

“The Book of the Grotesque” and *Winesburg, Ohio**

Lihua Zhang

School of Foreign Languages, Beijing Institute of Technology, 100081, Beijing, China

Abstract—Sherwood Anderson’s representative work *Winesburg, Ohio* portrays a procession of grotesque characters in the background of looming industrialism into the picaresque rural American small town. Its first story “The Book of the Grotesque” is not a separate story like others but serves a general prologue, intending to plant the concept of grotesque in the reader’s mind. Along with this, it links to the overall design of subsequent stories, with the old writer corresponding to George Willard, the carpenter to those grotesques, and the old writer’s bedroom to the grotesques’ entrapment of mentality.

Index Terms—articulation, grotesques, barriers of communication, industrialism

I. INTRODUCTION

Sherwood Anderson, influenced by Sigmund Freud and Henry James, published his masterpiece *Winesburg, Ohio* in 1919, a collection of 25 short stories all with psychological depth or perception. Set about in the 1890s it painted the ordinary life in the small Midwest town on the background of industrialization in American society, when city life gradually substituted town life and people there, faced with kinds of emotional or psychological lacunae, become the grotesques in others’ eyes. Those grotesques anguish in sorts of mental diseases that live inside them, struggling, clawing, shrieking at them and nearly tearing them down. Their eccentricity makes them lonely, urgently desirous for a companion to share their feelings or thoughts. George Willard, the reporter of *Winesburg Eagle* is chosen as the listener, thus combining all the stories. Professor Baym has pointed out, *Winesburg, Ohio* has explored the psychological and emotional aspects of American small-town life, as well as “the groping attempts of the townspeople to articulate their feelings and communicate with others—the repressed yearnings and obsessions which surface fleetingly or explosively from the depths of their experience” (Baym, 1999, p.1548).

The stories are plotless in usual sense because Anderson adopted the same technique—a very moment to permit the reader to grasp the nature of somewhat isolation that controls the characters’ individuality. Almost in every short story, there is a changing process of the protagonist’s mentality and in a moment he is crazy, which seems to spur him or her to make a change but the change never occurs. Anderson has his moment of craziness, too. In November 1912 Anderson suffered a mental breakdown and disappeared for four days. He was found in a drugstore in Cleveland, having walked almost thirty miles. Soon after, he left his position as president of the Anderson Manufacturing Co. in Elyria. He abandoned his wife and three small children to pursue writing. Anderson described the episode as “escaping from his materialistic existence”. The moment of revelation, or epiphany as James Joyce would call it, or “moment of being” in Virginia Woolf’s words, was the story Anderson told over and over and he “had that gift for summing up, for pouring a lifetime into a moment.” (Malcolm, 1976, p.8)

The moment, moreover, is portrayed with a combination of realism and symbolism. The former is best represented by George Willard’s occupation as a reporter, a job allowing him to have widest connection with the people. However, George could only see, hear, feel the externals, the everyday surface of life; to perceive the intricate mesh of impulses, desires, drives beneath it symbolism will help. Places, hands, walls and windows are endowed with symbolic meanings. The closed windows and rooms where those grotesques often stayed, suggested isolation and confinement. “Hands” recur in many stories are associated with different connotations like disease, trauma, desire and so forth. All the things seem to happen in the dark, rendering an air of depression in a gloomy background.

The first story, “The Book of the Grotesque”, serving as a general prologue, explains the author’s unifying conception of his characters: “Their lives have been distorted not, as Anderson tells us in his prologue, by their each having seized upon a single truth, but rather by their inability to express themselves. Since they cannot truly communicate with others, they have all become emotional cripples.” (Malcolm, 1976, pp.14-15) Because of one particular incident or event, they become grotesques and their lives are distorted, disfigured and maimed. This introductory section is not a separate story as that follows, but intends to intensify the concept of grotesque. Along with this, it links to the overall design of subsequent stories, with the old writer corresponding to George Willard, the carpenter to those grotesques, and the old writer’s bedroom to the grotesques’ entrapment of mentality.

* This paper is sponsored by No. 20122442003 project of Basic Research Fund of Beijing Institute of Technology.

II. THE TITLE "THE BOOK OF THE GROTESQUE"

In the prologue, an old writer hires an old carpenter to raise his bed so that it would be level with the windows. The carpenter is a veteran from the Civil War and a prisoner once. His brother died of starvation and he cries when telling this. The carpenter ends up fixing the bed in his own way and the old writer has to use a chair to get to it. In bed, the old writer would wonder about having a heart attack since he is a heavy smoker. He would think about many people he has known; in his dreams they are all grotesques, ranging from the nearly beautiful to the painfully misshapen. The parade of characters propels him to write a book called "The Book of the Grotesque" which is never published. The old writer would have become a grotesque but he is saved by the young thing within him.

The original title of *Winesburg, Ohio* is "The Book of the Grotesque", as Anderson named it when he submitted his manuscripts to a publisher. The publisher changed the title but Anderson kept it in his first story, the general prologue of the book. Thus it attempts to set forth the tone of the subsequent stories by reinforcing the concept of grotesque in this part.

Grotesque, as the dictionary defines, is "characterized by bizarre distortions, especially in the exaggerated or abnormal depiction of human features. The literature of the grotesque involves freakish caricatures of people's appearance and behavior, as in the novels of Dickens. A disturbingly odd fictional character may also be called a grotesque." (Baldick, 2001, p.93) It is also originated from Edgar Allen Poe's masterpiece *Tales of the Grotesque and Arabesque* (1840). In Poe's stories the characters are elusively neurotic or even hysterical under certain circumstances. They are totally welded by their subconscious impulses and morbid psychology enveloped in a gothic-like mood. But Poe does not reveal the reason behind their grotesqueness. Anderson, however, furthers the literary history on the portrayal of grotesques by rooting it in industrialism. He states it in the story of "Godliness":

"In the past fifty years a vast change has taken place in the lives of our people. A revolution has in fact taken place. The coming of industrialism, attended by all the roar and rattle of affairs, the shrill cries of millions of new voices that have come among us from overseas, the going and coming of trains, the growth of cities, the building of the interurban car lines that weave in and out of towns and past farmhouses, and now in these later days the coming of the automobiles has worked a tremendous change in the lives and in the habits of thoughts of our people of Mid-America."

Industrialism to the writer Anderson is degrading, humiliating and despairing. It builds wall of inarticulateness, separating people, engulfing them in pragmatic business culture and indifferent interpersonal relationship. Sherwood Anderson remarks: "As a people we have given ourselves to industrialism, and industrialism is not lovely. If any man can find beauty in an American factory town I wish he would show me the way. For myself, I cannot find it. To me, and I am living in industrial life, the whole thing is an ugly as a modern war." (Rideout, 2006, p.66) In American old industrial small town people are defeated, rebuffed, so they turn inward, become new cowards, twisting spiritually. In the prologue the established tone about grotesques is a solemn compassion.

"The grotesques were not all horrible. Some were amusing, some almost beautiful, and one, a woman all drawn out of shape, hurt the old man by her grotesqueness. When she passed he made a noise like a small dog whimpering."

The prologue is told by the omniscient author. He makes a comment on the old writer's "The book of the grotesque": "By remembering it I have been able to understand many people and things that I was never able to understand before". By trying to imprint the concept of grotesque in the readers' minds, he hopes the readers will do the same.

III. OLD WRITER'S BEDROOM AND THE RECURRENT SYMBOL OF ROOM IN *WINESBURG, OHIO*

The conversation between the old writer and carpenter takes place in a small room. The old writer trapped here tries to provide the room with a view, to see the outside world of vitality and activity. It is interesting to note Anderson himself had his bed raised so that he could look out at the Loop in Chicago. Undoubtedly the small is not as a place of warmth, security and comfort in the usual sense, but one of isolation and entrapment. This narrow place cuts man off from human contact, as seen in many more stories after the prologue.

Take Enoch Robinson's New York room for instance ("Loneliness"). "The story of Enoch is in fact the story of a room." Enoch, always a childlike man, was an introverted artist, drawing and burying his thoughts in painting in his New York Apartment which faced the Washington Square. He once invited young men to his room, talking of art passionately but he himself alone was an outsider, stammering, sputtering and finally silencing. Estranged from them he fell into a habit of talking only with imaginary figures alone in his locked room because this made him important and self-assured. In Anderson's description, Enoch's New York Room with his own pictures, was "long and narrow like a hallway", which in fact resembles an art gallery, enabling him to live with his fancy persons to whom he could really talk and to whom he explained the things he had been unable to explain to living people. Only in this locked room could his sense of being alienated and minor be dispelled. Pitifully in the background of the Washington Square his small room is more devalued: trivial, insignificant, emotionally barren, for its spatial narrowness and closeness contrast to the former's openness to human contact. Lacking of such openness to others, Enoch, like all the other grotesques in this town such as Wing Biddlebaum and Doctor Reefy, his loneliness is doomed to last for the rest of his life.

IV. THE CARPENTER AND THE RECURRENT SYMBOL OF HANDS IN *WINESBURG, OHIO*

In the prologue, the carpenter cried when he told about himself and his brother's death of starvation. He is a perfect

example who metamorphosed into the grotesque but remained lovable (“he, like many of what are called very common people, became the nearest thing to what is understandable and lovable of all the grotesques in the writer’s book.”) Like this carpenter each in the subsequent stories seems eager to tell someone about himself and each chooses George who is a reporter and will become a fiction writer as soon as possible.

The grotesques are beset with all kinds of mental or emotional diseases, elusively finding their expressions through some symbols. In the subsequent stories, hands are recurrent symbols charged with meaning. Wing Biddlebaum’s hands (“Hands”) are active, expressive and affectionate, but he seems to be frightened by their power and attempts to keep them hidden. “His story is a story of hand.” He was known as Adolph Myers, a respectable teacher in Pennsylvania before moving to Winesburg. He used to caress his students’ shoulders and tousle their hair in his dreamy talks to them. But one student dreamt of unspeakable things and accused him of sexual harassment. More students followed suit. Believed to be a pedophile by the local people, he was beaten, and banished. He escaped to Winesburg where he lived a lonely life as Wing Biddlebaum, supporting himself by picking fruits in an orchard. To illustrate, with the change of his name, he has lost his identity and cut his history off from the past. This odd name also links to his “nervous little hands”, the instrument of harassment, which makes them not so much as merely human hands, but “the wings of an imprisoned bird”. Analogically his inarticulation traps him in his own mentality, like a bird in cage; his hands resembling the bird’s wings, even if widely spread, or restlessly active, are not capable to set him free to have real human contact. Therefore, his aching experience handicaps him in communication. Similarly there are Doctor Reefy’s hands (“Paper Pills”), “the knuckles of the doctor’s hands were extraordinarily large”. Later Anderson compares them to “the gnarled, twisted apples left by the pickers in an orchard, and he adds, “Only the few know the sweetness of the twisted apples”. The ugly appearance, like “knuckles” alludes to Doctor’s grotesqueness in others’ eyes while the “sweetness” inside directs readers’ attention to good qualities of these grotesques in that Doctor Reefy marries the “tall black girl” after her being seduced by the black-haired boy. To the “tall black girl”, Doctor’s knuckled hands signify solace, innocent of desire for any purpose; while the “white hands” of jeweler’s son (“Paper Pills”), one of her suitors, signify possessive lust, terrifying her in her dreams—he has little difference with another young suitor, that black-haired boy who seduces her indeed.

Hands may look symptomatic of disease. Elizabeth Willard (“Mother”), George Willard’s mother, has “long hands, white and bloodless” in a “ghostly figure”. Her hands, pointing to decay, characterize her state of life as a middle-aged woman, troubled with obscure physical disease on the one side and baffled in her unfulfilled theater dreams on the other side. In her maidenhood she dreamt of acting and travelling to have adventures in a broad world of life. But her dreams were frustrated by her unhappy marriage with a man of pragmatics, not of dreams. In despair she is restless, unable to communicate or live effectively. In this sense, her “bloodless” hands and “ghostly figure” are not only symptoms of serious disease, but may suggest a living death, or an image of apparition in all others’ eyes. There are also Tom Willard’s (“The Philosopher”) “peculiarly marked hands”, whose fingers have flaming red birthmark. The redness deepens when he becomes excited, talking politics. His hands thus become the embodiment of his own political aspiration, which, however, nobody would share with him.

Hands, a symbol throughout all the stories, have their ultimate meaning generalized by Anderson toward the end of *Winesburg, Ohio*. In “Departure” when referring to George Willard’s hands, it says “With all his heart he wants to come close to some other human, touch someone with his hands, be touched by the hand of another.” Hands, therefore, to Anderson, are not merely symbolic of desire, absurdity, disease, but a carrier of human communication and companionship, redeeming the grotesques out of their abyss of dark life.

V. THE OLD WRITER AND GEORGE WILLARD

The old writer, like George Willard, however, spares himself the fate of being a grotesque. He listened to the old carpenter so attentively that he forgot the matter of raising the bed. In the meantime the latter’s story became his inspirational force to associate with figures in his mind. The window, now below his raised bed, is a fit symbol of a narrative entry, allowing him to look below, into his past, into his subconscious.

“In the bed the writer had a dream that was not a dream. As he grew somewhat sleepy but was still conscious, figures began to appear before his eyes. He imagined the young indescribable thing within himself was driving a long procession of figures before his eyes.”

The reader may see his counterpart George Willard especially in “Departure”.

“With the recollection of little things occupying his mind he closed his eyes and leaned back in the car seat. He stayed that way for a long time and when he aroused himself and again looked out of the car window the town of Winesburg had disappeared and his life there had become but a background on which to paint the dream of his manhood.” (“Departure”)

They both play a dual role as a listener and recorder of others’ stories. It is even safe to say the old writer is George Willard in his old age. As a teenager boy George does not bear the burden that life has pressed on the backs of the other characters and feels no sense of alienation. Instead, all the grotesques pin their hope on George to articulate their hearts to reestablish their connection with mankind. Moreover his occupation as a reporter in the local newspaper aspires him to be a fiction writer. They urge him to preserve and develop his gift. Kate Swift (“The Teacher”), his school teacher insists, taking hold of his shoulders, “you must not become a mere peddler of word. The thing to learn is to know what

people are thinking about, not what they say.” Dr. Parcival (“The Philosopher”) tells him, “If something happens perhaps you will be able to write the book I may never get written.” George is too young to understand their high expectation but his maturity physically and emotionally in the least illuminates a light at the end of the book, which helps to connect a maturing young man with the aging writer at the beginning of the book.

George’s maturing is chronicled in the last three stories of the book “Death”, “Sophistication” and “Departure”. In “Death”, his mother died painfully after paralysis for 6 days in bed in the year he became 18. Her death refigures her as a young graceful girl, releasing her finally from her humdrum marriage life. George, whereas, is oddly unaffected at first: her death gave him “a queer empty feeling” and he felt “annoyed”, “half angrily” because he would have to put off the date with Helen White. His disinterest or detachment is meant purposely by Anderson to point out the truth—her passing is the final moment of his childhood, enabling him to make the decision to leave Winesburg for his prospect. In “Sophistication”, he begins to look back on his childhood for the first time, giving him a new sense of manhood—“a moment of sophistication”. He and Helen took a nostalgic view about the town they lived in and would progress in their emotional lives. That night at the half decayed grand-stand in Winesburg Fair Ground, a symbol of nostalgic indulgence, he achieved his sophistication about love and sexual consciousness: he kissed Helen briefly and in the end they came back into town together in a very dignified fashion. If in his relation with Belle Carpenter, George tries all he can to prove his manhood, with Helen, now the college student, he is sure of his own manhood. In “Departure”, George is leaving Winesburg for good. He is taller than his father, symbolizing his newfound manhood; he does not see Helen running to say goodbye because she is left behind him as a part of his past. As the train started what was in his mind was not something serious or apparently important, but little details of the friendly town in which he was growing up, the trivial matters about solitary grotesques. At this point the figures in his mind on train coincide and overlap with those in the old writer at his bedroom.

“At this desk the writer worked for an hour. In the end he wrote a book which he called ‘The book of the Grotesque.’ It was never published, but I saw it once and it made an indelible impression on my mind...” (“The Book of the Grotesque”)

George leaves his small town in time to avoid the destiny of being a grotesque like his townspeople. Yet his sympathetically emotional attachment to them as their listener and advice-giver on certain occasions, or those little things in his mind, will not be erased easily no matter where he is. Particularly he will take writing as his occupation even living afar. In this sense, the old writer incarnates the old George Willard, who will become the voice of inarticulate men and women in all the solitary towns, and who has done as earnestly expected by his school teacher Kate Swift and Dr. Parcival.

VI. CONCLUSION

Winesburg, Ohio is not a detailed recording of daily life of the small town people at the turn of the century, but cuts through the surface of lives into the hidden, controlling innermost souls, or in Anderson’s words, in “moments”. In its general prologue, the tone is set forth purposely by Anderson in order to lead the reader toward the type of mood he wanted to adopt. In his small bedroom without a view, the old writer seems to be lonely, decaying and trapped, which may reduce him to a grotesque like those under his pen. Fortunately he is not as stubborn and staunch as his characters, sticking to one idea; rather he hired a carpenter to raise the bed to have a view outside window; it is writing, as a way of articulation, that has saved him.

“The Book of the Grotesque” said, the writer is inspired one night while thinking about his death. At this point, he experiences the thing inside him which is like a young pregnant woman. This image may sound bizarre but it is actually a creative way to describe the types of moments in his mind: it is a symbol of life within death, equivalent to fertility characterizing a pregnant woman. Repeatedly it says “The thing to get at is what the writer, or the young thing within the writer, was thinking about.” “It was the young thing inside him that saved the old man.” The “young”, by giving him creativity and vitality, helps to take the burden of alienation and loneliness off from the backs of those bizarre figures in his mind, and voice their hunger for love and understanding as well.

The weeping carpenter is a grotesque, flawed, ineffectual and incomplete. His existence foreshadows all others in subsequent stories. He can tell his stories only to the old writer as those grotesques in Winesburg, Ohio can only do so to George Willard. Their inability of articulation takes a variety of forms: inability to communicate feelings as seen in “Hands”, inability to communicate thoughts in “Paper Pills”, inability to communicate love in “Mother” and the like.

Characters become engrossed in a moment, which furnishes the reader with a penetrating glimpse of the innermost world of the grotesques. The moment is highly significant and pivotal in the life of the protagonist and appears as it will spur him onto a life-changing action, however it never does. For Alice in “Adventure” the moment of adventure changes into the moment of resignation, “trying to force herself to face bravely the fact that many people must live and die alone, even in Winesburg.” For Seth in “The Thinker” the moment of romantic sentiment changes into a moment of self-discovery; for Ray Pearson and Hal Winters in “The Untold Lie”, a moment of established communication changes into a moment of deliberate self-delusion. The moment slips away and so does the vivacity of the figure which Anderson has chosen to highlight. Anderson may suggest that in the industrial age and coming consumer society, spiritual food is a rare commodity like understanding, love, companionship and so forth. The grotesques are doomed grotesques in the real world but may find their counterparts in the fictional world, in this book, for instance.

REFERENCES

- [1] Anderson, Sherwood. (1976). Winesburg, Ohio, "Introduction" by Malcolm Cowley, Penguin Edition.
- [2] Baldick, Chris. (2001). ed. Oxford Concise Dictionary of Literary Terms, Shanghai: Shanghai Foreign Language Education Press.
- [3] Baym, N. (1999). ed. The Norton anthology of American literature. New York: Norton.
- [4] Rideout, W. B. (2006). A writer in America. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press.

Lihua Zhang was born in Shandong, China in 1979. She received her master degree in linguistics from Xiamen University, China in 2003.

She is currently a lecturer in the School of Foreign Languages, Beijing Institute of Technology, Beijing, China. Her research interests include Applied Linguistics, and American literature.