

The Study of Solitary Soul of Women in *Winesburg, Ohio*

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Abstract: *Winesburg, Ohio* depicts a group of grotesques who are weird and cannot be understood by common people in the small town during the industrial period. This paper takes three women for example, analyses the reasons for the loneliness of women.

Keywords: *Winesburg, Ohio*; Grotesques; Women

Publication date: March, 2021

Publication online: 31 March, 2021

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1 Introduction

Sherwood Anderson is one of the most important writers in American short story in the 20th century. Although he has gone through various kinds of tribulations in the course of his lifetime, he succeeds in creating *Winesburg, Ohio*, which wins a national reputation for him. Sherwood Anderson lives in a transitional era. So he experienced the great impacts that the Machine Age brings on human beings^[1].

Winesburg, Ohio, written in 1919 in America, describes various grotesques^[2]. This paper mainly takes the female characters for example and analyzes the reasons of the women's solitariness by the way of textual analysis.

2 Literature review

Winesburg, Ohio, is seen as Anderson's most significant novel. As a masterpiece, more attention has been paid to studying *Winesburg, Ohio* by many scholars at home and abroad. At abroad, some pay attention to the characters of *Winesburg, Ohio*. Take Malcolm Cowley for example, he gives those grotesques a name as "emotional cripples" since

they cannot truly communicate with others^[3]. At home, more attention is given to *Winesburg, Ohio*. Zou Tianyu elaborates the reasons of the generation of alienation, analyzes the inner worlds of the grotesques^[5]. Zhang Han states that *Winesburg, Ohio*'s structure seems loose, it is unified in time, place, character, theme, style, and form to greater extent than any of his later connections^[6]. Based on the former surveys, a deeper understanding about Sherwood Anderson and his literary works can be got. This paper aims to explore the inner world of women and discuss what leads to women's isolation and seek for the instructive meaning to contemporary women.

3 A world of loneliness

All stories in *Winesburg, Ohio* took place in the background of the Industrial Revolution. Almost all the western countries were involved in this big event. There was no exception for America. With the coming of this historical event, great changes had been taken place^[7].

3.1 Booming industrial revolution

Since the Industrial Revolution had swept across the western countries, America was also involved inevitably in the process of the Industrial Revolution. As the scientific technology goes on, the development of the industrialization has strong effect on the traditional American life. Large industries and factories developed rapidly in cities, and new machines were used in agricultural production. Although the Industrial Revolution facilitated the developments of science and technology, it also indeed brought many social problems, including the excessive pursuit of material fortune and indifferent interpersonal relationships. *Winesburg, Ohio* was

written under the context.

Apart from that, the American Civil war between the North and the South broke out in 1861, which also accelerated the expansion of industry. During the early years before the Civil War, the United States was a country which primarily depended upon agriculture. However, after the Civil War, such a traditional agricultural life disappeared in *Winesburg, Ohio*, and Industrialization began to play a dominate role in the whole society. People took advantage of the forest and iron ore and coal mines to develop industry. Meanwhile, an increasingly number of machinery was applied on the farm. By the foregoing discussion, a conclusion that the previous traditional life ultimately fades away in the process of American Industrialization can be drawn.

3.2 Winesburg town: A lonely place

Winesburg was a small town which located in the Midwest of the United States. 50 years ago, Winesburg town was a pastoral village which was the typical model of American small towns. However, with the coming of the industrialization, great changes took place in the Winesburg town. Some newly-born achievements such as trains, railroads and cars appeared in people's life and they indeed changed the life of inhabitants in Winesburg. People's life also went through great changes. People in Winesburg couldn't adapt to the new lifestyle. Moreover, new ideas and values conflict with traditional ones, which caused the isolation of people inner heart. Anderson described the situation where the farmland varied from agricultural society to industrial society in the story of *Godliness*. The Bentley family owned a large farm. Prior to the Industrialization, Jesse Bentley's father and brothers worked on the farm in old traditions like animals day by day. When Jesse took over the farm, it was a period of great prosperity of industrialization. Jesse then began to use machinery in harvesting and hire laborers to work for him. Thus, the traditional farming life in the time of Jesse's father was totally replaced by the mechanized production. Such changes exerted a great impact on the traditional lives of farming people.

Undoubtedly, the development of industrialization brought new inventions to inhabitant in the small town. But the appearance of new inventions also brought about a series of social problems, such as isolation, indifference and numbness. This feeling

could be found everywhere. There was no exception for women.

4 Analysis of images of three women

The introduction on background gives reader a clear situation where the story happened. The following part will analyze the images of the three main women and explore what caused their isolation.

4.1 Images of the three women

In order to well understand what caused three women's isolation, the top priority is to learn and analyze the character of the three women.

4.1.1 Elizabeth Willards in *Mother*

In the story *Mother*, the character Elizabeth Willards is described as a woman who is the mother of George Willard and the wife of Tom Willard. Elizabeth was an almost 45-year-old woman and she lacked in vitality while his husband was a slender and graceful man and he was full of interest in politics. When it came to her wife, Tom regarded Elizabeth as a ghost and he was even full of hatred. It is obvious that Elizabeth couldn't be understood by his husband. As for the relationship with her son, there is no doubt that she loved her own child. But every time she wanted to talk with her son, she was always keeping silent instead of talking. As a mother, it was absurd that Elizabeth did not know how to communicate with her son. In the story, Elizabeth's mother had died when she was five years old and she grew up in her father's complaint. So her life was filled with misfortune. In her girlhood, she had obtained a strange reputation because she worn men's clothes and rode a bike on Main Street. She liked adventures in life and dreamed of becoming an actor one day. But her dream was destroyed when people in the theatrical company told her that "it's as dull and uninteresting as here." So she tried to fulfill her dreams by dating with men at night, which could not be accepted by traditional society.

Actually, through this way, Elizabeth wanted to search for the meaning of her life and love. But she still felt lonely and repressed for these adventures did not change her life in essence. After she met Tom, she thought that she could get warmth and love again. But to her disappointment, Tom can't understand her and even attributed his failure in politics to his ghostly wife. As husband, Tom didn't give enough love to Elizabeth and even was shamed of his wife,

which was doomed to the failure of their marriage. Disappointed at marriage, she placed all her love and hope on her son George Willard. Though Elizabeth was full of hope and love towards her son, she did not know how to express her love and hope. Anderson has given the following description in his book *Winesburg, Ohio*, “In the son’s presence she was timid and reserved.” The above illustration showed that Elizabeth didn’t know how to communicate with her son and how to express her love to her son. In the end, George Willard told her mother that he wanted to go out and look at people outside and think what he should do. When Elizabeth heard these words, she knew her hope dashed. In fact, the family should have brought her happiness but brought her hurt. The failure of Elizabeth’s marriage was an epitome of the families in Winesburg.

4.1.2 Lousie Bentley in Godliness

In the story Godliness, Lousie Bentley was the figure who was the daughter of a rich farmer of Jesse Bentley. And her husband was John Hardy who was a banker in Winesburg town. However, Lousie and John led an unhappy couple life. On the one hand, Lousie had weird tempers and sometimes she did many strange behaviors. In her childhood, she was often prone to get angry groundlessly. After she got married, her husband did his utmost to make her happy and “she flew into half insane fits of temper during which she was sometimes silent, sometimes noisy and quarrelsome.” Usually she hid herself in her own room for many days, and sometimes she would drive her carriage out at a terrible speed in the town’s streets. Lousie’s heart was full of repression, but she failed to find a proper way to give vent to her discontent. On the other hand, Louise also hated her husband and even wanted to kill her husband with a knife. It seems that Louise’s queer behaviors are difficult to understand. However, it is very necessary to find out the reason why her queer personality is.

When Lousie was born, her mother died. Her father did not welcome her coming into the world and gave less love to her, because he expected that his wife could bear a boy to realize his dreams. Thus, in her childhood on the Bentley farm, Lousie was lonely and unhappy. Then she went to the Winesburg town to go to high school. There she lived with the family of Albert Hardy, a friend of her father. To begin with, Louise thought that she could get away from her

former lonely and unhappy life and would begin a new and happy life in Winesburg.

But to her disappointment, life in Winesburg was as unpleasant as that on the Bentley farm. In Hardy’s house, the two daughters of Albert Hardy were not friendly to her. And her classmates were indifferent to her because she did well in her study. Therefore, she became upset and disappointed and longed for getting love and warmth from others. Then Louise discovered that John was kind to her, so she started to make friends with John Hardy. At first, Louise believed that John could give her love that she desired. After they got married, John couldn’t understand what she really wanted and misunderstood her wife’s spiritual needs just for sexual desires. In fact, what Louise really wanted was understanding, care and love from her husband.

4.1.3 Alice Hindman in Adventure

In the story Adventure, Alice Hindman, a 27-year-old woman, was tall and thin. It seemed that she had a quiet personality. In fact, she was full of passion for life. When Alice was sixteen, she was a very beautiful girl and drew Ned Currie’s attention. Ned Currie was a reporter and worked on Winesburg Eagle and made an appointment with Alice. After that, she fell in love with Ned Currie. Then Ned left Winesburg town for Cleveland to look for a better job. And he made his promise that he would come back as soon as he found a good job. In the end, he broke his promise and never returned again. Alice was reluctant to accept the fact that she was abandoned by Ned, for she strongly believed that Ned would come back. The process of waiting for Ned was tortured. In the daytime, Alice tried to make herself busy with her jobs in the store. While at night she usually knelt on the floor and said prayers which she wanted to talk to Ned. As time went by, the endless waiting increased her loneliness. She knew that Ned never came back and she was unwilling to lead an isolated life. Eventually, on one rainy night, Alice could not stand inner repression and had an adventure in the rain.

Actually, Alice’s emotional repression mainly came from her inner desire for love in her solitary life. For one thing, due to her father’s death and her mother’s second marriage, Alice led a rather lonely life. For another thing, when she went to work in the dry good store, her boss hardly had any talk with her. So Alice felt isolated both at home and at work. When Ned appeared, Alice gave all her hope to Ned

and hoped to get love from him.

4.2 Reasons of the three women's solitariness

Everything has its own reason. The reason why three women felt isolation are as follows.

4.2.1 Social reasons

Environment plays an important role in society and has a great influence on personal character. The stories in *Winesburg, Ohio* happened in America in the later years of nineteenth century when Industrial Revolution boomed. The rapid development of Industrialization has brought new inventions to American and also brought some social problems, such as the expansion of material wealth and indifferent interpersonal relationships. Facing the expansion of material wealth, people felt empty in their inner heart.

4.2.2 Psychological reasons

As a humanistic writer, Anderson perceived people's isolation and repression. It is clear that people in Winesburg were going through one or more psychological problems. There are two kinds of psychological problems being discussed. The first one is about communication. Women hid their real feeling and didn't know how to communicate with their families. The second one is that women lived in their imaginary world.

In fact, the obstacle of communication is the most severe psychological problem. In *Winesburg, Ohio*, people were under a strong despair to express themselves and communicate with each other. "All men lead their lives behind a wall of misunderstanding they have themselves built, and most men die in silence and unnoticed behind the walls". The "walls" is a symbol that stands for an obstacle of communication between human beings.

Besides the above, the second psychological problem is that the women couldn't tell illusion from reality. The examples are as follows.

Elizabeth failed to realize her dream, which gave her a strong shock. Eventually, the loss of love between Elizabeth and her husband caused her unlucky marriage and the lack of communication between Elizabeth and her son resulted in her twisted life.

Louise is a miserable girl. In her early years, she failed to get maternal love and her father

didn't welcome her coming. She felt herself almost surrounded by loneliness and repression on the Bentley farm. When she had a chance to attend high school in Winesburg, she thought that she could get rid of previous lonely life. Nevertheless, life was not going as she expected. Moreover, she couldn't be understood by her husband. All of these doubled her inner loneliness.

In the story *Adventure*, Alice Hindman was unwilling to accept the fact that she was deserted by Ned and lived in her own imagination. As time went on, Alice realized Ned couldn't come back and she felt deeply lonely and terrified. Then, she locked herself in her own world and never communicated with others.

5 Conclusion

In *Winesburg, Ohio*, Anderson explores human beings inner world through people's weird behaviors which are not understood by common people in Winesburg town. This paper focus on the analysis of the images of women. In fact, these women have dreams and desires and they never give up the pursuit for love. They are unable to be understood by their families and their friends, so they usually do some unusual and odd behavior to express their real feelings and thoughts. In fact, *Winesburg, Ohio* cannot be explained as merely an exposition of the theme of human isolation. By writing this paper, it tells people what is love and understanding and it helps people establish the true values in human life.

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