IT IS A STORY: THE ROLE OF THE NARRATOR IN SHERWOOD ANDERSON’S
“DEATH IN THE WOODS”

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ABSTRACT

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Sherwood Anderson’s short story “Death in the Woods” was first published in 1933 and is considered by many critics to be one of his best works. My thesis examines the role that the narrator’s character plays in “Death in the Woods”. I argue that it is the empathic relationship that the narrator forms with Ma Grimes (a character in the text) is essential to a critical understanding of Anderson’s story. My thesis uses original research and interpretation of “Death in the Woods” along with the ideas of critics whose perspective on the work contributes to my argument. I also use a detailed analysis of an earlier version of “Death in the Woods” that appears as Chapter Twelve in Anderson’s Tar, A Midwest Childhood to point out how Anderson altered the story structure and content to better establish the narrator’s relationship to Ma Grimes. The critical and textual evidence I use to discuss the narrator’s role in “Death in the Woods” contributes to my assertion that the significance of this character’s relationship to Grimes is ultimately what drives the work and makes it a memorable literary text.
Dedicated to Dianne Skelly

who introduced me to this short story twenty years ago
I would like to express my gratitude to Dr. Katy Marre, my thesis advisor, whose help in crafting this thesis was constant and substantial. I have no doubt that her expert counsel about the content and rhetoric of this text have vastly improved my writing and improved my intellectual engagement with Anderson’s short story.

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INTRODUCTION

In “Death in the Woods,” a short story by Sherwood Anderson, the narrator reconstructs the story of Ma Grimes using repetition, manipulation of tone, and controlling the incremental reproduction of Ma Grimes’ history to show how he slowly came to relate to her struggle. The narrator uses these techniques to explain the complex relationship that he has with the story of this “old woman” (Anderson 1) and, in so doing, gives Ma Grimes’ tacit struggle a voice so that her life retains dignity. It is the intense effect that seeing Ma Grimes’ corpse in the snow had on the narrator as a boy that defines how he approaches her story; only that moment in the clearing when he sees her dead in the snow is the beginning of the narrator’s relationship with Ma Grimes’ life and begins the incremental process by which he reconstructs his memory of her. Ma Grimes’ death provides the ideal occasion for Anderson’s narrator to comment on the old woman’s role in the world of animal and human life and also allows the reader to see his (the narrator’s) empathy for Ma Grimes’s struggle and demise through his emotional reaction to seeing her corpse and reconstructing her story.

Even though Anderson’s narrator lends Ma Grimes a sense of worth by relating her story, it is his character (the narrator’s) that is the true protagonist of the story. Many critics who have engaged with this short story narrow their focus to how Grimes is represented
in the text. They choose to see the old woman as the most important aspect of the short story since the plot appears to revolve around her life and death. Such an approach would be valid if it did not ignore the relationship of the narrator to Ma Grimes’ story. He, not the old woman, is the character whose consciousness is reflected on the page; it is the narrator’s observations, memories, and emotions that cast Ma Grimes as a tragic figure and it is his reaction to her death that makes her story a work of art.

Ma Grimes is important to the narrator, but she is only a vehicle for him to discuss his ideas about life and its meaning. The narrator’s intense empathy for Ma Grimes is the reason that he recalls her story. This is important since Anderson’s narrator points out that, quite often, women such as Ma Grimes who live in small towns are infrequently “notice[d]” (4) by those who live near them; they are ignored, forgotten, and depart the world without being mourned. The narrator will not allow this to happen to Ma Grimes because he has been affected by her death. Since it is the narrator who is central to “Death in the Woods,” Anderson never allows Ma Grimes to speak for herself, forcing the narrator to be the interpreter of her thoughts and actions. Paul P. Somers supports this argument when he posits, “the narrator is a dramatic persona the revelation of whose character is vital to the story [emphasis mine]” (“Sherwood Anderson’s Mastery of Narrative Distance” 84).

Because the narrator is the focus of “Death in the Woods,” the story can be interpreted as a conversation between the narrator and his audience, and simultaneously as a conversation the narrator is having with himself. The first model implies that the story is being created in order to relate something to the reader. However, the second model, which is the focus of my argument, allows the reader to view the short story as an
intense meditation that is constructed in the consciousness of the narrator himself. As the
narrator reveals more and more about Grimes’ life, his bond with her struggle increases
and his distance from her life is reduced. Therefore, it is the effect that Grimes’ story has
on the narrator that is important in this short story and not the effect that her life has on
the reader that makes Anderson’s text a work of empathy and not a work of
objectification.
CHAPTER I

THE EVOLUTION OF GRIMES’ STORY

Sherwood Anderson saw himself as a storyteller, even titling his first autobiography *A Storyteller’s Story*. He was an author whose intense focus on his craft allowed him to expand his ability as an author to create effective narration. In “Death in the Woods,” Anderson demonstrates not only his skill as a teller of stories but also reveals the important role that memory plays in creating his narrative. To examine how Anderson’s narrator constructs his story, it is necessary to examine this short story from a number of perspectives: first, the way in which Ma Grimes’ story itself is related by the narrator, the uses of time and memory to construct the consciousness of the narrator, the purpose of using Ma Grimes as the central figure in the short story, and finally, how the storytelling is depicted through the narration.

For Sherwood Anderson, “Death in the Woods” was a story that held great importance. Biographical critics such as William V. Miller even go so far as to suggest that Anderson’s fascination with the character of Ma Grimes was, in fact, a reflection of the author’s own mother, with whom he often had a difficult relationship (“Psychological Stasis or Artistic Process: The Narrator Problem in Sherwood Anderson’s “Death in the Woods””). However, while this analysis supports the assertion that the empathy the narrator feels for the old woman is the impetus for his retelling the story of her life, it detracts from any close reading of the text that focuses on how the narrator himself is created for the reader. While there is only tendentious and circumstantial evidence to
promote the claim that Grimes is a stand-in for Anderson’s mother, the idea that the creation of the narrator’s character is what makes “Death in the Woods” such an artistic achievement is well supported by the evidence. There is no dispute among critics that Anderson recycled elements from his stories for use in his later works, and “Death in the Woods” is no exception. In fact, Jules Zanger claims that the author returned to the story of the old woman’s death no less than five times before he completed the final version that he eventually published in 1933. Zanger supports the idea that Anderson routinely reused plot elements from Grimes’ story in his article “Cold Pastoral: Sherwood Anderson’s “Death in the Woods”.” He posits that many parts of the 1933 text are directly related to other works that Anderson wrote even decades earlier. According to Zanger, the first sketch of the plot was a “fragment” (23) found on the back of a draft page of *Winesburg Ohio* in 1916 that mentions an old woman in a clearing and the dogs found in the final version of “Death in the Woods” (21).

The second version that Zanger discusses is an “unpublished story” (21) titled “Death in the Forest” which introduces Grimes’ character (in this case called “Ma Marvin” (22)) and the “first person” (23) perspective of the boy who sees her. At this stage, it appears that the ‘bound girl’ archetype has not yet been introduced to the plot and Grimes has not been presented as a feeder of men and animals. Zanger claims that the bound girl element was borrowed from Anderson’s “Father Abraham,” a story about Abraham Lincoln that involves a ruthless “German” farmer who abuses his female servant (22). Later, “Death in the Woods” was published in its first fully realized version as Chapter XII in *Tar, A Midwest Childhood.*
Chapter XII in *Tar...* however, does lack what is often considered the element of Anderson’s short story that makes it noteworthy, the first person perspective of the narrator as he constructs Ma Grimes’ life for the reader. In *Tar...*, the entire episode is presented from a third person perspective that creates a distance between the narrator and the events of the story. The use of third person narration is somewhat confusing because *Tar...* itself is often cited by critics as a fictionalized autobiography.¹ No critic has suggested why Anderson made such a sweeping alteration to this story whose plot remains almost unchanged from the *Tar...* version to the final 1933 text. The effect, however, of adding the first person perspective is apparent to readers and are closely drawn into the personal relationship the narrator has with Grimes’ story and they are shown the narrator’s own consciousness. Another important difference between the *Tar...* version and the 1933 publication is that the chapter in *Tar...* is one continuous text whereas the later version is divided into five discrete sections. After using this story in *Tar...*, Anderson finally published it in *The American Mercury* magazine. The final 1933 version of the text bears only superficial differences from the version in *American Mercury* publication of “Death in the Woods”.

By examining Zanger’s account of the early versions of “Death in the Woods” and looking at the *Tar...* and *American Mercury* variations with alterations that Anderson made to his story, it is clear that many of the elements that eventually coalesced into the 1933 short story came from a diverse group of sources that took many years to synthesize into a cohesive text. Zanger argues that “Death in the Woods” is an amalgam of at least five texts that Anderson assembled to create the definitive interpretation of Ma Grimes’ life. He also agrees with the idea that the first person narration of “Death in the Woods”
(1933) is the essential ingredient (23) that makes it such an emotionally effective piece of fiction.
“Death in the Woods” is a text that is completely dependent on the memory of its narrator because it is his knowledge of Ma Grimes that reveals her life and character to the reader. To this end, the narrator’s use of repeated words and phrases mimics human memory to demonstrate how the narrator constructs Grimes’ story and uses those same terms to support his argument that the old woman was, ultimately, a caretaker for animal and human lives. Turning once again to Zanger, the reader can see “Death in the Woods” as the narrative of processes whereby “…the narrator create[s] and construct[s]…the story of Mrs. Grimes before [the reader’s]…eyes, from fragments of his own experience” and what Zanger terms a “generic American typology” to which “the illusion of the progress of the creative act itself” (25) is added. These ideas from Zanger provide an interesting insight for readers of Anderson’s text: the reader himself watches the text being created as if the narrator were telling it in the present. Zanger points out two aspects of “Death in the Woods,” the mimesis of memory in the narrative structure, and the creation of the artistic “illusion”; these are aspects that must be dealt with individually to be fully understood.
Repetition of “Old Woman” and “Feed”

Even the most cursory reading of “Death in the Woods” will reveal that Anderson uses sparse, economic, and common language in his text. None of the words that he uses are above the normal vocabulary of the rural Ohioan that his stories most often depict and his sentences are, as Benjamin T. Spencer states, fairly straightforward and short—in a word, “organic” (“Sherwood Anderson: American Mythopoeist” 17). There are notable passages of poetic prose in “Death in the Woods,” but they are the exception rather than the rule. Anderson’s text is grounded in everyday language and presented in a diction that makes him easy to understand. However, in spite of the surface-level simplicity of Anderson’s prose, the reader should not assume that the author wrote in this mode because he was unable to write in a different style. Anderson’s regular correspondence with Gertrude Stein, Theodore Dreiser, and others amply demonstrates that he was well educated and more than able to tackle the complicated theoretical dimensions of literary art. Spencer even argues that Anderson’s style is, in part, “inherited” (17) from the American literary tradition. Sherwood Anderson chose to write in an economic style to closely engage with his readers and to accurately represent the populations that he depicted in his works.

While Sherwood Anderson’s style of prose in “Death in the Woods” may appear simple and direct, there are a number of techniques that the author uses to reinforce how specific characters, events, and themes are reiterated in the text. For example, Anderson uses repeated words and phrases in order to emphasize their importance for the reader. In the first three to four pages of the story, the phrase “old woman” is used eight times in order to describe Ma Grimes. This makes sense in the beginning of the text when the
reader is being introduced to the character, but seems somewhat out of place as the story continues given that the reader not only knows her to be Ma Grimes, but also knows a good deal of biographical information about her. Anderson’s narrator so often uses the phrases “old woman” or “such old women” (4) that, were it not clear that his story focuses only on Ma Grimes, his avoidance of using her name might confuse the reader. It is likely that in repeating the phrase “old woman” throughout the story, Anderson is reminding the reader that Ma Grimes’ life is representative of a class of unknown “bound children” (7) who populate small town America, and that his narrator appears to be composing the story as he recalls it. “[O]ld woman” is a signal word for the narrator and the reader; it is a touchstone that ties the narrator’s observations to Ma Grimes’ death. Another possible reason that Anderson uses “old woman” often on the same page as Ma Grimes’ name is that doing so integrates the larger public narrative of the discovery of her body in the clearing and his own deeply personal reaction to her death years later. The frequency with which “old woman” is used suggests that this last option holds the most potential. Within pages three and four alone, the phrase is used at least seven times, then disappears until page nine, appearing eight more times in the remaining pages. This diminishing use of “old woman” roughly coincides with the sections of the short story that describe Ma Grimes’ own life experiences, while the areas with higher “old woman” frequency appear in places where the narrator is talking about his knowledge of the woman.

Another oft-repeated word in Anderson’s text is the verb “feed” (8) which is used nineteen times during the course of the story in varying forms. By changing the forms of “feed,” Anderson makes clear the number of ways that Ma Grimes occupies her role as a
feeder of others. Variations on “feed” appear most often in the second section of the story as the narrator gives the reader information about Grimes’ background. The narrator’s insistence on presenting Ma Grimes as a “feed[er of] animal life” (23) creates an impression that the old woman’s servile role is the central theme of the short story rather than her relationship with the narrator. William J. Scheick in his article “Compulsion Towards Repetition: Sherwood Anderson’s “Death in the Woods,” promotes a Freudian psychosexual reading of Ma Grimes’ character and her effect on the narrator. He views the ever-present feeder image and the dogs that follow Ma Grimes around on the night of her death as a representation of the “adult male’s hunger for the sexual victimization of women” (142). Without a doubt, Ma Grimes is a victim of the sexual appetites of her husband and the German farmer, but to interpret her role in the story as a passive victim of such abuse divests her of the dignity that Anderson’s narrator provides her with and misrepresents her agency in the story since she “manage[s]” (Anderson 10) the Grimes farm. Scheick’s conflation of the feeder image with sexual abuse does not match Anderson’s language in the story, as I will explain.

If Scheick’s assertions that the animal imagery and Ma Grimes’ feeding were meant to imply sexual domination were true, then Anderson’s narrator would not have told the reader that Ma Grimes “did not have to feed her husband—in a certain way” (Anderson 10) (sexually) after being married a few years. Thus, even though “Every moment of every day” (8) for Ma Grimes “was spent feeding something,” the reader can easily infer that the narrator is using the verb “feed” to depict the literal ingestion of food and not her husband’s sexual misadventures. When the narrator uses the word “feed,” he does not supply the direct object of the sentence. Namely it is that Ma Grimes is feeding
her animals; instead, the reader is almost always given the indirect object of “feed,” as what or who she is giving food to. Here perhaps is where my argument differs from Scheick and other critics: where they see phrases such as “Horses, cows, pigs, dogs, men” (Anderson 12) to interpret the inclusion of “men” in the sentence as an implicit suggestion that Ma Grimes has to feed men sexually. In contrast to this, the meaning of Anderson’s narrator is clear: men, for Ma Grimes’ purposes, are equal to animals because her relationship to them is identical; she lives to provide them food.

In the last few pages of the story, the narrator reiterates the image of Ma Grimes as a provider of food and reveals that she was “one who was destined to feed animal life” (23) and continued to do so after “her death” (24). In the Tar... version of this episode, this paragraph concludes the chapter, leaving the reader with the impression that the entire theme of the story is centered on Ma Grime’s role as a feeder. As this ending is more poetic than it is personal, it is not surprising that it is not given such prominence in the 1933 version of “Death in the Woods” since the focus has shifted from the old woman to the narrator’s recollection of the events of her life and demise. The repetition of the “feeder” motif in the short story is mimetic of human memory in the same manner that the narrator’s use of “old woman” was. “Feed” reiterates how the narrator sees Ma Grimes, without discussing his relationship to her. There is no positive or negative association coupled with the use of “feed”; the word provides a thematic concept that unifies the old woman’s life.

**Fragmentation and Unification of Memory**

William J. Scheick’s psychological reading of “Death in the Woods” may not be useful for interpreting the meanings behind Anderson’s symbols, but he does provide the
strongest case of any critic that the way that Ma Grimes’ story appears on the page is meant to mimic human memory. Repetition is the simplest way to remind a reader of a salient theme or archetype, but adapting prose to mirror human memory is a far more complicated process. Scheick suggests that the narrator of the story “discovers fragments into consciousness” (145) and that these pieces of narrative are assembled in such a way that a “suspension of time” (143) results. All of the parts of Ma Grimes’ story coalesce through the careful thought-process of the narrator. For the first page and a half of the short story, there is no indication that Anderson’s narrator is going to talk about any specific person. The narrator’s uses the phrase “old woman” until he begins to integrate his own memories into the text. He recalls “an old woman” that routinely “walked past” the his home when he was a child (4). Even though she is one of the “nameless ones” who escapes the attention of small town Ohioans, he “suddenly” remembers her story and her name: “Grimes.”

The narrator of “Death in the Woods” contributes his observations about the story he is constructing more than ten times during the course of the text. The first of these comments reveals that Ma Grimes’ husband, Jake, was “whispered about” in town. Then the narrator recalls his own direct contact with Ma Grimes’ husband when he saw him at “Tom Whitehead’s livery-barn” when he was a boy. This connection to Ma Grimes’ experience occurs again in the short story and causes the accretion of narrative fragments that eventually reconstitute themselves into her life story. The majority of the biographical information that the narrator uses in the short story, however, does not come from shared experiences with Ma Grimes, rather it comes from a parenthetical comment that he adds where he begins to “wonder how [he]…know[s]” (6) about the old woman’s
life and attributes the information to “small-town tales” he heard as a child. For example, when the narrator describes Grimes’ death, using words such as “may” (16) and “couldn’t” (15) he tells the audience that he does not have direct access to Ma Grimes’ thoughts. He is, after all, a first-person storyteller connecting the old woman’s story to his own. Near the end of “Death in the Woods,” the narrator reveals some of the sources for his empathy for Grimes: he too had “worked on the farm of a German,” (22) and had his own “mystical adventure with dogs.” He even went to “the house where the old woman had lived” (23). These explicit links between the narrator’s personal history and Ma Grimes’ life make it clear that he is attempting to establish a context for the connection that he feels with her. Without this explanation of the dog experience in particular, it is doubtful that his belief that they circled around her in the clearing would stretch the credulity of his account of Grimes’ life. Anderson constructs this narrator in such a way that his (the narrator’s) character blends with that of Ma Grimes so that both storyteller and character (Grimes) coalesce into a rendering of Ma Grimes’ life in a way that not only describes her experiences but also reflects on the narrator’s own life as well.

One aspect of the narrative structure of “Death in the Woods” that seems to have been ignored by all critics is the division of the narrative into five sections each headed with a roman numeral. These segments serve the purpose of controlling the pace of the narration and allow the narrator to segue from one part of the story to another. In the first section, the reader is introduced to the ignored old women of Midwestern towns. The narrator then connects this to the story of Ma Grimes and offers first and secondhand information to depict her life in its old age and as a young woman. Section II follows this by revealing how Grimes came to occupy the liminal and drudge-like position that she
did. As well, section two deals with the events that led up to her death in the clearing.

Part III deals with the actual demise of Ma Grimes and includes more information about her domestic life. The penultimate section of “Death in the Woods,” completely focuses on the narrator’s encounter with the corpse in the woods. Part V deals with the narrator’s reaction to the death of the woman and the meaning that he takes away from it. Each section of the text gives incrementally more details about the discovery of Ma Grimes’ body by the narrator. However, each section also functions independently as a recalled part of the “music” (23) of memory that the narrator is trying to recall. The narrator must “pick…up” (22) the “fragments” (22) about Ma Grimes as an adult reminiscing on an event from his childhood.

By dividing the text into five discrete sections, Anderson reveals the narrator’s character by showing how he selects specific events in a calculated order to tell Ma Grimes’ story. Sections I through III serve as a background to explain how Ma Grimes came to die on a snowy evening whereas Section IV barely mentions Ma Grimes at all, only her effect on the narrator. ² Section V then ties the events of the story together and relates the narrator’s life experiences to Ma Grimes’. Each section of the short story may be compared to a motif: a recurring melodic line in a piece of music. Even though each part of the text is separated by time or perspective, the underlying theme is still that which the title states: “Death in the Woods.” Ma Grimes’ demise is the thematic conceit that binds the whole short story into one cohesive narrative. Without the woman’s death scene in Section III, the entire reconstructed memory of the narrator would disintegrate. Her body in the clearing is the central image of the story because it gives her life meaning to the narrator. Grimes is the symbolic referent for the short story, and her death, which
is mentioned in every section, is the echoed motif of the narrator’s memory. Once the fragments of memory are combined, then the narrator constructs his music and gives meaning to the old woman’s life.
CHAPTER III
EFFECT OF THE FIRST PERSON NARRATION

“Death in the Woods” depends on the role the narrator plays in the story. The short story evolves along with the thoughts of the narrator and creates an effect of verisimilitude that makes him a more trustworthy voice. To Paul P. Somers Jr., the fact that the narrator testifies to truth of the story he is presenting makes him more trustworthy to the reader. Also, Somers posits that Anderson creates a distance “between the ‘implied author’ and the narrator” (92) to avoid the “authorial intrusion” of directly sharing his view of the narrator’s character. What makes “Death in the Woods” a masterful short story is that the uncertainty of the narrator’s memory about the events of Ma Grimes’ life actually presents the death of the old woman through fragmentary recollected bits and pieces of the narrator’s remembrance. Thus, the narrative evolves and expands as a story that is recalled gradually. This narrative, in turn provides clues to the empathetic relationship that the narrator has toward Ma Grimes.

In the beginning of the short story, Ma Grimes is an old woman who inhabits a passive, miserable existence, “manag[ing]” (10) to survive outside of the town she lives in. By framing Ma Grimes as a forgotten old woman, who is “nothing special,” (4) it is surprising that her story “got into” the mind of the narrator. However, by the end of “Death in the Woods” it is apparent that the narrator’s passionate belief that Ma Grimes’
life has a deeper meaning that compels him to compose his story. He calls Ma Grimes’ struggle “a story,” thereby informing the reader of his intent to describe her life and promoting the idea that her struggle and the trials of those like her are very important to him.

Anderson’s choice to write “Death in the Woods” from the narrator’s first-person perspective is essential to establishing the empathic relationship the narrator has with Ma Grimes. Had he chosen to write the story from Ma Grimes’ perspective, for example, there would be no basis for any larger meaning to be taken away from her life – she would have died in the woods and the story would have been over after section three. As well, if Anderson had excised the narrator from the text and used a third person omniscient perspective, the reader would have known Ma Grimes’ thoughts and perhaps would be able to visualize her death scene in the forest. What each of these alternatives lacks is the relationship that the narrator, limited though his perspective is, establishes with Ma Grimes by reflecting on her life. Without the frequent intrusion of the narrator’s voice in the story, Anderson could have faced great difficulty in communicating her thematic feeder role to his audience, and the reader may have been left wondering why Ma Grimes’ story was important enough to be told.

Robert Scholes, in his book *Elements of Fiction*, discusses the presence of “limitation[s]” (27) in the storyteller’s perspective. Certainly, the narrator of “Death in the Woods” is forced to interpret Ma Grimes’ life by using information from his own experience, but Anderson’s careful negotiation between the facts that the narrator knows about Ma Grimes from his childhood and the potential parallels of the shared experiences that they have had allows the reader to engage with the short story without having to
“compensate” (27) for any limits of perspective. Instead, the narrator openly admits the
gaps in his knowledge and suggests a meaning for Grimes’ existence that comes from his
empathy for the old woman and not from an omniscient knowledge of her thoughts. In
essence, Anderson manages to characterize the narrator by showing how the narrator, in turn, characterizes Ma Grimes.

The narrator of “Death in the Woods” exposes the story’s plot to the reader. Since
the narrator is completely frank about the fact that he does not recall Ma Grimes’ story as a single coherent event, he contributes to the impression that he is creating her story for the reader. Other than seeing Ma Grimes when he was a “young boy,” (Anderson 4) the only other interaction that the narrator has had with her indirectly is through the violent stare of her husband. The details of the courtship of Ma Grimes and how she came to be in the woods on that fateful evening build upon the impression that she was a victim of circumstance, from her birth as a “bound child.” (7)

The reader is allowed to see the narrator’s inner thoughts and concerns about his own storytelling. This enhances the sense of narrational consciousness that pervades this short story – the reader sees the narrator construct the story as he tells it, hesitations included. Since the story is essentially about how the narrator was affected by Ma Grimes and not about the old woman herself, it is interesting to see that he feels the need to express his doubts about his own memory within the story. The details that the narrator uses in telling Grimes’ story are important in establishing that he is creating the story for the reader, paralleling the narrative process as he weaves together his experience and the information that he has discovered about Grimes. Anderson presents the narrator’s consciousness to the reader and successfully communicates the character’s
empathy for Ma Grimes by representing the storyteller (the narrator) as a character who is unhindered by the need to factually substantiate every piece of information that he uses.

“Death in the Woods” depends on the reliability of the narrator and his emotional link to Ma Grimes’ life experiences. Even though the narrator generalizes Ma Grimes as the archetypal bound woman, he still cares about her. At first, she is an “old woman,” (1) but as the story continues she is recast as a “bound girl” (5) who is often ignored and exploited. In the second section of the story, Ma Grimes is reinterpreted once again as a person who must “manage” (6) to feed “the cows… pigs…horses, and the chickens” as well as her son and husband (8). The important thing to consider regardless of how Ma Grimes is described is that the narrator shows the hardship that she had to endure on a daily basis just to survive. Every detail added by the narrator shows just how limited her existence was and how the effect of her death on the narrator transformed her into a symbol of great significance to him. Ultimately, it is the task of the narrator to create a meaning for the old woman’s life; it is he who must show how a woman who was “kick[ed] and abuse[d]” (14) like a dog contributed something to his life and understanding of the world.

Later in the story, when Ma Grimes has died and her dogs are circling around her body in a clearing, the narrator adds his own commentary to the story in the same way he did in Section II. He testifies that he “knew all about it [her death’s significance] afterward, when [he]…grew to be a man” (16) because he witnessed a similar event in his own life. The narrator admits that Ma Grimes “may have” (15) seen the dogs running in a circle and then links that scene to his memory of “a pack of dogs act[ing] just like that” (16) when he became an adult. The difference between his fate and Ma Grimes’ demise
he attributes to the fact that he “had no intention whatever of dying” whereas the old woman had surrendered to the fact that she was going to die. Drawing this parallel between his experiences and those of Ma Grimes, the narrator once again attempts to demonstrate the truth in her story as well as create a context for the emotional bond that he shares with the old woman. Without the links between his life and hers, there is perhaps little reason for him to feel such empathy for her. However, since he has witnessed dogs circling in the way he describes, the reader can understand why he imagines that this may have happened to Ma Grimes. Due to his first person perspective as the narrator, he can only project her thoughts as she sat dying in the wood. The narrator must provide the missing pieces of information to the reader in an attempt to explain the circumstances of Ma Grimes’ death since she herself cannot narrate her journey. In this sense, his first person narration is essential to the telling of the story.

Even before the narrator (as a boy) sees Ma Grimes’ corpse, he is already thinking about how he will have “something to tell” (20) his family when he returns home that evening. He remembers the impulse to relate to others what he has found and construct his first version of the story. The narrator reveals that he “saw everything” (20) in the clearing and that the sight of Ma Grimes’ unclothed corpse made his “body tremble…with some strange mystical feeling” (21) which critics such as William J. Scheick have interpreted as sexual arousal. In fact, it is this moment in the story that most critics seek to dissect so that they can argue whether or not the narrator is a mature person reflecting about Ma Grimes or a character stuck in a puerile state that cannot advance past the trauma of his experience. Whether or not this interpretation is accurate, it is the narrator’s experience of seeing Ma Grimes’ corpse that creates the central focus
of the short story because her death is the event that causes the narrator to tell her story in the first place. The scene in the woods is the beginning of his relationship with the woman’s story and provides the first note of the “music” that he composes later from the fragments of his memory. Anderson focuses an entire section of the short story on this single scene to establish part of the reason that the narrator feels a need to tell Grimes’ story to the reader. However, since the reader sees the narrator’s reaction to her death firsthand, all of his emotions are reflected on the page and his return to the narrative of her death much later in life makes sense.

Anderson’s narrator feels the need to confirm the truth of his story by admitting that it was only “Later” (22) when he heard the “fragments of the old woman’s story” from others in his town that her life is fully revealed to him. When he and his brother return home to relate their strange experiences, it is the brother who tells the story to the family, not the narrator (21), leaving the narrator to remark that he “was not satisfied with the way [that his brother] told” (22) the tale. Perhaps this is the first indication that the narrator has a different understanding of Grimes than his brother does and he, even as a child, wants to give her life a sort of meaning. Anderson’s narrator is transfixed by the “picture” of Grimes’ death scene and admits that her demise was the “foundation for the story [he is]…now trying to tell,” and it is his continued emotional bond with her struggle that causes him to return to her in his thoughts again and again.

The narrator reveals another emotional tie to Grimes’ story when he recalls that he “worked on the farm of a German” where a bound girl was “hated” by the farmer’s spouse and that he had his own “half-uncanny mystical adventure with dogs in an Illinois forest on a clear, moon-lit winter night” (22-3). The “dog” experience has been
mentioned before in the short story, so his repetition of this element places even more emphasis on his relationship to Ma Grimes. The most important piece of information in this last section of the story, however, is that the narrator actually has been to the “house where the old woman had lived” (23) and sees two “tall, gaunt” dogs canvassing the abandoned dwelling. Anderson’s characterization of the narrator as an empathetic observer of Grimes’ existence allows him (the narrator) to admit that he has embellished her story with experiences from his own life—understanding her thoughts and emotions since he too, to some degree, has felt them as well.

Anderson’s use of music as a metaphor to discuss how he came to see the “story of the old woman’s death” explains why the narrator wanted to find “Something” to be “understood” from the situation. Echoing his earlier dissatisfaction with his brother’s story, the narrator reasons that he and his brother were “too young” (24) to understand the meaning of what they saw in the woods. Also, though the narrator does not admit it openly, they did not know enough of her story to comprehend the “beauty” of what they saw that night—to them it was a “mystical” (21) sensation that captivated them in the clearing when they saw her naked body. The narrator’s revelation of how he came to reconstruct Ma Grimes’ story shows the reader that the woman’s life ultimately only has meaning if she is remembered by others. Given the narrator’s insistence that no one else in the community noticed the old woman until her death, his need to tell her story is arguably valid because it is the consciousness of the storyteller that must compose a theme from the disparate information he has received over the years. The narrator is the only member of his community able or willing to give Grimes her due and his empathy
for her is what constitutes the greatest strength of the story, namely that he must find some larger meaning in her miserable death.
CHAPTER IV
THE CHARACTER OF THE NARRATOR:

Narrator as Storyteller

In “Death in the Woods,” Sherwood Anderson does not give the reader a direct sense of the narrator as a character; his attitudes and beliefs must be interpreted from the text of the short story. There is never a description of the narrator or an assessment made of his character. For the reader, he is a character whose presence as a persona is liminal throughout the story even though it is presented as his conscious recollection of Ma Grimes’ death. This is much the same phenomenon that one sees in a drama: the setting of the action and the audience’s knowledge of the characters is set up by a narrator who is typically outside the action. Anderson’s approach in “Death in the Woods” is very much like that of a playwright who is attempting to present a story in a very small amount of space. Like a two-act play, the sequence of events and the amount of detail that goes into them must be considered carefully as not to tax the audience’s attention span. Anderson overcomes the brevity of his text by tying every section of the story to Ma Grimes’ death. In fact, by titling the story “Death in the Woods,” Anderson makes it abundantly clear that, despite every other part of the story Ma Grimes’ demise is the central focus of the text and creates a central image which he expands to tell her story. Even though the story is divided into sections, the overall effect of the text comes from the strategic juxtaposition of the scenes.
Even though the reader is only given the briefest of direct glimpses into who the narrator is as a character, there are some details given about his life that provide a context for his relationship to Ma Grimes. In his commentary on “old women” (3) that live in small towns, the narrator discusses how these old women were generally given the less-desirable cuts of meats by the butchers for a discounted rate and points out that “liver [was given] to anyone who wanted to carry it away.” (3) The narrator then briefly describes how his own “family [were]…always having it [liver]” and that, he has “hated the thought of it ever since” even though it “never cost a cent.” This passage from the text gives the reader his first sense that the narrator is speaking about events from his childhood as an adult. However, the narrator’s revulsion at the thought of eating liver is a clever way in which Anderson prepares the reader for the unpleasantness of Ma Grimes’ life. By telling the reader that the narrator dislikes the taste of liver because of his childhood memory of eating it on a regular basis, Anderson informs the audience of two important facts about his character—that he comes from a poor family who were forced to eat cheap, undesirable meat to survive and that he resents the fact that they ate liver so often. In this context, the reader is able to see that the narrator’s own childhood holds memories that are unpleasant for him to remember and that his former poverty is an issue that still affects how he experiences the world.

As I have argued, Anderson frequently has his narrator comment on the verisimilitude of the account of Ma Grimes’ life that is presented to the reader. The effect of this concern with truth has been duly noted by many critics and their as well as my conclusions all center around how this choice on Anderson’s part makes the narrator
seem more trustworthy. However, this is not all that the narrator’s observations in the story do; they also mimic the habits of a storyteller whose audience may not be inclined to believe everything that he is saying. From a rhetorical perspective, lines such as “I wonder how I know all this” (Anderson 6) and remarks such as “You know what I mean” (7) appear to anticipate that the narrator has a relationship with the reader. There is an assumed body of shared knowledge between the reader and the narrator that is implicit throughout the text and the narrator’s concern with verisimilitude attempts to reinforce the privileged perspective that he as a character has. He gets to tell Ma Grimes’s story to the audience and provide some autobiographical information in the process.

Another section of “Death in the Woods” that provides a glimpse of the narrator’s character is when he describes the dogs running around Ma Grimes’ corpse. In looking at this section, it is necessary to remember that the narrator gives no real evidence to suggest that the dogs circled around Ma Grimes.\(^4\) In this part of the text, the reader does not learn more about the narrator’s background, but does get a glimpse of how he views the world. By calling the “running of the dogs” (16) a “death ceremony,” the narrator is using poetic license to describe the dogs’ behavior. If the circling pack of dogs is indeed indicative of a “ceremon[ial]” movement, then the narrator is suggesting that their primitive funeral procession for Ma Grimes is a sign of reciprocal affection; she was, after all, the only person who fed them.

The poetic nature of the dog scene intensifies when Anderson’s narrator has the dogs speak for themselves: “Now we are no longer wolves. We are…the servants of men...When man dies we becomes [sic] wolves again.” (16) Giving Ma Grimes’ dogs a chance to speak in this manner is an unusual choice considering that they play a very
small role in the story and that this exchange and the scene around it take up almost two
pages of the story (that is approximately ten percent of the length of the text.) Even so,
the effect of their speech is apparent – it makes Ma Grimes’ death take on a larger
symbolic significance. If Anderson had left out the haunting image of the circling dogs
and failed to mention that the narrator “knew all about” such occurrences from a later life
experience, then Grimes’ death would become unimportant to the story until she is found
by the hunter later on. As well, if this section were removed, the reader would not have
an explicit image to link to Grimes’ role as a feeder throughout the story since this
occasion is the only time when she is actually shown to be providing food to animals or
people.

The most explicit characterization of the narrator occurs in section IV of “Death
in the woods when he, as a boy, finally enters the plot of the story. The narrator reveals
that he was a “newsboy” (18) on “Main street with one of [his]…brothers” when he first
heard about the body in the woods. Like the Grimes dogs they follow “at the…heels”
(19) of the other men as they journey to the clearing. Framing this section of the story
from his childhood perspective, the narrator prepares his audience for the shock of seeing
Ma Grimes’ half-naked corpse in the snow. Before the reader sees his reaction to the
woman’s body, however, another important narratorial comment occurs. Just as when
Anderson’s narrator describes the inner thoughts of the dogs, he seemingly uses the
narrator’s voice to explain why the hunter who found the body was skittish. The narrator
claims that in the location in which the hunter found Ma Grimes, with “the trees…bare”
and “white snow on the ground,” that “something creepy steals over the mind and body”
causing a person to want to “get…away” from such a place “as fast as [he]…can.”
The Death Scene

By far, the most important and memorable scene in “Death in the Woods” is when the narrator first sees Ma Grimes’ body. Anderson’s short story uses the image of Ma Grimes in the snow as the focal point for the feeder metaphor and as the only verifiable point of contact between her and the narrator. The scene itself appears at the end of section IV of “Death in the Woods” where its impact is decisive in tying the disparate threads of the narrator’s memory together. Even though the narrator is “silent” (Anderson 20) when he first looks at the corpse, he is still excited that he will have “something to tell” (20) his family. We have seen how this type of storytelling affects the narrator’s relationship with Ma Grimes, but it is also important to consider that it is this feeling of curiosity that compels him to look at her body. If the narrator had been apprehensive about seeing the corpse and come away from the experience with a fear of death, then there would be no story to relate. However, since he goes into the clearing acutely aware of his surroundings, his interest is communicated to the reader.

Once again, the narrator frames Ma Grimes in a poetic way, recalling that the “full moon made everything [in the scene] clear.” (20) From his point of view, Grimes “did not look old” in the moonlight; she was the “beautiful young girl” (19) that the hunter described. Even when her body is turned over, the narrator still recalls a “strange mystical feeling” (20) in his body when he saw the front of Grimes’ naked corpse. The narrator’s professed innocence when he says, “neither of us had seen a woman’s body before” frames the image of Ma Grimes’ body in a way that is altogether different than (one may imagine) the men of the town saw her. Many critics use the
phrase “mystical feeling” to imagine that Ma Grimes’ naked form excites a nascent sexual response in the young narrator, however there is no evidence in the text to support this. It is equally plausible to conclude that the feeling of the narrator is that of an intellectual discovery with sexual overtones. If he were aroused by the nakedness of Ma Grimes, there is little reason that he should hide his feelings from the reader given his bluntness about sexual feeding in the rest of the story. Perhaps the narrator is like any young male who sees the female form for the first time; he is intrigued and curious but does not know exactly how to process what he is seeing or feeling. He renders the experience as “mystical” and leaves it at that.

This is also the point when Anderson uses the narrator to expand the poetic dimensions of Ma Grimes’ life and death. Just as the dogs are given voice in section III, a symbolic component is projected on the discovery of Ma Grimes’ corpse – the idea of transformation. Sister Mary Joselyn, in her analysis of “Death in the Woods,” characterizes the short story as a series of “transformations” (253) that occur. She argues that the various metamorphoses that happen in the story (an old woman becomes a young girl, dogs become wolves, etc.) attempt to access a “more universal realm” (252) of symbolic meaning. Even as Anderson works toward the meaning of the short story, he still does not choose to reveal why Ma Grimes’ story is so important, rather he takes time to repeatedly emphasize the enormous effect that Grimes had on the narrator. In the beginning of section V, the reason why the narrator is telling this story is unclear. It is only later in section V that Anderson makes the narrator bring his thoughts to the foreground and reveals his character in five paragraphs that completely shape what the reader will take away from this story – the identity of the narrator/storyteller himself.
Almost every critic who has discussed Sherwood Anderson’s “Death in the Woods” has been faced with the same issue and the same question: is the animal feeder image in section V of the story really the ultimate meaning of the text? To this end, most have attempted to prove that, by presenting Ma Grimes as an idealized woman who feeds animal life, that Anderson’s narrator has, in some way, liberated the character (or objectified her) and in so doing given her a mythical place in the narrator’s consciousness. Without a doubt, this interpretation of “Death in the Woods” is very simple and direct, but it fails to realize that the feeder image is not the most important message of the story. If that were the case, then the short story would end with the words “…feeding animal life” (Anderson 24) as it does in the Tar, A Midwest Childhood Version. What follows that sentence in the 1933 version completely alters the meaning of Ma Grimes’ story and refocuses the text on the narrator. It is only in the final paragraphs of section V that the reader finally sees the entire story come together in a meaningful way.

Perhaps the best account of how these paragraphs alter the meaning of the text comes from Jon S. Lawry who wrote “Death in the Woods and the Artist’s Self in Sherwood Anderson” in 1959. His article is the earliest analysis of Anderson’s short story and is the basis for all of the criticism that follows. Lawry claims that the idea that the story is about Ma Grimes’ role as a feeder is “patently insufficient” (306) as an explanation for her story being told. For him, the narrator’s relationship to Ma Grimes is what gives the story a “symbolic fullness” (307) and it is that character’s act of “receiving…consciousness” from the old woman that is the central focus of the story.
The “converge[nce]” of Ma Grimes and the narrator is what makes the short story so memorable and moving. Lawry posits that: “The creation of the woman’s story” and the “discovery of her [self, leads [the narrator] into recognition of his being, [emphasis not mine]” (307) thereby letting the reader fully understand the narrator’s identity.

Lawry argues that the manner in which the adult narrator reconstructs Ma Grimes’ story portrays him as an “artist in the essential gesture of art: creation” (307) who is “minting from…experiences the personal expression of meaning, [and] the personal ingathering to form,” and “giv[ing]…coherence and beauty to unrelated fragments” much as a composer of music would. For Lawry, the narrator “surrenders self” (311) in an effort to “gain” his identity from his relationship to Ma Grimes’ story. This surrender, we see, is necessitated by the fact that the two have only minimal direct contact with one another in the short story and that the narrator only comes to know Grimes after she is dead. If Lawry’s interpretation is valid, then it is incomplete because it does not deal with how much of the narrator’s personality is related on the page. There are numerous instances where the narrator interrupts the flow of the story in order to emphasize a point, discuss verisimilitude, or explain his relationship to Ma Grimes. These examples are the basis for the reader’s understanding of the narrator’s character and have a tone that sets them apart from the rest of the story. The narrator is not fully identified as a character (his name is never given), but to overlook the effect that his observations as a character have on the short story misrepresents his role in the story, as its teller.

At the end of “Death in the Woods,” Anderson’s narrator compares his memory of the old woman to “music hear from far off…[whose] notes had to be picked up slowly one at a time. (23) This model of memory aligns with the way that “Death in the Woods”
unfolds to the reader and serves as a fitting metaphor for the repetition, variation, and narratorial commentary that are this short story’s most successful characteristics. The narrator insists that “Something had to be understood” about Ma Grimes’ death and provides an explanation, telling the reader that the old woman “was one destined to feed animal life” and who, even in death “continued feeding animal life” (24) in the form of the Grimes dogs. Anderson, by providing this poetic meaning for Ma Grimes gives the reader an understanding of her role from a metaphysical point of view by elevating her from a servile status to an important provider whose feeding of animal life was perpetual and necessary.

In Tar, A Midwest Childhood, this is where Ma Grimes’ story ends, with the feeder motif as a means to integrate all of the sections of the story into one cohesive whole. The 1933 version of the short story, however, continues for two paragraphs after this point. Anderson’s narrator reflects that he, as a boy, remembers hearing his brother’s retelling of the scene in the clearing and that his brother “did not…get the point (24) of the experience because he and the narrator were “too young” to fully understand what they had experienced. Now that the mature narrator has reintegrated the disparate strands of his memory of Ma Grimes, he can see why her story affects him so much. He insists that, “A thing so complete [as her story] has its own beauty.” The narrator does not “try to emphasize the point” of the story and claims that he “speak[s]” so that the reader “may understand why” he has “been impelled to try to tell the simple story over again.”

These last few lines of “Death in the Woods” examine the narrator’s justification for why he has shared Ma Grimes’ story with the reader. Anderson’s careful presentation of the narrator’s character, up to this point, has never so explicitly related to the reader.
Indeed, the narrator has intruded on the text, but Anderson never has him openly explain why he tells Ma Grimes’ story in the first place. The last paragraph of the short story provides a clue to the reader that the story itself is not really about Ma Grimes or her unfortunate death; in fact, her demise is only an occasion for the narrator’s reflection on her life. What “Death in the Woods” is really about is how Ma Grimes affects the narrator and how he demonstrates his empathy for her suffering. The narrator has no way of knowing what Ma Grimes really thought or felt as she lay dying in the woods but he does know how he feels about her death. Ma Grimes, to him, may be the archetypal feeder of animal life, but she is also the means by which Anderson constructs his identity as a character. By the end of “Death in the Woods,” the focus of the short story has shifted completely from Ma Grimes to the narrator. This is perhaps the best explanation for the story’s title. “Death in the Woods” only communicates an event and a location; it does not identify the person who has died.

Whether or not Ma Grimes is called “old woman” or “Ma Marvin,” her role in the story is to be a vehicle for the narrator to tell his story about her life. Anderson’s narrator is the most important character in the story as far as its meaning is concerned and it is his transformation and reflection that brings the short story together. The narrator’s retelling of Ma Grimes’ story in “Death in the Woods” may be compared to a melody in a piece of music; it is however how he relates to the other motifs in the story that sets the tone and mood of Anderson’s text. To expand the comparison, what lies behind the melody is the perception of the truth that, a human being, like a melodic line, has character only because he exists in relation to other human being -- without that context, his story is meaningless.
CONCLUSION

“Death in the Woods” has been one of Sherwood Anderson’s most celebrated short stories because it is a well-executed and thoughtful representation of the storytelling process. The story depends on how the narrator relates to Ma Grimes and how that bond is represented on the page. “Death in the Woods” was a story long in the making that deals explicitly with how human beings create memory and meaning. To that end, the story itself is mimetic of memory processes and uses organization and repetition to emphasize important ideas or images. The accretion of these perspectives contributes to a feeling of completeness in which the narrator can meditate on what Grimes’ death means to him. Once he has fully narrated the story of his relationship to Ma Grimes, Anderson uses the narrator to directly explain the meaning of her story. In doing so, the hidden character of the narrator is revealed to the reader and the events of the story are projected into a universal frame in which the narrative device is, fittingly, the act of storytelling itself.
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NOTES
1 Anderson’s use of this third-person voice may be explained by the frequent allusions he makes in “Death in the Woods” to the verisimilitude of Grimes’ story—he may have wanted to make it obvious that his narrator in *Tar, A Midwest Childhood* was manipulating the old woman’s story to meet his aims.
2 Again, a key development in the *Tar*. version of “Death in The Woods,” the story of how the boy finds the old woman’s body.
3 An opinion echoed in Paul P. Somers’ “…Mastery of Narrative Distance”. The narrator is taken at face value—his opinions are never questioned within the context of “Death in the Woods”.
4 This happens later, when she is discovered by a hunter in the next section of the short story.
5 See Clare Colquitt in Selected Bibliography for this perspective.
6 See earlier analysis of multiple versions of “Death In the Woods” as well as Jules Zanger in Selected bibliography.