women, almost all of them experience similar specific trials of being unable to leave the town and operate in danger of becoming a “drudge” due to economic circumstances, the very fear Anderson expressed for his own mother (Anderson 94-5, Anderson qtd in Rideout 29).

The anomalous figure of Helen White, who has access to certain social and financial privileges many of the other women lack, serves as an example of how a woman can successfully gain mobility outside of the town without marriage, but her privileges come directly from her father’s success at the bank. Belle Carpenter also is somewhat of an exception. Although she has a somewhat creatively stimulating job in the milliner’s shop, she also relies on her father’s clerk position at the bank for status. Elizabeth Willard also receives some financial support from her father when he gives her some money, but before she can leave town, she marries Tom Willard. Michelle Coates, in her short article on Elizabeth Willard, emphasizes the gift the Elizabeth wants desperately to impart to her son: “Elizabeth does not want her son to be beaten down in life as she has been” (138). Even if the interactions between the two of them seem awkward in the book, Elizabeth’s hopes for George seem to come true since he finally gets to leave town with a renewed purpose in his writing.

While Tom Willard appears to have ambition for his son, it is in a mercenary way that only focuses on material success, not on the unique qualities that Elizabeth more sensitively recognizes in George (Anderson 26). It is also interesting to note that after his
mother dies, the other woman named Elizabeth, Kate Swift’s Aunt Elizabeth, is present to comfort him, suggesting some vague extension of concern from the community, which seems somewhat surprising considering the rest of the book, where characters falter for connections and usually have to fend for themselves.

Anderson reveals limited job and economic choices in the town which stifle especially the female characters. Anderson’s notable lack of mentioning civil or social involvement also stands out. Tom Willard does mention his failed political ambitions as a member of the Democrat party, the minority in Winesburg (Anderson 22). Although Willard once hoped to run for governor, the name of the current governor at the time never surfaces; although Willard attends a “political conference,” the location of the conference never appears, making Tom Willard’s aspirations appear even more fantastical (Anderson 22-3).

The inclusion of Willard’s political aspirations also serves as a further example of frustration and failure and he shuts down any discussion or opposition by an angry outburst in a less than democratic spirit (Anderson 22-23). Political opportunities for women would have been ever more limited, making Tom Willard’s failings all the more telling, since he provides an example of a man experiencing frustration with political ambitions instead of gaining power and prominence through such avenues. Rather than seeing politically successful men as examples, the men in town must rely on the ebbing tides of capitalism and commerce to increase their wealth and, by extension, prominence. This is best represented by Helen White’s father’s unquestioned success as the owner of the bank.
While successful politically motivated men are scarce, the police also rarely make appearances, except to incarcerate Hal Winters after an altercation with his father (Anderson 166). Interestingly, Anderson allows the police to intercede in this relatively minor incident, but we do not see them bring justice to more centrally significant incidents in the book, as when Elmer Cowley assaults George Willard (Anderson 164). Even George’s shocked reaction, which we never hear more about, seems very surreal and dreamlike, almost raising the question of whether the experience happened at all, since it does not appear to have legal repercussions or significance to anyone other than Elmer Cowley.

The map of Winesburg seems more evocative of the spirit of the book and less factually based on the details, since numerous establishments beyond the few marked on the map surface throughout the book. The incompleteness of this map and the rustic quality of the drawing nods toward a simpler time when the land first started to be charted, or when Ohio was still considered the “Wild West.” The generic, stripped down quality of it also could suggest that it stands in for a general pattern for the universality of many small towns in America. This, by extension, would suggest that the lessons learned through the stories can carry over to many different circumstances and places, rather than only applying to one place and time.

Although a post office is mentioned in relation to the distribution of the newspaper, it is unclear if the post office actually is in Winesburg itself or if it is in a nearby town (Anderson 126) The only apparent alternative is to deal with the repulsive but talented Wash Williams, who also acts as a prime example of deeply ingrained misogyny that stands in the way of more nuanced understandings of gender (Anderson
This suggests the emphasis that so many of the town’s residents place on their communications with the more approachable everyman George Willard.

Anderson even reveals that the Winesburg newspaper’s “one policy” is to “mention by name in each issue, as many as possible of the inhabitants of the village” (Anderson 104). In an isolated place with slim possibility for outside communication, the newspaper is the next best thing, especially since one that publishes local news which could afford regular people their fifteen minutes of fame. The opportunity for having one’s voice and story heard operates as a very important theme throughout the stories in the work, especially as it relates to women’s stories being told alongside men’s, with an equal eye toward responsibility and accountability for their actions, instead of being subjugated as secondary material or left out completely.

Many citizens in the town also share some curious similarities in their home lives that influence their later experiences of life. Many of the young women of the town, including Louise Trunnion, Louise Bentley, the girl called Tandy, and Belle Carpenter do not have a mother figure present in their lives and live with their fathers or, in Louise Bentley’s case, her father’s friend John Hardy (Anderson 39, 62, 70, 113, 145). In fact, Anderson highlights the fact that Louise Bentley’s mother dies in childbirth (45). Belle Carpenter “[knows] the story of [her father’s] brutal treatment of her mother and [hates] him for it” (Anderson 146). Since we do not see Belle Carpenter’s mother at all, it is implied that Henry Carpenter either abused her so much that she left or, more likely, eventually killed her. As mentioned, Belle harbors resentment toward him for this and retaliates by ruining a pair of his pants (Anderson 146). Even the minor character Sarah King “a lean, sad-looking woman [lives] with her father and brother in a
house…opposite…the Winesburg Cemetery” (Anderson 81). Alice Hindman and Kate Swift are anomalies in that they do live with their mothers, but Alice also lives with her step-father as well and we do not get to see any meaningful interaction between Alice or Kate and their mothers (Anderson 85, 119). Both of these characters also represent “old maids” who apparently have no choice but to live with their mothers since they are not married.

While most of the female main characters lack a mother figure in their lives, many of the male characters also lack a father figure. Joe Welling, Seth Richmond, and Enoch Robinson all live with their mothers in Winesburg (Anderson 77, 99, 135). Other men in the town are not exclusively raised by their mothers, but are listed as a “son of” their father’s with a profession usually listed, echoing biblical terminology in the same way that Louise Trunnion lives in “her father’s house” (Anderson 39). These include Reverend Hartman, the “son of a wagon maker,” Art Wilson, the “son of the town butcher,” and Hal Winters, “son of Windpeter Winters,” whose father kills himself in a dramatic fashion (Anderson 119, 147, 165). Perhaps part of what makes Elmer Cowley feel out of place is that, although he lives with his father since his mother is dead, his father stands out as a blatant failure to him since he cannot hold his own among other merchants (Anderson 155-6). In an age where commercial success is increasingly valued, as suggested by the status given to Helen White’s father, Elmer Cowley’s father would definitely seem like a failure in a town like Winesburg. Another character who does not have a strong father figure, Tom Foster, lives with his grandmother, but this does not seem to affect him adversely since “[h]e [is] one to get along anywhere” (Anderson 172-3).
The most notable exceptions to this rule, of course, are George Willard and Helen White, who not only have both parents still alive (for most of the book) but also still together (Anderson 22, 105, 107). Even with both parents together, this does not necessarily guarantee a perfect life for the character in question, but this living situation sets them apart from the majority of characters in the book. Perhaps, although George and Helen’s respective parents do not always do the best job as spouses or parents, this suggests that George and Helen still stand the best chances at moving beyond Winesburg as more or less well-adjusted compared to other citizens. Anderson also differentiates George and Helen by giving them non-biblical names in contrast with the many other characters named biblically. Both names have Greek origins; “George” ironically means “farmer” and Helen means “torch,” implying connotations of light in accordance with her virginal portrayal.

The animosity between the Willards presents George with conflicting messages, especially in the episode in “Mother” when his father, while trying to encourage him to write, does not go about it in the most sensitive way possible, while Elizabeth, who is more sympathetic, also encourages him to “be out among the boys [since he is] too much indoors” which makes him “awkward and confused” (Anderson 24-5). Although Elizabeth has good intentions for her son, especially when compared to Louise Bentley’s bitter words regarding David, she and George find slightly more meaningful communication, though her plan to give him the eight hundred dollars meant for her fails (Anderson 70, 191). Tom Willard’s attitude toward his wife that makes her feel like the cat hunted by the baker in a “rehearsal of her own life, terrible in its vividness” proves detrimental to their relationship and to George, since Elizabeth is unable to stand up for
George during Tom’s tirade (Anderson 24, 26). This sense of powerlessness and the feeling of unmet expectations for married life contribute to Elizabeth’s plight. Part of what makes Elizabeth’s side of the story so compelling is her mistake in marrying Tom Willard when her father actually gave her the economic means to leave Winesburg, a rare opportunity for a woman of the time (Anderson 185). Because of her naiveté in thinking that marriage will solve everything, she stands as a very human character, complete with flaws, just like her son.

Helen’s family details do not surface until later in the work and we do not actually see her father much, although he gets mentioned often based on his position in the bank (Anderson 105). Although Helen White’s mother gets mentioned more often, she is only called Mrs. White and we do not learn her name. Anderson’s identification of her is telling, since he presents her solely by her status as a married woman and a carrier of her husband’s name; not so uncommon of the time but especially prominent in her case, since she is the banker’s wife and plays up that role.

Mrs. White does have the unique distinction of promoting the arts in Winesburg, since she “organize[s] a women’s club for the study of poetry” (Anderson 107). Despite this somewhat open-minded ambition, the scene with Helen seems more stifling than productive, since Mrs. White and Helen do not actually talk to each other and Mrs. White tries to be a matchmaker and decide what is best for Helen. Mrs. White claims that “‘[t]here is no one [in Winesburg] fit to associate with a girl of Helen’s breeding’” (Anderson 197). Mrs. White stands in for the societal expectations placed on Helen that, in spite of her opportunity to attend college, her ultimate goal is still to marry well according to her class despite whatever personal feelings she may have about the matter.
This does not match Helen’s feelings, since immediately afterwards she goes looking for George.
 Within the confines of Anderson’s strangely outlined town, the only real leadership and structure besides the engrained patriarchy comes from the churches. Although the Methodist church makes a brief appearance in Alice Hindman’s story, “The Strength of God” focuses on the all too human pastor of the Presbyterian Church, Curtis Hartman. Hartman confides in his parishioners that he himself is not sinless and still struggles with temptation for the greater good, so that they themselves will also be redeemed in the end (Anderson 120). Through examining this representative story in the collection, we realize the depth to which religious obsession can fester and the extent to which institutions can fail to meet their own standards in catering to the people’s needs. “The Strength of God” draws upon Anderson’s reworking of biblical themes and allusions, which, through exposing certain failings and hypocrisies, Anderson exhibits the dangers of obsessive fixation on one thing, echoing his assertion in the beginning of the collection that people can become grotesque by twisting things to their own purposes and distorting the truth.

When Hartman implies certain elements of his carnal obsession to George, he attempts to justify it by making the connection between Kate Swift and the design on the
window of Christ blessing a child (Anderson 124-5). Thomas Yingling, in his article “Winesburg, OH and the End of Collective Experience,” suggests the emptiness of the situation: “[w]anting, delving, body, soul, salvation, and sexuality are linked in this passage in a manner beyond the understanding of the one whose psyche links them” (105). Anderson’s character realizes that he lacks something, but fails to appropriately accommodate those feelings, leading to inflicting harm on himself.

The revelation that Hartman reaches contains meaning only to him. When he tries to explain to George Willard, his explanation “can never signify the psychological process that makes it meaningful…it will never be intelligible to others” (Yingling 105). Whether Hartman’s revelation is actually particularly truthful or not does not matter much, only that he believes it is true. This recalls the description of the grotesques in the beginning of the book, and the assertion that truths apparently corrupt people into grotesqueries (Anderson 9). Although this presents problems for many of the characters, the idea of a person in the authority of a church being so consumed by what might be a shaky truth presents a troubling trend, especially given his continued evasion of responsibility and attitude toward his wife.

The failings of Revered Hartman, according to John Updike, recall the struggles of Jesse Bentley as “Anderson writes about religious obsession with cold sympathy, as something that truly enters into lives and twists them” (192). He also links the searching tendencies of the less religious characters of Winesburg, asserting that in general “[t]he agonizing philosophical search is inherited from religion” (Updike 192). This allows for an equally pervasive critique of secular schools of thought, like the mindset of Tom Hard’s agnosticism.
Grotesques like Jesse Bentley offer extreme examples of what can happen to people if they invest too heavily into religion, Anderson also notes a certain “beautiful childlike innocence” that fades when one relies too heavily on the words of others in a world with more access to the written word (49). In fact, according to Rosemary Laughlin, the story “Godliness” often lacks much critical attention when, in fact, the story “is brilliantly in step with the other stories in the [work], and with a larger context outside as well” (97).

Laughlin also notes certain parallels with biblical stories, as when she compares Jesse to Abraham in his “desire to sire a new nation and a great race” (101). This mindset also reveals an aspect of patriarchal biblical values that could prove potentially harmful to women’s worth in the town; Jesse “values his wife in so far as she is able to bear him children, and when she dies in childbirth he is sorry only because she left him a daughter rather than a son” (Laughlin 101). This leads to Louise’s thwarted lifelong struggle for acceptance and understanding, which reflects upon Jesse’s actions (Laughlin 101). It is fitting that Jesse receives some of the responsibility for her troubles, since he operates as a cog in the society that discourages her from expressing her true self.

Jesse also fails to establish a meaningful relationship with his grandson David beyond expectations on a biblical scale, although he desires this relationship much more. Jesse’s plight in general actually circles back to Anderson’s commentary on industrialized vs simpler life. Laughlin explains “the tragedy is Jesse’s, but Jesse’s is symbolic of the nation’s, in the same way the story of The Great Gatsby is Gatsby’s” (102). As Laughlin notes the extension of Jesse to the nation at large of the time, she also foreshadows influences on later works in the American canon, notably William Faulkner.
(102). This highlights the already acknowledged importance of Anderson’s contributions to later authors and the development of many aspects in literature.

Joseph Dewey, in “No God in the Sky and No God in Myself: “Godliness” and Anderson’s Winesburg,” provides a thoughtful progression from the extreme Puritan work ethic of Jesse to a more artistic sensibility of George Willard (201). This observation also seems to create a “new covenant” for American writers and readers (Dewey 201). Building upon but ultimately going beyond the old way of thinking represented by a Puritanical character, one finds a solution by embracing the continued artistic work ethic of George Willard, similar to Modernists trying to create art out of the aftermath of World War One, although the war is not explicitly mentioned in the work.

The contrast that Dewey draws between the old-fashioned obsessive Jesse Bentley and the newer, more productive creative figure of George Willard suggests not only an individual shift in people of the time, but a shift in the family dynamic. The agrarian empire of biblical proportions that Jesse envisions for himself and his family was no longer a practical goal in the increasingly modernized society that Anderson observed. Similarly, the harmful implications of the inherent patriarchy in such a system manifest themselves in the book through Louise’s story, as discussed previously. Although George’s small nuclear family of himself and his parents does not necessarily provide all the answers, it does allow for a better chance at developing as a person without expectations as rigid as those of the Bentley household. The economics of the two families are also crucial. The large Bentley farm requires family members to generally stay and help with chores, but the Willard’s business with the hotel means that their status can only be improved by George getting prominent jobs on newspapers, which may
require him leaving town eventually, as both of his parents encourage him in different ways.

John O’Neil also advocates for further critical attention directed at “Godliness,” since he suggests that instead of acting as a disparate element in the work, it presents a microcosm of Winesburg because “characters in ‘Godliness’ focus and reinforce our overall impressions of Winesburg, for each is seen to be an amplified and dramatically simplified version of the essential types to which Anderson returns over and over again in Winesburg” (68). This offers a connection between the otherwise awkwardly placed four part story with the rest of the work. O’Neil also offers a similarity between David and George Willard, suggesting that Jesse attaches a special meaning to David, just like other people in the town rely on George as a mediator of their life stories (69). Taking the findings of these critics into consideration, one realizes more fully the importance of examining “Godliness” in conjunction with the rest of the work, as it raises many questions and observations about not only traditional religious beliefs, but their place in an increasingly modern and industrialized world, a theme that repeats in more secularized ways throughout the book.

Keeping this in mind, we also note even further parallels to biblical concepts in this particular story. For example, the instance of Enoch Bentley’s accidental injury of his father and his hiding until his father is better holds obvious connections to biblical “parricide averted” since “Anderson contrives diction and sentence structure to evoke spiritual accounts of restless, violent tribes” (O’Neil 71). While examining these similarities, O’Neil also places the work within the context of an earlier time and mentions the jarring effect of the Civil War on a Northern town; Jesse loses his brothers
and O’Neil contrasts Jesse by noting a particular quality in him that echoes many of the men post Civil War.

This quality that O’Neil describes as a “native ruthlessness and visionary exaltation” allows for Jesse to take control over his farm like a general would a regiment (73). The implication here is that Jesse might be making up for not going to war and reasserting himself as the head of his household. Like Laughlin, O’Neil makes the connection between Anderson’s telling of Jesse’s family’s story to the nation at large at the time. O’Neil also compares the story to our nation’s roots in Calvinism, and the idea that material wealth serves as a marker of “spiritual victory,” but that Anderson uniquely shows “the emotional dynamo behind the process” (73-4). This exhibits Anderson’s sensitivity to the complexity of experiencing religion and national change and attempting not to simplify things.

Certain biblical connections to some characters exist; although in “Terror,” part four of “Godliness,” Jesse seems like a Goliath figure to his grandson David, O’Neil ascribes Jesse as Saul and identifies Reverend Hartman as an adult King David (O’Neil 76). This rationalization of the characters seems confusing since Saul eventually converted, but there does not appear to be the desire for Jesse to change his ways, which ironically are already supposed to be Christian. After his grandson runs away, Jesse, instead of experiencing a revelation, “[is] not surprised by the boy’s disappearance” and instead of investigating what happened for his edification, he instead places the responsibility on an imaginary “messenger from God” and has “no more to say on the matter” (Anderson 75-6). This presents a confusing correlation when Jesse’s biblical
significance might more straightforwardly be attributed to the biblical Jesse, an early patriarch of David’s family.

O’Neil admits the possibility of other parallels to biblical instances and characters, though, when he lists the “Saul-David, the Jesse-David, and the David-Goliath [b]iblical parallels… [and] the denouement suggests Abraham’s willingness to sacrifice Isaac” (78). In the cases of the biblical Jesse and Abraham, Jesse still finds comparisons to famous biblical patriarchs, but O’Neil allows for a multiplicity of biblical identities on Jesse rather than just one direct correlation. The “Godliness” story also suggests a connection to Anderson’s main character George, since he notes that Jesse is devastated by the death of his mother since “only [Jesse’s] mother had understood him and she was now dead” (Anderson 45). This foreshadows Elizabeth’s death later in the story and also re-emphasizes the importance that Anderson places on mothers.

O’Neil explains that by re-emphasizing that “the characters of ‘Godliness’ have considerable interest for the reader as images of those feelings which most profoundly moved Anderson as a man and as a writer” (82). This observation suggests that this story, one of the ones most invested in religion in an otherwise modernized world, offers much toward understanding the rest of the work even if it sometimes seems out of place to some. It also avoids the trap of maudlin sentimentality for religion in an increasingly secular modern world by exhibiting the complex psychological experience of religion and the extreme embrace of it for some.

The very act of this, as E. San Juan, Jr. explains, ties back to the beginning of the work, when Anderson’s writer figure notes that “anyone who identifies himself absolutely with fixed schematic ways of doing, feeling, and thinking…will inevitably
distort the inner self and its potentialities” (487). The theme of truths, not only religious, continues throughout the work, but seems especially telling with Jesse’s story. Jesse’s story is not the only striking example of distress, since Dr. Parcival exhibits a more secular side to doubt and uncertainty.

Anderson is careful to note, though, that with Modernism comes a confusion of images and meanings, as even the Dr. Parcival, who should stand for science, mentions Christ and “by the force of his emotional convictions, this idea ceases to be a cold abstraction and becomes in him a living dynamic truth” (San Juan, Jr. 489-490). This reveals strange new realities, where a doctor can internalize ideas about Christian dogma as intense experiences and a pastor can lose self-control and become obsessed with spying on a woman with God as his flimsy excuse. The uncertainty present here also appears to suggest later uses of post-modernism as well, suggesting a mood of “bitter nihilism and despair” (San Juan, Jr. 492). This suggests that in addition to presenting religious and secular episodes, Anderson also strategically balances the idea of picaresque small town America with examining the more enigmatic and empty aspects of such an experience. Anderson’s presentation of the Bentley’s as an extended family in contrast to so many one-parent families also adds something to this technique, since both the extended family and the one-parent families have their flaws in the work.

Although the story “Godliness” boasts many obvious biblical connections, Anderson’s naming of some more central characters offers even more to examine. In Winesburg, the only Mary is one of the “evil stepsisters,” so to speak, of Louise Bentley (Bidney 454). This Mary, mean-spirited and selfish, serves as a perversion of the Madonna that one might not expect to see. This also suggests the theme of the grotesque
running throughout the book, as expressed in unexpected biblical inversions. Although a
correlation to Mary seems inverted, Elizabeth Willard might serve as a counterpart to the
biblical Elizabeth, the mother of John the Baptist, since George serves a somewhat
similar capacity as he carries messages via newspaper to the town residents, who are
supposed to all represent Christ in suffering, according the Dr. Parcival’s ideas (Anderson
37). This in itself both aligns with and contradicts the biblical counterpart, since John the
Baptist was not preaching to Christ or Christ figures, but alerting the people to prepare,
saying “‘I am the voice of the one crying out / in the wilderness, / Make straight the way
of / the Lord’” (John 1:23). George does not necessarily suggest a course of action in his
stories, but instead serves to spread the stories of the residents of Winesburg, therefore
indirectly spreading the multiple stories of Christ as they supposedly manifest
themselves in the tumult of a Modern world where divinity might appear in unlikely places.

The characters Seth Richmond and Enoch Robinson, who both share connections
with George through artistic sensibilities or attraction to Helen White, also draw their
names from the Bible. Seth recalls the son of Adam and Eve given in place of Abel after
Cain murders him (Genesis 4:25-6). Although Anderson does not mention siblings, when
Seth runs away, he goes with two friends (Anderson 101). Later, Seth appears as a
neutral observer in the midst of the still naïve George Willard and the brazen corrupting
influence of Art Wilson, which seems to reflect the well-meaning Abel and the evil Cain
(Anderson 147-8).

Enoch Robinson, who shares an appreciation for artistic creation that George
strives for, also has a biblical counterpart. Cain names a city after his son, named Enoch
(Genesis 4:17). This contracts with the characterization of Enoch as an unsuccessful and
somewhat reclusive city dweller. Enoch is also the name of one of Jesse’s relatives, who accidentally injured his father (Anderson 44). The incessant string of bad luck that both characters named Enoch struggle with, since “[n]othing ever turn[s] out for Enoch Robinson,” also recalls the curse of the biblical Enoch’s father, as Cain must be “a fugitive and wanderer on the earth” (Anderson 135, Genesis 4:15). Anderson’s choice in naming this character Enoch offers more nuance when reading Anderson’s work with attention to the many biblical references in the text, even with lesser known names and stories.

Anderson’s name choices for these two characters ties in with one of perhaps the most well-known families in the Bible. Rather than taking an obvious route and naming characters after Adam, Eve, Abel, or Cain, Anderson reveals an unexpected richness when exploring familial connections. As noted previously, Seth appears to be an only child, but twice appears with two male counterparts. Enoch differs from his biblical counterpart, the namesake of an entire city, by experiencing crippling isolation in a city. This exhibits the different ways in which Anderson shows his characters trying to make the best of a bad situation by creating, or failing to create, in Enoch’s case, new familial or communal units.
CHAPTER V

COMING OF AGE AND THE ECONOMICS OF ATTRACTION

Although Enoch Robinson experiences loneliness in New York, Seth Richmond’s story demonstrates that this feeling, of course, also abounds in Winesburg. An intelligent and perceptive boy, Seth feels “depressed by the thought that he [is] not part of the life in his own town, but the depression [does] not cut as deeply as he [does] not think of himself as at fault” (Anderson 106). This recalls Revered Hartman’s continued evasion of personal responsibility, but Seth’s also adds an element of competition, as he contrasts himself with George Willard, whom he sees as very involved in town life (Anderson 107). The boys also compete for the affection of Helen White, “the richest and most attractive girl in town” (Anderson 108). Despite impressing Helen with his plans of going to the city to find work, Seth’s conversation with her ends anti-climactically when she decides to leave and they “regret that some vague adventure that had been present in the spirit of the night would now never be realized” (Anderson 110-111). Enoch loses someone because he feared losing himself too much, but Seth loses someone due to an awkward miscommunication fueled by selfish competition with George.

Seth Richmond appears another time with George in “An Awakening.” Oddly enough, this story also involves George’s attraction to a girl whose father works at a
bank, but in this case it is not Helen White but Belle Carpenter, whose father is a “bookkeeper in the First National Bank of Winesburg” (Anderson 145). In this instance, George talks to Seth about women and places blame on them, saying “women should look out for themselves, that the fellow who went out with a girl was not responsible for what happened” (Anderson 147). This troubling attitude toward courtship serves as an example of a viewpoint which must change in order to accept a more open and empathetic version of gender, and must shift toward a responsibility for one’s own actions rather than a scapegoating onto the other party.

Although Seth does not contribute anything, George comes to the realization when leaving that order and organization are admirable goals to attain and this gives him confidence (Anderson 148-9). However, his encounter with Belle ends up less than successful and George predictably follows the pattern of blame that so many other men in the town employ and blames Belle Carpenter, thinking that “all his life he would continue to hate her” (Anderson 152-3). Although George does have some justification in this, since Belle does use him to make Ed Handby jealous, he does not actually seem to get upset for the right reasons. Instead of really being upset at being used, George is upset at Belle because of his own egotistical failings and humiliation at being pushed aside by Ed. When Ed does come to retrieve Belle, the language describing the scene recalls the passion of Christ with the three falls; “[t]hree times the young reporter [springs] at Ed Handby and each time the bartender, catching him by the shoulder, hurl[s] him back into the bushes” (Anderson 153). George’s trial only serves as a mockery, since his motives are purely self-interested and he ultimately leaves the hillside instead of sacrificing himself for others.
Belle herself has no dialogue in the story, and the reader gains only the bare minimum of information in learning her motives for going out with George. She attracts slightly different physical descriptions than other women in the town. Elizabeth and the woman who marries Dr. Reefy are both “tall, dark girl[s]” (Anderson 19, 28). Elizabeth also has a pale and sickly appearance with “long hands, white and bloodless” (Anderson 24). Since Elizabeth’s skin is white and pale, the descriptor of “dark” appears to either refer to hair color or perhaps symbolically a gloomy aspect in her character. Joe Welling’s mother, “a grey, silent woman with a peculiar ashy complexion” also appears to bear the physical characteristics that show the stresses of Winesburg life on some women in particular (Anderson 77).

But Belle Carpenter has “dark skin, grey eyes and thick lips” (Anderson 145). Although the words “dark” and “grey” describe many women in the town, the descriptor “dark” directly relates to Belle Carpenter’s skin and the description of “thick lips” sounds similar to traditionally stereotyped descriptions of African Americans, raising the question of her ethnicity in an otherwise very white Ohio town (Anderson 145).

Although the frequency of African American citizens in towns like Winesburg at the time might be rare, considering this possibility for Belle Carpenter does add the additional complicating factor of race relations to George’s encounter and attempted conquest of her and as a symbolic “dark” foil for the implications of Helen White’s innocence and purity, expressed most overtly in her name.

Belle Carpenter and Helen White both stand in as symbols of wealth and success, since they are both seemingly available daughters of bankers. However, the similarities stop there. Helen White’s name symbolizes purity and light and also recalls male
competition over Helen of Troy. She plays the diplomat when she politely talks with Seth about his plans for leaving and discreetly turns him down (Anderson 111). Belle Carpenter, whose name suggests beauty, does use George and tries to manipulate both him and Ed since she has doubts about Ed’s value as a life partner (Anderson 146). This might skirt around the stereotype of African Americans as conniving and scheming, suggesting a double danger to the men of Winesburg with a woman who also has these specific motives. Anderson is careful to note at the very least, though, that the motives involved in Belle Carpenter’s actions spring partly from making the best of her situation in life since she cannot have as much power as a man, like she wishes, and very likely some self-preservation as well since Ed’s past behavior sounds incredibly dangerous (Anderson 145-7).

In the dichotomy set up in “Surrender,” that of girls who are “‘nice’ or ‘not nice,’” Helen White stands as the “nice” girl and Belle Carpenter as “not nice,” which would also portray the stereotype of promiscuity (Anderson 66). This likely contributes to George’s fury and hatred at Belle, although she actually let him kiss her, compared even to an earlier affair he had with Louise Trunnion. In that case, Louise Trunnion represents a more working class ideal since she washes dishes when George comes over (Anderson 39). Her physical appearance is not as much as other women in the town, since besides being “not particularly comely,” she wears the mark of her working class status in “a black smudge on the side of her nose…[from] handling some of the kitchen pots” (Anderson 40). The implication in “Nobody Knows” is that George and Louise sleep together or at least have some sort of intimate encounter, but that, since she is no
one of real social or economic status in the community, George has no consequences, but also cannot successfully brag to anyone about the experience (Anderson 41).

With Belle Carpenter, George’s overconfidence allows him to think that he can make a more significant conquest, and that explains why he feels more upset about the interruption of the affair. By the time he and Helen White interact, he has matured enough to have a more meaningful relationship, even if that means sacrificing physical pleasure for a deeper understanding based on at least the suggestion of mental connection. Kim Townsend goes so far as to suggest that the true victory for George is that “by the end of the book, [he] ceases to think like a stereotypical male” (210). This provides a more positive direction for the book’s end as George leaves Winesburg and reaches a maturity and responsibility for his actions.

Walter B. Rideout, in his article “The Simplicity of Wineburg, Ohio,” also notes a strong correlation between George’s attitudes toward his relationships and his overall increasing maturity (175). The evening with Helen White has a successful outcome not only because of the maturity of the interaction, but the “insight that produces self-awareness, but not self-centeredness, that produces in short the mature, ‘sophisticated’ person” (Rideout 177). This also adds to George’s understanding of his mother’s death near the end of the book and reveals that the story does not have to end with a marriage in order to end on a hopeful note. As mentioned before, Alice Hindman and Ned Currie stand in as cautionary examples of what might have happened to George and Helen if they had also bought into the ideal of a marriage where the man is the sole provider.

George and Helen’s respective mobility in being able to leave Winesburg, and the often stifling expectations outlined therein, suggests that there may be other ways to live one’s
life rather than an unexamined acceptance of a traditional timeline, like getting married immediately after reaching adulthood without the chance to receive an education or explore a career.

It is also important to note that “the sadness of sophistication” comes directly from grappling with an understanding of death (Anderson 193). Although George’s realization of impending manhood comes on the heels of his mother’s death, Helen’s realization of womanhood also depends upon examining information around her. Her realization comes not from witnessing death, but from comparing her realities against the pompous “pedantic turn of mind” lampooned in the scholar who attempts to court her (Anderson 194).

Like George realizes the reality of life after a loved one’s death, Helen also realizes the reality of life compared to hollow “book learning” from the city that does not interest her, with good reason since the scholar’s motives actually also involve chasing her for her money and she only keeps him around because the interest of her former classmates comes as a perk (Anderson 194). Her maturity comes from eventually leaving the scholar, with all his status, to find George instead, who appears to stand for a better balance between art and practical real world experience. Helen also seems to be the only woman in town to have the mobility to go to the city for college and still return for things like the fair. As an unmarried wealthy daughter, though, Helen is in a unique position based on her class expectations that allow her a more extended experience in her youth, providing she remains chaste before a socially acceptable marriage based on class standing. Although George earlier was interested in her for money, his maturity at the end of the book allows them to have a mutually fulfilling moment and George leaves
before he can fall back into more superficial interests with her, like money and sex. George also appears to value his interactions with Helen more than the casual encounter with Louise Trunnion, who unsurprisingly never appears in the work again.

Clare Colquitt notes that Anderson’s placement of this story directly after Elizabeth’s death affects George’s attitude of the fair. Instead of purely carefree enjoyment, George also feels “increasing awareness of the burden she [leaves] him” (85). To this end, Colquitt even suggests that “[f]or Anderson, only the artist can impose order and meaning on an essentially meaningless world, one in which both God and mother have died” (86). This dramatic revelation echoes the conclusion offered by John Dewey of a progression from strict religious sensibilities into productive and valuable artistic contributions (Dewey 201).

Many critics do acknowledge the importance of Elizabeth Willard and Helen White, but a closer look reveals even more female characters that do not always receive much attention. Tom Foster’s grandmother, for example, presents a picture of a female character with inner strength despite hardships. For this character, the prospect of returning to Winesburg after a full and exciting, if hard, life in the city provides an exciting experience and makes her feel “as delighted as a girl” (Anderson 173). She also feels comfortable enough to smoke a pipe (Anderson 175). Tobacco use for women of the time in a small town seems taboo, since the Reverend Hartman expresses shock upon viewing Kate smoking until he realizes it is probably a worldly, city habit (Anderson 119). In this instance, it probably serves as a reminder of her life in the city, but also carries the connotation of a social activity, as she smokes with her grandson and shares
her day with him. It also implies that, due to her age, she is allowed to flout the conventions of the town, albeit in private.

While Tom’s oddly unnamed grandmother offers much to examine in comparison with the other women of the town, Tom Foster himself also draws a comparison to George Willard as do others like Elmer Cowley. Irving Howe purposely highlights the isolation that Tom Foster and Elmer Cowley, among others like Seth Richmond and Enoch Robinson, and implies that to these men George Willard “is a reporter-messenger, a small town Hermes, bringing news of a dispensation which will allow them to re-enter the world of men” (401). The similarities in the stories of these four men from the latter half of the work, seem too similar to ignore, and loneliness recurs as a common theme in criticism. Seth Richmond worries that people will “look at [him] in a funny way” based on their perceptions of his secret thoughts (Anderson 111), Enoch Robinson experiences loneliness in any location, especially after a woman’s leaving causes him to lose inspiration (Anderson 144). Additionally, Elmer Cowley’s paranoia of being “queer” and not fitting in and alternately wanting to, and Tom Foster, who “never assert[s] himself” and “always [has] the power to be a part of and yet distinctly apart from the life about him” also expresses similar terrors related to a desire to connect and still preserve a unique identity (Anderson 158, 175).

Although George seems to participate a little more fully in town life, he is not without his own quandaries and dilemmas, as Elmer Cowley seems to think (Anderson 158-9). In fact, George is more similar to Tom Foster at least, since Anderson’s language choices concerning Tom Foster’s fantasy about Helen White, that she is “a strong terrible wind, coming out of the darkness of a stormy sea and that he [is] a boat left on the shore
of the sea by a fisherman” recalls the words that George finds significant on his night with Belle Carpenter: “‘Death…night, the sea, fear, loveliness’” (Anderson 178, 150). These similarities suggest that both young men either share the same poetic vision or that the perception of love stands as one of the few equalizing factors in the town besides loneliness.

These experiences are also similar in that, despite their striking language, neither experience leads to an understanding with the woman in question. George’s revelations when he goes out with Belle Carpenter distract him from the danger coming from Ed, Belle’s admirer. In this way, his musings, for all their profundity to him, leave him as alone as Tom Foster as he dreams drunkenly about Helen White, yet another example of the lack of connection rampant in a town of confused and apprehensive characters.
CHAPTER VI

CONCLUSION

When considering family structures, it may be helpful to look historically at some social trends concerning family structure. Stephanie Coontz elucidates many problems with attempting to pinpoint a time when American families exhibited ideal qualities as portrayed in some television shows. Coontz reminds us that “[e]xtended families have never been the norm in America,” which reveals again what an anomaly Jesse Bentley’s family presents, though the families with many members would often help with farm work or other cottage industries (12).

Coontz also addresses the role of industrialization, a topic of interest for Anderson, by discussing the reality of many families of the time who sent their young children to work in factories, prompting activists to protest working conditions (13). Anderson’s silence on this issue is interesting, as many of his characters struggle with fragmented families, but the impact of industrialization for him depends more on an intellectual shift, the “old brutal ignorance that ha[s] in it also a kind of beautiful childlike innocence…gone forever” because of the influx of new media, rather than the often dangerous conditions for children in factories (Anderson 48-9). In fact, “[r]eformers advocated adoption of a ‘true American’ family – a restricted, exclusive nuclear unit in
which women and children were divorced from the world of work” (Coontz 13). This idealization of the family does not match the characters in Anderson’s work, which, as previously mentioned, contains many widowed parents, a vast patriarchal empire like the Bentley’s, or the rarity of the Willard and White households, the nuclear family which still has the potential to fail almost every member if executed too rigidly.

In addition to reformers calling for a more nuclear family structure, views of women also changed to reflect a more middle-class sensibility. Coontz explains that “[a]fter the Civil War… [v]irtue lost its earlier political meaning and became reduced to an assessment of whether a woman was likely to remain sexually chaste until marriage” (108). This concept Anderson also addresses with many of his characters and reveals the emotional toll that this pressure might cause, as with Louise Bentley’s settling for John Hardy in order to prevent a possible birth out of wedlock (Anderson 69-70). Although this concern historically surfaces and resurfaces in culture many times, Anderson’s acute attention to it in his time shows a perceptive insight into some of the factors possibly causing unhappiness.

The repeated biblical parallels and attentiveness to gender in Winesburg, Ohio draw attention to not only established literary devices and patterns, but also reveals a fictional town that nevertheless asks questions about the future of American families. Although Stephanie Coontz cautions against making generalizations about families of any time, the landscape Anderson presents, with its fragmented families, offers some commentary on one area of uncertainty at the time. For example, Coontz notes that in the twentieth century, women often were held to a higher moral standard, as when single mothers sought Mothers’ Pensions and had to prove that they did not use “liquor or
tobacco…, kept her house clean, and attended church” (136). As to the effect of things like women being held to a higher moral standard, Anderson’s work shows an exploration of this ideal and other aspects of Antebellum society in contrast with an opposing viewpoint which might put things into a more realistic perspective.

Anderson reveals through the characters in *Winesburg, Ohio* that men and women often share similar needs but only rarely have the chance to effectively communicate this to one another. He also includes female characters that do not necessarily uphold this standard, like Kate Swift and Tom Foster’s grandmother, who use tobacco (Anderson 119, 175). Even the discussion of premarital sex reveals not hedonism, but an attempt at connection, as in the case of Louise Bentley, whose story “is a story of misunderstanding,” but also representative of one of the “neurotic, one of the race of over-sensitive women that in later days industrialism was to bring in such great numbers into the world” (Anderson 62). This displays not only the struggles of women at the time, which mirror the struggles of men like Reverend Hartman, who “[does] not know what he want[s],” but also juxtaposes these age old questions against the changing societal landscape of industrialism (Anderson 121). Anderson also pre-empts the trend that Coontz describes, of an increased expectation of middle-class morality especially for women of the time, when he inserts a digression into “Godliness” about “[t]he beginning of the most materialistic age in the history of the world…when men would forget God and only pay attention to moral standards,” suggesting a hollowness and lack of deeper meaning in the Modern society of his time, a time and place concerned about morality merely for showing off one’s status rather than out of devotion to God or a higher purpose (Anderson 57).
This observation, set up in a binary between secularism and Christianity, might seem to suggest that the previous times, when religion was more central, were the good times, but Anderson’s complex portrayal of religious fanaticism in Jesse and Reverend Hartman evades easy answers as to whether an overly zealous return to religion is that best answer to Modern ennui. Through examining the family structures Anderson presents, even if they are not perfectly functional, a picture of America emerges that rails against the simplistic morality fixation of the time. Even if single parent households come off as broken and incomplete, neither does the extended empirical family or the small nuclear family come off in the best light, even if the small nuclear family offers the best opportunity in comparison to the other styles.

The stories in *Winesburg, Ohio* suggest uncertainty at the coming of industrialization, but make no pretensions toward idyllic small town life, attempting to balance the imperfections of incomplete and often dysfunctional families with realistically imagined characters, complete with flaws and doubts of their own. This balance in the book complements the ideal balance of genders and mutual respect that Anderson’s characters George and Helen reach in the story “Sophistication,” suggestive of the type of relationships that might prove beneficial to many people post-industrialism.
Works Cited


