

## Why We Should Care – Or Not Care – about *Winesburg, Ohio* in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century

by Will Schuck, Sherwood Anderson Literary Center ©2019

*Presentation given at the Clyde (Ohio) Museum on September 10, 2019,  
celebrating the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the publishing of Winesburg, Ohio, by Sherwood Anderson*

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Our purpose here tonight is to discover – or uncover -- why we should care about *Winesburg, Ohio* in these days of social media, advanced technology, and fake news... along with all of our almost-normal 21st century cares of day-to-day living.

My process for achieving our purpose is not going to be all that complicated.... I have planned to simply paint some broad strokes about Anderson, his life, *Winesburg, Ohio*, and society today based on my personal impressions and connections with the book, and....

The payoff to you at the end of tonight is:

- You will know something new about *Winesburg, Ohio* and/or Sherwood Anderson that you didn't know before tonight.
- You'll gain some insight into how I see *Winesburg, Ohio* and Sherwood Anderson though my 20 years of studying him and his work, and....
- You'll be able to sleep well tonight knowing that I've put to rest some of the false criticisms and conclusions you've heard about Anderson and *Winesburg, Ohio*, and why he and his most famous book are no longer relevant among modern literature.

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So, why is *Winesburg* relevant in the 21st century? Why should we care about this story -- or collection of stories? What are some of the common theories? Anyone... anyone... Bueller? We only have time for short answers....

Some would argue that *Winesburg, Ohio* is actually set right here in the town of Clyde and since Clyde is still here, and so are many of the buildings, and families Anderson knew, that it's still relevant -- for the most part -- because the setting is the book's main character, and the setting remains right here, today. Who agrees with this theory...?

Although Clyde may serve as *Winesburg's* backdrop – and even that has been disputed by some - - wasn't *Winesburg* not only the story of Clyde but also the story of the condition of the American small town? And wasn't it – and isn't it – also the story of America... and of mankind? From his experience living on the Route 20 circuit from Clyde to Elyria to Cleveland to Chicago, *Winesburg* is said to be all of them rolled up and put into the place he knew best. And the people in *Winesburg* aren't just here in Clyde, in Cleveland or in Chicago, they're everywhere! That's why *Winesburg* is revered and loved and taught widely in Japan, the Middle East, Russia, all over Europe and other places in the world maybe more than here in the U.S.!

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For those of you who have never read *Winesburg, Ohio*, or those who have read it many years ago and have forgotten... or perhaps you've read it and it didn't make a bit of sense to you.... Let me give you a mini summary of the book's significance, themes and style – no spoilers, however!

In his *Memoirs* that were published more than 20 years after *Winesburg, Ohio*, and a year after his untimely death in 1941, Anderson said of *Winesburg* that it had “become a kind of American classic and has been said by many critics to have started a kind of revolution in American short-story writing.” This is true because the “Lost Generation” of writers that followed Anderson - those that mimicked his style and took it as their own included some authors you may have heard of:

- Hemingway
- Faulkner
- Fitzgerald
- Steinbeck

In other words, Anderson died knowing that *Winesburg* was a classic literary work.

But at the time it was published in 1919, the American reading public held an idealized concept of small-town life that included hard work, strong Judeo-Christian values, a slower pace and a simpler way of life free of the drama and hardships of either city living or farm life.

On the other hand, Anderson's *Winesburg* was filled with people he called the grotesques, who were lonely, separated, and lacking the love and understanding they longed for. They were trapped in their small town by their desires, beliefs and values while unable to understand the difference between their dreams and reality. These residents – or characters – of *Winesburg* were Anderson's “grotesques.” In the introduction to *Winesburg, Ohio*, Anderson writes that a grotesque is someone who holds onto a personal “truth” but turns it into a lie by trying to live by that truth. What's the outcome? Perhaps this list of thesaurus words for grotesque will help:

- incongruous
- ridiculous
- ludicrous
- laughable
- outrageous
- outlandish
- surreal
- weird
- ugly
- gross
- fantastic
- bizarre
- monstrous
- misshapen
- distorted

*Winesburg, Ohio* features more than 20 characters. In the first chapter entitled “Hands,” Anderson says that to tell the stories of these obscure people, “It is a job for a poet.” I took that

challenge seriously and so turned the introduction, “The Book of the Grotesque” into a poem, which I’ll share with you now because it captures the essence of Anderson’s vision of and for the people of Winesburg....

### **Grotesque**

©2004, Will Schuck

Friend carpenter,  
Help me raise my bed.  
I want to see out the window  
Without lifting my head.  
I just can’t sleep nights,  
Something’s not right.  
In fact, here’s what’s happening  
To me every night.

I lie in a trance  
Afraid I will die.  
My heart is failing,  
I can’t open my eyes.  
A woman controls me,  
Inside me she stays.  
Over and over,  
Here’s what she says:

It’s strange and grotesque,  
This passing with death,  
But you are my friend  
And you’ll understand.  
It’s strange and grotesque,  
This passing with death.

On these nights  
When I’m afraid I will die,  
The woman parades folks  
All through my mind.  
Each person embraces  
A truth he only knows  
And with it he wrestles  
And eventually grows.

It’s strange and grotesque,  
This passing with death,  
But you are my friend  
And you’ll understand.  
It’s strange and grotesque,  
This passing with death.

These people haunt me,  
So about them I write.  
They stay with me always  
Until morning light.  
I reach for my pen  
And I open my pad.  
Some of their stories are happy,  
Others are sad.

Friend, please don’t cry,  
Let’s have a cigar.  
Let’s talk about old times,  
Including the war.  
Your moustache has yellowed,  
And also has mine.  
Though we’ll both die,  
Right now we have time.

It’s strange and grotesque,  
This passing with death,  
But you are my friend  
And you’ll understand.  
It’s strange and grotesque,  
This passing with death.

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Although it's not a cohesive, traditional novel with a standard plot outline, introduction, rising action, climax, falling action and conclusion (see graphic), the 21 stories that comprise *Winesburg, Ohio* each have their own plots and are bound together by their setting (town of Winesburg) the network of relationships between the characters, the darkness that seems to surround the action of most of the characters, as well as their grasping, reaching, touching, and using their hands to relate their "truth" to others through their experiences.

Yes, the themes, characters and location of *Winesburg, Ohio* are enduring, however...

I'd like to point out here – and this may surprise you – but *Winesburg, Ohio* is not relevant because Anderson was a great writer. He wasn't. He rewrote and changed the endings of his stories like a chameleon changes colors! Dr. Reefy of Winesburg, who wrote down truths and wadded them up into "paper pills" may be symbolic of Sherwood beginning his story ideas and starting over...! Anderson himself said about his own writing, "I have seldom written a story, long or short, that I did not have to write and rewrite. There are single stories of mine that have taken me ten or twelve years to get written."

No, he wasn't a great writer, but he was a great storyteller! *Winesburg*, this so-called cubist novel, was told the way true storytellers tell stories. It's not nice and neatly packaged but written as the details occurred to the storyteller – the way the human mind really works. Is storytelling relevant now? You'll find that storytelling is now a necessary skill for nearly all marketing and social media jobs! (see job posting examples).

It doesn't matter if Anderson had amnesia when he walked away from his business career in Elyria to become a writer, or if he suffered from fugue states, or if he acted out his stories to find out if they were plausible, or if he drank too much – you know that's why some said the book is called *Winesburg*, because supposedly Anderson "had to go to Winesburg" (or get drunk) to feel inspired to write! What mattered is that he cared enough to hold their stories sympathetically in his heart and retell them – as he puts it in the chapter called "Paper Pills" in *Winesburg, Ohio*,

"On the trees are only a few gnarled apples that the pickers have rejected. They look like the knuckles of Doctor Reefy's hands. One nibbles at them and they are delicious. Into a little round place at the side of the apple has been gathered all its sweetness. One runs from tree to tree over the frosted ground picking the gnarled, twisted apples and filling his pockets with them. Only the few know the sweetness of the twisted apples."

By collecting and telling the stories of the "twisted apples," Anderson built his legacy. His legacy and the legacy of *Winesburg*, which is helping people -- helping others -- so they could be better than they have been, and better than Anderson himself was.

Anderson has been deemed the 20th century's first psychological writer, where we can peer into the thoughts and motivations of his characters... and isn't that what the world does to us today? Google, Amazon, Facebook, and the other online media that we rely upon for nearly everything

we do in work and personal lives are peering into our collective psyche... what do we read, watch, like, buy, and why?

For some additional perspective on *Winesburg's* relevance to today's society, I'd like to introduce the short video I'm about to share with you. In 2005, I produced an interview with Dr. Bill Sutton, a retired professor of English from Ball State University, and the author of this fine book, *The Road to Winesburg*. Bill was living in Dunedin, Florida – near a golf course where this interview was recorded. Dr. Sutton was 90 years young when he did this interview – after you see this, you may say like I did, “I hope I look and sound that great when I'm 90!” Bill passed away three years ago, but thankfully, we have this excellent interview with him to remember him and to remember Sherwood Anderson and *Winesburg, Ohio*. (queue video at <https://youtu.be/1WF-NktcNhE>)

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Can I take a moment here to say that I'm not here to impress you with my knowledge and wisdom about *Winesburg, Ohio* and Sherwood Anderson but to humble myself by saying I know as much as you do or perhaps even less. I'm a middle aged educated white man in a suit. I have a family and a home and a job but I'm just as broken and misshapen as these cubist paintings (graphics) and the characters in *Winesburg*, and so are you – so are we all....

I say this now because I'm about to share with you the most enduring thing about *Winesburg, Ohio*... not its themes, not its characters not the town, nor even its psychological viewpoint, but the most enduring aspect of *Winesburg, Ohio*, is... (drum roll) YOU!

Why you? Because you are in it. You are a character in *Winesburg, Ohio*, but not just because you may identify with one character. But because right here tonight in this room we have someone – or one of us knows someone – who longs to be a great writer and is stuck writing for a small town newspaper (like George Willard). We have someone here tonight (or we know someone) who had aspirations of becoming an actor but got mixed up with the wrong people or otherwise missed their opportunity to make it (like George's mother Elizabeth Willard). Right here in this room we may have someone or we may know someone who had to give up the career he loved because he was unjustly accused of doing something he didn't do (like the Winesburg teacher Wing Biddlebaum). There is someone here tonight who is passionate about something that matters desperately to them -- that no one else cares about (like Winesburg businessman and baseball coach Joe Welling). Someone you know or someone or here in this room is struggling with the contrast between serving God and making too much money (like Winesburg farmer and man-of-God Jesse Bentley). There may be someone here tonight who waited for a lover to come back and the doggone dirty buster is never coming back! I said “buster!” (like Alice Hindman) And in this political season, I'm sure we all know of someone who is politically astute and well connected but something in their past or in their family is holding them back (like owner of the Winesburg hotel Tom Willard). And these are just some of the people in *Winesburg, Ohio*, as well as some of the people in this room... and some of the people we know, and some of the people who will take their place on this earth long after we're gone.

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Finally, *Winesburg Ohio* will continue to be relevant in the 21st century and beyond as long as we have people who aspire to be more than their surroundings allow. As long as we have people who fail to meet up to their own standards or the standards of others. As long as we have disadvantaged people stuck in places they can't seem to escape. As long as we have bad things happening to good people, and good things happening to bad people. As long as we have gossip, and facts, the real world and the imagined, as long as we have small towns, big cities, and the mentalities that go along with them and those who like Winesburg Eagle newspaper reporter George Willard attempt to see through all these guises and get to the truth — *Winesburg Ohio* and the works of Sherwood Anderson will be as relevant as the sunrise and the sunset of each day over the real “Winesburgs” of the world.

In summary, I've adapted this passage from Chapter 6: “Godliness,” in *Winesburg, Ohio*

It will perhaps be somewhat difficult for the men and women of a later day to understand the people of Winesburg. In the last 100 years a vast change has taken place in the lives of our people. A revolution has in fact taken place. The coming of electronic media, attended by all the clicks, beeps, bright lights, and alarms of our affairs, the shrill cries of millions of new voices that have come among us from over our borders, the going and coming of cars, the growth of suburbs and the decline of cities, the building of multi-lane interstate highways that weave around and through towns and past farmhouses, and now in these later days the coming of the internet with Google and Amazon has worked a tremendous change in the lives and the habits of thought of our people of Mid-America.

-- Sherwood Anderson and Will Schuck