

The Symbol of the Hand in Sherwood Anderson's *Winesburg, Ohio*

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Abstract

The symbol is something essential in literature, especially in short fiction. Most of the writers use different symbols in their stories to reveal and emphasize their themes or to draw the readers' attention for something important. *Winesburg, Ohio*, a collection of short stories by Sherwood Anderson, is one of the most important American literary works in which Anderson uses symbol in an effective way, especially the symbol of hand. This symbol will be found in more than one story in this collection.

This paper tries to shed light upon Anderson's use of hands as a symbol in four stories, "Hands", "Respectability", "Paper Pills" and "The Thinker." It gives a short and simple idea about the use of symbols in literature, then it tries to explore how Anderson clarifies his themes in a beautiful way by using the symbol of hand.

1.1. Symbol in Literature:

The richness and variety of the symbols in any literary work help the readers understand the writer's work and recognize his

themes and characters. Many symbols have meanings which are familiar to readers. For example, the fox is usually a symbol of cunning and treachery; the dove always stands for peace. Actually, not in all cases, the readers, when reading a book, can recognize the symbol or its meaning.¹

In fact, a single symbol could have several meanings. The Lion, may represent bravery or power depending on the context in which it appears. Many modern critics believe that things are not always as they seem, and only "human pride leads the readers to imagine that they can understand and control everything around them."² There are millions of symbols that anyone can recognize when reading a literary work in which one should keep his mind open to possible symbols that may not be so obvious at first. In general, a symbol is "anything that represents, stands for or means something else."³

When the reader discovers a symbol or a series of symbols in any literary work, he comes up with a theme or he understands an overall theme, an overall message or lesson. The fact that literary texts very much seek to convey a message to their readers does not mean that their authors always use

difficult or ambiguous symbols. Just as dreams, "often convey meaning and information to the dreamer in puzzling symbolic images, literature may be said to function in a similar way. The author of a literary text can be compared to a dreamer transcribing his dreams into written language. But just as a dreamer is often unaware of the meaning of his dreams, the writers also cannot explain the meaning of their writings."⁴

In general terms, a symbol can be defined as a signifier of a complex nature which always places its most important referent outside itself. To

convey the meaning in a literary text, the writer makes use of a variety of special devices, such as symbols, allegories, metaphors, metonymies, similes, ironies, paradoxes, etc.⁵

1.2. Sherwood Anderson's Winesburg, Ohio:

Sherwood Anderson (1876-1941) is an American short story writer who is known for his special way in writing fiction. He is successful and has a great effect on other writers. He can be considered a controversial figure in the history of American literature. Most of the modern critics agree that Anderson is a significant writer in the transition time of the American literature and as a pioneer of modernism. His influence on American fiction is profound; his literary voice can be heard in Ernest Hemingway, William Faulkner, Thomas Wolf, John Steinbeck, and others. He makes breakthroughs in

short fiction in form, theme, style and characterization. He also has formed his own characteristics in the characterization in his short stories.⁶

As a great writer, Anderson is writing in a more simplistic, common American tone and would occasionally replace his prose with a more antiquated or colloquial style. Critics refer to his style of writing as "lyrical prose as the flow is consistently melodic and well structured. It rolls easily to the readers while retaining a high quality of language."⁷ This style can be seen very clearly by the readers in Anderson's most important book, *Winesburg, Ohio*.

Winesburg, Ohio stories have been written and published in different magazines in the years 1916-1918 till they had been collected together in

1919 in one book to create a series of stories in the form of novel. In fact, *Winesburg, Ohio* is a book falling somewhere between a novel and a collection of short stories which are centered on a single protagonist, George Willard, and the fictional inhabitants in a small town of Winesburg Ohio. It is about twenty four sections which are all connected though not directly linked as the chapters of a novel would be.⁸

Actually, *Winesburg, Ohio* is not a collection of isolated stories, but it is a short story sequence, i.e. it is a collection of related short stories in which the theme of loneliness, isolation and frustration in the town has been explored. If the readers

understand the sequence of stories in Homer's the **Odyssey**, Chaucer's **Canterbury Tales** and Joyce's **Dubliners**, they will understand Anderson's work easily.⁹ In **Winesburg, Ohio** Anderson has been able to create a beautiful unified work of art.

This form of the book creates a problem for the critics; how to define it, but Anderson himself considers it a whole or he intends it to be a novel: a different form of novel as he states

I have even sometimes thought that the novel form does not fit an American writer that it is a form which has been brought in. What is wanted is a new looseness; and in *Winesburg*, I have made my own form. There were individual tales but all about lives in some way connected ... Life is a loose flowing thing.¹⁰

The importance of **Winesburg, Ohio** comes from the reason that its stories have broken the common standards of the American story; the standards which are focused on the plot and action. This innovative structure is disconcerting to many of Anderson's contemporaries, who challenged the work's validity as fiction. Anderson, here is a disregard for temporal sequence and plot. These stories, really, can be interpreted as a portrayal of grotesque human beings. Anderson here tries to examine the limits of living in a small town. He deals with the life of the people there, especially the disappointed and isolated characters more than the developed

plot.¹¹ In his earlier works, Anderson has been dealing with himself and his experience. But then, he feels that his own personal experience is not enough, therefore, in ***Winesburg, Ohio***, he deals with human lives other than his own. In each story, he deals with the central character's life.

In the portrayal of his characters in this book, Anderson becomes one of the first writers who used the psychological theories, especially Freud's theories. Those characters are usually lonely, isolated, sad, disappointed because of the circumstances around them. Those characters cannot communicate with each other, and their way to express their feelings and their relationships usually take a special and strange form. Sherwood Anderson is able to show these things in *Winesburg* stories by using simple and strange pictures, and a style in which the prose turned into tragic poetry.¹² Concerning *Winesburg*'s characters, one can say that they are *Winesburg* town people who are grotesques, stunted, morally, emotionally, mentally or spiritually. They seem to be attracted toward George Willard, telling him their strange and sad stories. They hope that, in writing the stories of their lives, he will be able to import dignity and meaning to their personal struggle and experience.

2.2. The Symbol of the Hand in Winesburg, Ohio stories:

The hands are very significant as the readers can see in many of **Winesburg, Ohio** stories, "Hands," "Respectability," "Paper Pills" and

"The Thinker" in which Anderson uses the symbol of hands in different ways to emphasize the main theme of these stories which is the isolation of his characters and how their hands help them to express themselves, their thoughts and feelings, and how to communicate with others by using their hands.

"Hands" is the second story in the book in which the symbol of the hand is very clear and effective. Wing Biddlebaum, a fat, little, harmless, and sensitive old man, who lives in his small house in the town of Winesburg. Biddlebaum, though he has lived in this town for twenty years, still does not consider himself a part of it. He is close only to one person, George Willard, the reporter on Winesburg Eagle. Only with George Biddlebaum he would open up and talk for hours.

"The story of Wing Biddlebaum is a story of hands,"¹³ i.e. the whole story is related to the hands of Wing. He always "talked much with hands, the slender expressive fingers, forever active."(**WO**, 10). Biddlebaum's hands are very expressive and restless; their restless activities are described like "the beating of the wings of an imprisoned bird"(**WO**, 9) by which he has earned his name. In Winesburg, his hands

have attracted attention because of their activity, and have become a distinguished feature for his fame, "Winesburg was proud of the hands of Wings."(**WO**, 10)

George is also fascinated by Wing's hands and feels that there must be reasons for this fascination. One day both are involved in a deep discussion and Wing is chastising George for letting himself be influenced by people. Wing, who is totally involved, forgets his hands and slips them on George's shoulders and goes on speaking and begins to dream, only with George he forgets himself and "closed his hands and beat with them upon a table or on the walls of his house."(**WO**, 10) As he speaks, his eyes glow and his hands caress George's face. Immediately he realizes what he is doing and with a look of horror, he picks up his hands, "the hands alarmed their owner. He wanted to keep them hidden away and looked with amazement at the quiet inexpressive hands of other men."(**WO**, 9)

"The story of Wing Biddlebaum's hands is worth a book in itself."(**WO**, 10) The real story behind his hands is that as a young man, he was a school teacher in Pennsylvania and he was known as Adolph Myers. He had a very gentle soul which is ruled by a gentle power. With his boys, he used to be lost as if in a dream. While speaking to them, he would unconsciously caress their heads and stroke their shoulders. They began to dream with him; it is "a part of the schoolmaster's effort to

carry a dream into the young minds...by his fingers he expressed himself."(**WO**, 13, 14)

His tragedy struck when a little boy misunderstood his intentions and blurted out his feelings about the caresses. This instigated all the others who began disbelieving his pure aims and he was about to be hanged. So, Adolph was driven out of the school and the town and he ran away. Thus for twenty years, Adolph lived alone in Winesburg, with his stained past only his secret. He understood that his poor hands were to be blamed; therefore, he always kept them hidden away from the eyes of people, "his hands moving nervously" (**WO**, 8) and he always felt that they "must be to blame."(**WO**, 15)

George always feels that Wing's "hands have something to do with his fear of everyone"(**WO**, 12) and "there must be a reason for their strange activity and their inclination to keep hidden away,"(**WO**, 10) but he decides not to talk with Wing about his hands. At the end of the story,

Anderson gives a beautiful description of Wing's hands "the nervous expressive fingers, flashing in and out of the light, might well have been mistaken for the fingers of the devotee going swiftly through decade after decade of his rosary." (**WO**, 17)

The readers in this story can see that Wing's hands can express his feelings but he does not allow them to do. They are like a pen or typewriter by which the writer can express his

thoughts. He is afraid to express himself through these hands, as he once had with the boys he taught. He is frightened by his own passions. He tends to be misunderstood by people around him. But when he finds a person who understands him, like George Willard, he feels free to be himself; he communicates by using his expressive tool, his hands.

The same is true in "Paper Pills". This story is devoted to the inability to communicate thoughts. It concerns the aged Doctor Reefy, who has worn the same suit of clothes for ten years. He was married once to a much younger woman who died a year after their marriage. She was an heiress with two suitors, one who "talked continually of virginity" (*WO*, 21) and one who said almost nothing at all before trying to kiss her. Eventually, she became pregnant by the quiet suitor, and went to doctor Reefy for medical help. After that, they were married and during their few months of happiness, he would read to her from what he had written on little scraps of paper in his pockets.

Just like Biddlebaum, Reefy has a problem of being unable to communicate with others without being misunderstood. Therefore, he uses his hands to express his own thoughts. Anderson describes Reefy's hands as unnaturally large and they look like "clusters of unpainted wooden balls." (*WO*, 18) Using these hands, he has a strange habit of

writing his thoughts on papers and then crumpling the papers into balls; he is making bits of papers. These papers contain his written thoughts. Out of many of these thoughts he would form a truth when this truth grew and was clouded, he would throw it away and begin a new one with new thoughts.

The theme in both stories, "Hands" and "Paper Pills", is the loneliness and isolation of the main characters. Anderson uses the symbol of hand to emphasize his theme. Both Wing and Reefy have isolated themselves from other people of the town and both have used their hands to express themselves; Wing to express his feelings and Reefy to express his thoughts. Their hands become their only tool to communicate with the world.

In "Respectability," Anderson produces the symbol of hands again as a sign of communication and sensitivity. "Respectability" centers on Wash Williams, the telegraph operator in Winesburg. He is the ugliest man to be seen in the town. He is immense, with thin legs and neck, and is extremely filthy. He is just like a monkey in a cage. The town folk avoid any contact with him and so does he. It is George Willard who manages to extricate Wash's life story out. Once, when seeing George with a young girl taking a night walk, Wash accompanies George the next day and tells him his whole story.

Wash Williams once was a successful, good looking young telegraph operator in Columbus Ohio office. He had a wife and loved her very much but he discovered that she was cheating on him with other men. He left her immediately and since then, he has nothing to do with women considering them to be uniformly depraved and deceitful. After this accident, he becomes a person who does not care about his appearance. People in the town compare him to grotesque monkeys in cages in the town park. Though huge and dirty, he still rouses pity and sympathy from the readers. His hands are always very clean, in spite of his dirtiness. His clean fingers show the better side of his nature, a side which believes in gentility and grace.

Anderson gives Wash's hands a special description, though fat hands with fat fingers, they are shapely and look sensitive. They are always clean, "he was dirty. Everything about him was unclean... he took care of his hands. His fingers were fat, but there was something sensitive and shapely in the hand."(*WO*, 136) He believes that the hand is the best way to connect and forgive the mistakes of others, "I thought that if she came in and just touched me with her hand, I would perhaps faint away. I ached to forgive and forget."(*WO*, 143) He feels that his clean hands are the only thing that reflects his real personality and through them, he can communicate with others. As well as this, Anderson, by using the symbol of "the clean hands"(*WO*, 136), draws out and emphasizes his theme,

the theme of respectability and gentility which can be presented even in such a shabby person like Wash.

"The Thinker" is another story of **Winesburg, Ohio** in which Anderson produces the hand as a mean of connecting and expressing thoughts and feelings but in different way from the previous stories. It is the story of Seth Richmond, the son of a family that has fallen on hard times since the father's death. Seth is a very clear and sensitive thinker and he is a friend of George Willard. One night, in George's house, George declares his intention to fall in love and settles on Helen White, a local girl, as the object of his affection. He asks Seth to tell Helen, but Seth becomes flustered and he leaves. Seth wanders about his feeling of alienation, then he reaches White's house where he invites Helen out for a walk. As they walk, he tells her that he plans to get out of Winesburg, either by going to college or getting a job. There is a romantic tension between them, but it dissipates amid mutual awkwardness, and Seth is left thinking about how Helen will probably end up in love with "some fool...someone like George Willard."(**WO**, 165)

Seth Richmond is a silent person, a person who loves doing more than talking; He is a much deeper one. Although falling in love with Helen, he feels that she is just like others in Winesburg who loves too much talking. He wishes to be a mechanic because he believes that his hands will give more than his tongue, "I'll just be a mechanic in a shop...I just want

to work and keep quite."(**WO**, 163) Those hands can be the strong connected material between Seth and Helen. When they are walking together in Helen's garden, she "puts her hand boldly into Seth's hand...the hand of the girl was warm and a strange, dizzy feeling crept over him...Into his mind came a desire to tell her something he had been determined not to tell,"(**WO**, 160) but the hand is the thing that makes him speak.

Here , the hand is the connection between their own feelings of love and by separating them, Seth is cutting this connection because he is afraid from this love, "putting her hand upon Seth's shoulder...letting her hand fall heavily to her side....Releasing the hand of the girl, he thrust his hands into his trousers pockets."(**WO**, 162-4) When Seth releases his hands, he ends the feelings of love between him and Helen. As it is clear, Anderson in this story uses hands as a symbol of love connection. Besides the love between Helen and Seth, there is another picture of love in which the hand plays a role in. Virginia Richmond, Seth's mother, who loves her son so much and she cannot punish him for anything; cannot express her feelings and what she wants to say to her son, therefore, she uses her hands and writes these feelings, "she got a pencil and paper and wrote down a series of sharp, stinging reproofs she intended to pour upon her son."(**WO**, 149)

Finally, the hands, according to Anderson, are the best means of communication in the modern life. They help human

beings express themselves, when they are disappointed, isolated, wanted to be respected, or even to express their love.

Conclusion

In modern times, the communication between people becomes very difficult due to the difficult condition of life. Each human being needs something that helps him in his life; to express his thoughts, his feelings, to prove himself among the others and also to strengthen his relationship with people around him.

Winesburg, Ohio reveals Sherwood Anderson's ability in dealing with the difficulty of communication in the modern age. He uses a special symbol, the symbol of hand as a solution to this problem and he presents it to the readers through a group of stories. In "Hands," "Paper Pills," and "Respectability," the hands are the best means for the heroes of these stories to express themselves in Winesburg town in spite of being grotesque characters. In "The Thinker," the writer uses the hands to be the only way for the characters to express love. Love here is the thing that cannot be discussed or shown only by hands.

Like Anderson, everyone in this life must find a special, beautiful and simple way which can help him in making a strong bond and a good relationship with the others around him

and to express himself in the best way without being misunderstood.

Notes

1. Fidel Fajardo- Acosta, "understanding Literature," *World Literature Website*, 2001, N.P. URL: <http://fajardo-acosta.com/worldlit/understanding.htm>. Retrieved 28 July 2012.
2. William Flint Thrall and Addison Hibbard, *A Handbook to Literature*, (New York: Odyssey Press, 1960), p.478.
3. Ibid, p.479.
4. Ibid.
5. Ibid.
6. Hilbert H. Campbell, "The Shadow people: Feodor Sologub and Sherwood Anderson's *Winesburg, Ohio*," *Studies in Short Fiction Journal*, Vol.33, Issue.1, (1996), p.51.
7. Thrall and Hibbard, pp.300, 305.
8. "Winesburg, Ohio" in *Wikipedia: The Free Encyclopedia*, p.1. URL:http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Winesburg,_Ohio_%28novel%29. Retrieved 20 July 2012.
9. Adli Hilal Odeh, " 'Characters Types' in Sherwood Anderson's *Winesburg, Ohio*," *International Journal of*

Arts and Sciences, Vol.10, No.3, Issue.1994, (2010), p.85.

10. Quoted in Odeh, p.86
11. "Winesburg, Ohio" in *Wikipedia: The Free Encyclopedia*, p.1.
12. Odeh, pp. 86-7, 94.
13. Sherwood Anderson, *Winesburg, Ohio: A Group of Tales of Ohio Small- Town Life*, (New York: Modern Library, 1919), p.9. All other quotations of Anderson's "Hands," "Paper Pills," "Respectability," and "The Thinker" are from this collection and henceforth are parenthetically cited within the text as **WO**, followed by page number.

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