

Deformity in Characters Exposed by Sherwood Anderson

***Mona Sharma**

Abstract

Sherwood Anderson became famous due to bringing American Literature into a new way of writing short stories – which are famous for their characterization. As a story teller, Anderson seems to be preoccupied by a need to describe the plight of the “Grotesque”- the unsuccessful, the deprived and the inarticulate. The aim of this paper is to explore and draw attention towards ‘deformity in characters’ that he has discussed in his great work *Winesburg, Ohio*.

Another major change in Anderson’s writing when he moved away from his early novels to Winesburg stories was a shift away from plot. We can find a little development of a story line in the Winesburg tales in terms of cause and effect. The story begins with a physical description of the central character focusing a Grotesque feature or trait. Then, usually in relation to George Willard as listener, something of the character’s past history is revealed [a desertion a death in the family, an unwanted pregnancy]. The story gets usually with the character committing a desperate act [getting drunk, shorting in the streets, striking at the newspaper reporter] and fleeing temporarily from the town. With Winesburg, Ohio Anderson made possible the exploration of the usual, the Bizarre, the outré, the decadent and the Grotesque that for him made up the most interesting and wonderful examples of human character subsequent American writers who influenced greatly in the short story form – among them William Faulkner, Ernest Hemingway, John Steinbeck and Thomas Wolf.

In observing one of the most important things about American life is the isolation, alienation in some way physically or emotionally. Anderson’s brought out the sense of alienation that had become a theme of much 20th Century American Literature. In the last quarter of the 19th Century, he had seen quite villages of farmers and tradesmen disrupted by the advent of factories with machines. Machines produce goods in less time than even before.

As a narrator of the stories, Anderson himself exemplifies both youth and old age in Winesburg, Ohio. Anderson introduces a youthful character named George Willard, who figures in all but two of subsequent stories. As a reporter for the town newspaper, and as an aspiring writer intent on learning about life through his repeated intimate contacts with the inhabitants of Winesburg.

In the first of the sketches “The Book of The Grotesque” which Anderson uses as a settlement of purpose; this approach is defined in symbolic terms. He shows that the characters have been twisted psychologically that their real natures have nothing to do with their appearances. Due to this spiritual distortion, these causes narrowness of human vision both their own and that of others. He is interested in understanding and loving these twisted people and he employs empathy, compassion and intuition rather than analysis or fierce desire to cure.

In the first sketch, in which he describes that an old writer who has achieved an understanding of his fellow man and has retired from life to observe men and to teach them understanding. Anderson

Deformity in Characters Exposed by Sherwood Anderson

Mona Sharma

defines his problem symbolically by having the writer says:

“...In the beginning when the world was young there were great many thoughts but no such things as truth. Man made the truths himself and each truth was a composite of a great many vague thoughts. All about in the world were the truths and they were all beautiful...

And then the people came along came along. Each as he appeared snatched up one of truths and some who were quite strong snatched up a dozen of them.

It was the truths that made the people grotesquethe moment that one of the people took one of the truths to himself , called it his truth, and tried to live his life by it, he became a grotesque and the truth he embraced became a falsehood.”

(9)

Therefore, Anderson’s “Book of The Grotesque” should be seen as a piece for the twenty-one stories that follow, for each contains a character having grotesqueness.

Anderson’s use of the word “Grotesque” is quite important different through which he describes that human grotesque is like the twisted and gnarled apples left behind in the orchards when the perfect fruit is picked. Small boys and the poor seek these apples eagerly because they know that the imperfect apples are the sweetest of all, perhaps even because of their surface blemishes that have caused them to be rejected. He also asserts that the spiritual ills of his people merely intensify their need for understanding and love. After this story, Anderson uses the first three stories to explore what he feels are the major aspects of the problem of human isolation.

The first story “Hands” deals with the inability to communicate feeling, second, “Paper Pills” is about inability to communicate thought; the third, “Mother” focuses on the inability to communicate love. According to Anderson these three shortcomings are the real creators of the grotesque in the human society. Each of these characters has introduced with one aspect of the problem, he has something that he feels, is vital and real within himself that he wants to reveal it to others.

Discussion

The present paper is about the term “Grotesque” and fragmented role of characters in his fiction. This paper is written with special focus on Sherwood Anderson Psychoanalysis of his character and Grotesque – the frustrated hopes and ambitions that put down the lives of most people. His short fiction gives study about human nature as their Sad, Isolated, Hopeless, Sexually Repressed, Compulsion Driven, Fear Driven or Terror-Stricken lives. The term “Grotesque” can be considered in fiction when the characters induce both Empathy and Disgust [A character who inspires disgust alone may be simply a villain or a monster]. It can be understood in terms as deformity and disability which caused after the first world war (1914-1918).

In his writings, those characters can be called “Grotesque” who are obsessed with an idea or mannerism. These characters have lost contact with their fellow beings. Impact of grotesque can be seen in their changing life as they became alone unconnected, unhappy marriage life and unfulfillment of their wishes. he defines the meaning of ‘Grotesque’ as- A character who takes one of the many truths in life and pursues obsessively and some of these obsessions include freedom, lost love, sex, innocence, age, power, money or indecency.

In “The Book of The Grotesque” the old writer tried to see the dream in consciousness about youth age. He relates the truth to the term grotesque, that was hidden by all the people. The old man writer

Deformity in Characters Exposed by Sherwood Anderson

Mona Sharma

imagines about caricaturized people who are obsessed with various truths as truth of virginity, passion, wealth, poverty, thrift, profligacy, carelessness and abandon.

In "Hands, Concerning Wing Biddlebaum" the character himself tried to hide the truth and become "Grotesque." Wing Biddlebaum used to hide his hand which he used to often caress in hiding after being accused of molestation a student. This horror of molestation forced him to change his name and placed. he went to Winesburg where he lives in a seclusion broken only by his friendship with George Willard. In the next story "Paper Pills" the doctor Reefy spends his life with the truth of little scraps of paper which he keeps in his suit's pocket wearing for one year. On these papers he had written thoughts, end of thoughts, beginning of thoughts. These thoughts formed a truth that has been showed by the writer.

In "Mother, Concerns Elizabeth Willard" Elizabeth Willard is the central character, mother of George Willard [another example of Grotesque] her growth as an individual remain undeveloped by her on her own unfulfilled dreams. She is an unhappy, bitter woman and unsatisfied with her own life. She tries to makes sure her son's life better. She really has the best interests of her son at heart but by the time her own desired get in the way of what is best for him. When she was near the end of her life, she almost find's fulfillment in her own life when she develops a brief romantic relationship with Dr. Reefy. Due to her obsession with Dr. Reefy relation, her happiness remained shortly. After sometimes she suffers a stroke and dies but never disclosed her son that she had saved a good amount of money for him to use in making a better life for himself.

In another story "The Philosopher" Grotesque can be seen when Dr. Percival could not lead the life as he thought so. He wanted to be a minister and became a doctor. We can find Grotesque description at the beginning of the story, when Percival's most awkward characteristic is the twitching left eye lid which flaps like a window shade. His eye lid represents the whole of Percival's character. The distorted grotesque in Winesburg, Ohio. was also seen, dealing with the issues and emotions.

In the story "Nobody Knows" George Willard is a kind of window through which we can view the Grotesque character of Louise Trunnion, she is being hunted. He stalks through the dark alleyways, representing his anxiety and then stands in the fields calling to Louise. In it we find the theme of secrecy, insecurity, equality, control, uncertainty coming of age and maturity. George's action and transition from boyhood to manhood which may lead us that how he thinks about his sexual encounter with Louise and he continued wish that "Nobody Knows" that he has been with her. It also shows in the male dominated society what a man thinks / view about woman.

In the story "Godliness" which is divided into four parts tells about the disintegration of the Bentley family. Jesse Bentley, the family patriarch through his hard work, become a wealthy and successful leader in the community. All of sudden this man has come into confusion collecting wealth with serving god. Thus, we find some break up of something into something Grotesque. After departing of David, Jesse transformed into a job like figure. He tells everyone this, having slipped into a kind of dazed madness. He has taught god's favors so desperately that he ends up destroying his family.

In the end, the old man frightens the boy again with an Old Testament- which is inspired by sacrifice designed to remove his doubts and the boy strikes his grandfather with a stone run of into the unknown. So, Jesse Bentley is made grotesque frightening, his daughter is denied love and understanding and his grandson driven away in terror.

In "A Man of Ideas" the writer shows Joe Welling's ludicrous and futile efforts to break the barriers surrounding him until his love for a lean, tired women give him hope.

Deformity in Characters Exposed by Sherwood Anderson

Mona Sharma

In "Adventure" Alice Hindman, a non-aggressive grotesque finds nothing. She has wanted to love and like another lost being, she runs naked in the rain, humiliates herself and at last she realizes that she must live and die alone in Winesburg.

In the story "Respectability" Wash William is made grotesque both physically and psychologically despite which his well-cared-for hands. Once made him the best telegrapher in the state, but his mother-in-law's attempt to affect a harmony between him and his unfaithful wife by conspiring to see her naked. But her love affairs had destroyed his mother-in-law's trick he began to hate women and become twisted into the grim figure that "Winesburg" town knows.

Again, in the story "The Thinker" Seth Richmond seems helpless to communicate his hunger for life to his mother, to Helen White, the banker's daughter, or his friend George Willard. He started to feel down due to sickness of the idle, meaningless talk, fearing that Helen will eventually marry to George, he turns on Willard furiously because George seems to have the ability to communicate with others that he lacks. The story "Tandy" indicates that the vision of wholeness and of perfect understanding which may be communicated to an innocent and unspoiled recipient.

In "The Strength of God" Reverend Hartman suddenly discovers that he is peeping Tom, spying on Kate Swift, the school teacher in her room. He became convinced that he is damned, he continues compulsively until the sight of Kate Swift praying in anguish reverses his conviction. Then he startles George Willard by proclaiming that he has been saved by a vision of her. In this instance, the minister's need for human understanding has been distorted to a renewal of a perverted faith by fright and conviction of sin.

The story "The Teacher" reveals about the source of Kate Swift's anguish. She had been George Willard's teacher and had continued to advise him until one night in her fervor, she had taken him in the arms, frightened by her actions, she ran home to pray. However, due to the growth of his intuitive wisdom, George realizes that it is not sex that she seeks: intuitive wisdom; instead he is confused as he leaves her and tells himself,

I have missed something. I have missed something Kate Swift trying to tell me. (105)
But Kate is enabled to tell George or anyone else what she is seeking.

The "Loneliness" shows two-fold picture of human isolation which drives Enoch Robinson into the supposed security of a single room and denies him even that security. Robinson tells George of the peculiar isolation of the artist in a society that makes special demand on him while it denies understanding until finally he flees. His isolation is not only that of other men: but it is also peculiar isolation that only the unfulfilled artist can know.

In "An Awakening" Belle carpenter leads George Willard further along the road to eventually understanding of his fellows: at the same time, it gives him further insight into the forces of misunderstanding that drives them into isolation.

In "Queer" George Willard suffers one of the grotesques, just as the others see George as a symbol of liberation, Elmer sees George as the symbol of liberation, and as a manifestation of the society that rejects him. But also resents George: he attempts to become friendly with him. Failing this he strikes George, leaving him bewildered and half-conscious. In this story, Elmer indicates that what most of the other grotesques have failed to perceive. George Willard does not understand them. The other believes that he does even when he leaves each of them in bewilderment, the grotesque completely misunderstands his sympathy.

Deformity in Characters Exposed by Sherwood Anderson

Mona Sharma

In "The Untold Lie" we find grotesque when Hal Winter a married farmhand is unable to give his young friend advice about marriage considering it as a meaningless trap, yet realizing it has moments of closeness, he turns away in the dark to know a definable truth.

In "Drink" George Willard learns for himself the ambiguous nature of experience and the attendant difficulties it represents. Tom Foster who is outsider both by birth and by nature. He is too innocent to be condemned merely because he is at once possessed by impossible dream of understanding. George is drawn to the boy who wants to experience everything expect hurting others. At this point, George is almost complete but nobody in Winesburg can teach him. So, he must go into the world and learn for himself.

In "Sophistication" George realizes about a moment of shared understanding transcends anything that might be found in a physical union. Based on his new insight, he senses that pure love can easily lead to mis-interpretation and isolation whether it is complicated by society's-imposed pressures of its misguided interpretation.

In the episode of "Departure" George leaves Winesburg [the town] where he has learned the fundamental secret of human life in the microcosm of nature which should be accepted and loved. As he leaves Winesburg he takes something of each of the grotesques with him. He tried to search it out and knows finally that he can find understanding and fulfillment only in moments of unaccomplished acceptance and love.

Although Anderson's people are highly individualized in their micro cosmic setting. Each person is defined by a controlling characteristic that provide both the key to his individuality and the nature of his grotesqueness.

At last, I gave focus on Anderson's exposition about deformity in his character in Winesburg, Ohio which leaves a landmark in the history of American literature. American literature has its significant effect upon the readers for their alienation in some way physically or emotionally. Anderson's characters souls are somehow deformed who are inhabitant of Winesburg. Their deformation flourish from two factors – alienation and loneliness.

The book is of course, in no sense a burlesque, but it is an effort to treat the lives of simply ordinary people in an American middle western town with sympathy and understanding. The people are all alike Wing Biddlebaum, people who had not succeeded in life but decent people nevertheless.

***Research Scholar
Department of English
University of Rajasthan
Jaipur (Raj.)**

Work cited

1. Anderson, Sherwood. *Winesburg, Ohio: A Group of Tales of Ohio Small Towns Life*. New York: BW Huebsch, 1920. Print.
2. Odeh, Hilal, Adil. "Character Types" in *Sherwood Anderson's Winesburg, Ohio*. King Saud University, KSA. International Journal of Arts & Science. CD-ROM. ISSN-1944-6934. <http://citeseerx.ist.psu.edu/viewdoc/download?doi=10.1.1.302.15&rep=rep1&type=pdf>

Deformity in Characters Exposed by Sherwood Anderson

Mona Sharma