Journal Of Higher Education And Research Society: A Refereed International

ISSN – 23490209 Volume – 5 / Issue – 1 APRIL 2017

NARRATION OF THE GROTESQUE AND THE PRIMITIVE IN SHERWOOD ANDERSON'S SHORT FICTION WITH CLOSE REFERENCE TO "DEATH IN THE WOODS"

Shubham Singh,
Research Scholar (JRF)
Department of English and
Modern European Languages
University of Lucknow
Lucknow, U.P.India.

Abstract

Sherwood Anderson is a master story-teller, who altered the dynamics of the genre in more ways than one. His fiction dealt closely with the transforming nature of the culture of America in the wake of modernity and the notions of progress. He took acute interest in capturing the primitive essence of a society which was undergoing a major change both in the way it existed and the way its people perceived the world around them. His stories showcase character types rather than individuals many of whom are grotesque representations of a fatigued yet somehow continuing presence. His writing comes forth as a revolt against the great illusion of American civilization, with all its glowing optimism, and its deliberate evasion of harsh realities. This paper aims to take a keen and cursory look at Anderson's fiction centring basically on the stylist in the writer with respect to his select collections of short stories in general and to his well-received mystical tale of one of his most dear grotesques, "Death in the Woods", in particular.

Keywords: *character types, civilization, evasion, grotesque, illusion, mystical, primitive, transforming.*

Journal Of Higher Education And Research Society: A Refereed International

ISSN – 23490209 Volume – 5 / Issue – 1 APRIL 2017

NARRATION OF THE GROTESQUE AND THE PRIMITIVE IN SHERWOOD ANDERSON'S SHORT FICTION WITH CLOSE REFERENCE TO "DEATH IN THE WOODS"

- **Shubham Singh**

Sherwood Anderson's work has created his popular image as a realist- that is, a writer who represents the human world around him with as much verisimilitude as possible. His work showcases a picture of modern American life which has its roots in the primitive times. His writing comes forth as a revolt against the great illusion of American civilization, with all its glowing optimism, and its deliberate evasion of harsh realities, its puerile cheerfulness, whose unavoidable end was the culmination of "glad" books, which had reduced literature in America down to the lowest parameters of sentimentality. Anderson's fame is truly dependent on his short stories. As Irving Howe writes in his critical biography on Anderson, titled, *Sherwood Anderson:*

> Some eight or ten of Anderson's stories, by far the best he ever wrote, can be considered a coherent group. Such stories as "I Want to Know, Why," "The Egg," "Death in the Woods," "I'm a Fool," "The Man Who Became a Woman," and to a lesser extent "The Corn Planting," "A Meeting South," and "Brother Death" are similar in having as their structural base an oral narration, as their tone a slightly bewildered tenderness, and as their subject matter elemental crises in the lives of simple townspeople. In these stories the central figure is often an "I" who stands at the rim of action, sometimes looking back to his boyhood and remembering an incident he now realizes to have been crucial to his life, a moment in which he took one of those painful leaps that climax the process of growth. (147-8)

His short-story collection *Winesburg, Ohio* (1919) is his most famous work. It is a aseries of connected short narratives that form a sort of a novel about the dwellers of a small Midwestern town. The collection bears most of the prominent and recurring features of Anderson's creative art such as depiction of characters struggling with the harsh existence of small-town life, stress on the individual experiences of loneliness and frustration, and a lyrical writing style that painstakingly captures the rhythms of human thought. All of this is evinced clearly in which is arguably his most famous short-story, "Death in the Woods".

ISSN – 23490209 Volume – 5 / Issue – 1 APRIL 2017

The collection of Winesberg stories is a proof of Anderson's creative spirit. In *Winesberg, Ohio*, he takes an acute look at small-town life, bringing its lack of opportunity and its conservatism to the forefront, alongside its moments of innocence and joy. With experience of several decades spent in the country, Anderson paints Winesberg as a town in a transition state that is undergoing social and economic changes which may or may not alter the future of the town, and which are too much to digest for some primitive characters. Realism is the keyword here and Anderson also constructs a clear-cut meaning of the term "grotesque", which is discussed in the first chapter. The striking quality is the individual fixations to which each character seems to have clung to and shaped his or her life in accordance with it so much so that truth gets morphed into falsehood and the person appears merely a grotesque exaggeration of it. Anderson's mastery lies in his being alive to all these myriads of versions of truths. Many of the characters are certainly grotesque; they are caged by an idea or a belief system that has shrouded their lives and deeply manipulated their thought processes.

"Death in the Woods" (1933), printed in *Death in the Woods and Other Stories* is one of Sherwood Anderson's best pieces of short fiction. The story bears strong autobiographical resemblances to Anderson's own life. In the past, Anderson used to serve as a laborer on the farm of a German man, and he too once had a strange encounter with a pack of dogs on a winter night in a forest. There lies the metaphorical significance of the particular scene in the world of the story. The character of old Mrs. Grimes is partly based on Anderson's own devoted and self-effacing mother. Although the narrator of the short story is not Anderson himself, the story's main subject certainly applies to him. The manner in which an artist weaves disconnected and intense personal experiences together through his art is evinced in the adeptness with which Anderson incorporates his encounter with the dogs into the fabric of the story. A strong sense of nostalgia pervades the story. The old woman who dies in the woods is one of Anderson's most grotesque creations. However, the main thrust of the story is the narrator, and how his thoughts get such an indelible imprint of the scene that he could not erase the memory for decades to come. Moreover, that view of death, that encounter, was not fully comprehended by him at that moment but several years later that scene resounds in his thinking as a significant symbolic reference point about the general nature of life and death . Through Anderson's memoirs, readers can easily infer how almost each of his stories or characters come from people that he individually knew or that he had come across some way or another. *Winesburg, Ohio* is not an exception and during the mid-twenties, almost all of Anderson's work was biographical, or at least semi biographical in nature.

America's transformation from an agricultural to an industrial economy greatly altered the conception of man, in complete harmony with himself, and conflicted the

image with the new and often harsh realities of twentieth century life. The concepts of nation and boundaries received a jolt with the blurring of borders following the world war. Being uprooted from a sense of belongingness to a national ethos man was left lonely and fragile. A loss of faith and weakening hold of belief in religion and God in the modern mechanized world led to a psychological and communicative breakdown which became a social phenomenon. Man, in the twentieth century ceased to be part of the compassable whole. Family, that is believed to be most fundamental and primitive unit of traditional life patterns faced a threat of extinction since human beings rapidly accepted the notions of privacy in personal affairs and nuclear family system. Success became the single most significant factor to judge an individual's worth in society and religion suffered a major setback.

Sherwood Anderson's writing is a pleasure to read and is easily attributable to him. In almost all of his stories the narrator plays a prominent role, being the central story teller. It is through his perspective that the tale unfolds. There is hardly any use of direct dialogues in his stories and wherever used, they are placed to such a level of perfection that they create a semblance of reality. Although Anderson wan not a naturalist, his writing is strewn with naturalistic elements and the primitive background of the countryside. The incorporation of his personal experiences lends a sense of reality and authenticity to the stories. The use of the narrator as the main player of the story comes across as the inclusion of an authentic voice that presents all the differing viewpoints of the characters in the story and adds up to a single perspective. The prose of Winesburg, Ohio is more often marked by a naturalness which Anderson might have learned from such oral story tellers as his father or from Mark Twain, who was one of his favorite authors. He could have used this natural style in his earlier books, but he thought it not fancy enough. The courage to write in a natural, simple style was perhaps the result of reading Gertrude Stein's Tender Buttons. Anderson acknowledged that the book was thought altering in that it induced in him the inspiration to develop a peculiar natural style of his own. From Stein, he may have learned the repetition of certain emphatic words and the a simple syntax that is easily perceptible his prose, but her work was merely one of several influences which he synthesized into a distinct style of his own. The Bible too, probably influenced Anderson's prose style. It was another writer, however, who was perhaps responsible for Anderson's style as presented in Winesburg, Ohio. One of the members of the Chicago literary group, lent Anderson a copy of Edgar Lee Master's Spoon River Anthology which he excitedly read during the course of a single night and realized that if such a style is introduced in prose, it would give him the freedom yet sustain the unity which he had been wanting. Master's collection of poems was based on the small town of Spoon River and, in the poems, he had painted a touching portrait of the repressed and frustrated lives lived by the villagers. This is the style that Anderson later adopted for many of his great creations. This unification by setting, theme,

and mood creates a more complex meaning than each individual poem or story could have by itself. Winesburg, Ohio is not as pessimistic and bitter as Spoon River, but it is obviously indebted to it in terms of structuring and essence. Some critics have called Anderson an "American Freudian" and insisted that he was influenced by Freud because Winesburg, Ohio deals closely with frustration and repression, often of normal sexual desires. However, this claim has been refuted by Anderson.

Anderson developed a distinctive style of his own and his works feature a psychological complexity which is inexistent in previous works of American fiction. His stories stress character and mood, and his style is laconic and colloquial. As we have seen in the Winesburg stories, there is little suspense in the narrative, which sometimes borders on the mystical, but the reader often gets a sense of satisfaction, if not closure, at the end of a story because it has provided an epiphany, a moment of psychological revelation. An excellent storyteller, Anderson seems to be preoccupied by a need to describe the plight of the "grotesque" - the unsuccessful, the deprived, and the inarticulate. He sensitively describes poverty and eccentricity. His simple style, in the oral tradition of storytelling, went on to influence renowned writers like Hemingway and Faulkner who, in 1956, acknowledged Anderson as "the father of my generation of American writers and the tradition of American writing which our successors will carry on." Anderson, much like Willa Cather, longed for the past and the primitive way of American rustic and humble life. He was acutely disappointed by the machine culture of technological America. This is why his stories carry his reflection on the nation's past and his essential social theme is to show the impact of industrialization on agrarian small-town life. A pinching nostalgia for a lost world of displaced farmers, harness-makers, blacksmiths, and other local working men, characterizes most of his works.

"Death in the Woods" exemplifies many of the characteristics of the masterpieces of Anderson's story-telling art, some of the crucial ones being, a direct authorial address to the reader; a circular, not linear, narrative structure; plot remaining subordinate to characterization; simple style and vocabulary; and images drawn from elemental aspects of nature. In "Death in the Woods" the central character is not Ma Grimes but the mature narrator who looks back on the past experiences and especially a particular event of the sight of an old, oppressed woman trudging from her farm into town in order to obtain the necessary food for her men and animals and the moonlit winter night he saw half-wild dogs almost transforming into wolves in the presence of the half-dead human. We know from a note attached to a holograph housed with the Anderson Papers in the Newberry Library, that Anderson's first attempt to write this story was a short sketch called "Death in the Forest." Chapter XII of Tar: A Midwestern Childhood (Cleveland: Press of Case Western Reserve University, 1969, pp. 129-41), also tells the story of an old woman's death in the forest on a snowy winter night. A slightly expanded version of this episode,

told by a first-person narrator, that appeared in American Mercury (IX, 7-13), in September of the same year, that is, 1926. The titular story in the collection Death in the Woods is practically identical with the version of the story that appeared in American Mercury. All of her days Ma Grimes "fed animal life", and this is strong reminder of the earlier generation's rootedness in primitivity and nature. Only at the end of the story does the reader realize that the most important life that Ma Grimes incessantly fed was the creative life of the narrator. Thus, the entirety of the story elucidates itself, as Anderson explains in its final sentence, "why I have been impelled to try to tell the simple story over again." The reader feels, as the story comes to a close, that now, after perhaps ten or twelve years, Anderson has been able to create a beautifully unified work of art.

"Death in the Woods" is a fine specimen of Anderson's pared-down writing style and brooding, bittersweet tone. The story is most notable for the stark simplicity of its subject matter and the contrasting intricacy of its self-conscious narration. It is a story within a story that comments upon the nature of creative process itself. The narrator recounts Mrs. Grimes' life and the routine activities she indulged into yet he also reflects on his status and peculiarities as a narrator, explaining how he happened to comprehend that particular event of a wintry night and how those few intense moments left a deep impression on his psyche, virtually affecting most of his work. The narrator is both a witness and participant in some of the events of the story—most notably, the discovery of the body—but he makes it clear that the old woman's tale is closer to fiction than truth. Since a long time has elapsed when he has felt an inclination to narrate the mystical tale and much of the story he has either heard from others or extrapolated from his own experiences. This is why, at one point, he interjects, 'I wonder how I know all of this. It must have stuck in my mind from small-town tales when I was a boy."

Point of view is probably the most striking and significant stylistic feature of "Death in the Woods." The story is narrated in the first person by a man looking back on an event that happened in his hometown when he was a youth. At first his credibility for telling the old woman's story seems rather dubious. The narrator is limited in his view of events—a fact that he frequently calls to his readers' attention. To him, the old woman was nothing special:

> She was an old woman and lived on a farm near the town in which I lived. All country and small-town people have seen such old women, but no one knows much about them. Such an old woman comes into town driving an old worn-out horse or she comes afoot carrying a basket. She may own a few hens and have eggs to sell. She brings them in a basket and takes them to a grocer. There she trades them in. She gets some salt pork and some beans. Then she gets a pound or two of sugar and some flour.

She was an ordinary woman busy with the routine domestic chores of life. But the narrator is also an unreliable one, due to the fact that he was witness to only part of the story being recalled and also that his subsequent experiences have altered the way he perceived the event in his subconscious mind. As a boy, the narrator was partial witness to the death of an old farm woman named Ma Grimes who, upon returning from town, froze to death in the snowy woods. The narrator is present when the woman's naked body is found. The element of grotesquery and mysticism is unmistakable:

> They dragged the old woman's body out into the open clearing. The worn-out dress was quickly torn from her shoulders. When she was found, a day or two later, the dress had been torn from her body clear to the hips, but the dogs had not touched her body. They had got the meat out of the grain bag, that was all. Her body was frozen stiff when it was found, and the shoulders were so narrow and the body so slight that in death it looked like the body of some charming young girl.

What the narrator sees here is the thematic crux of the story itself, as it calls into question notions of perception and witnessing. The boy sees not a spiritless, deceased old woman, but a frozen beauty, an illuminated figure of romance. Accordingly, the narrator undergoes an epiphany informed by this experience in youth and his later recollection of past events. As an adult, the narrator acknowledges that it may have been the white snow and ice that made Grimes look so lovely and metaphysically transfigured.

Anderson employs the theme of death to emphasize the values of life and to express his reverence for the workings of nature. Feeding is a very potent metaphor in the story. She has never been rebellious or vengeful and thus has suffered in silence. One snowy afternoon, while returning with edibles got from a nearby town, she lies down to rest, falls asleep and freezes to death. Just after she sat down, the dogs left her to chase rabbits in the forest which suggests that dogs possess both the primitive traits of their wolf ancestors, and a domestic instinct. As they chase the rabbits, following their native killer instinct, their domestic senses tell them that the old woman is dying. They return to protect her. The ritualistic dance of the dogs around the women, seemingly purified by death, seems to celebrate the justice of nature's processes. Death comes as beautiful event, even a relief to the old woman, as it is in stark contrast to the cruelty and meanness that the husband and son have shown her.

Works Cited:

Anderson, Sherwood. *Death in the Woods and Other Stories*. New York: Shoreline Books, 1961. Print.

- *A Story Teller's Story*. New York: B.W. Huebsch, 1924. Print.

- Glen A. Love. *Winesburg, Ohio*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997. Print.

Bassett, John Earl. *Sherwood Anderson: An American Career*. Selinsgrove: Susquehanna University Press, 2006. Print.

Bloom, Harold. *Sherwood Anderson*. Broomall: Chelsea House Publishers, 2003. Print.

Howe, Irving. *Sherwood Anderson*. California: Stanford University Press, 1951. Print.

Love, Glen A. "Winesburg, Ohio and the Rhetoric of Silence." *American Literature*, vol. 40, no. 1, 1968, pp. 38–57. *JSTOR*, JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/2923697.

Rideout, Walter B. *Sherwood Anderson: A Writer in America*. *Volume 2*. Wisconsin: The University of Wisconsin Press, 2007. Print.

Trilling, Lionel. "Sherwood Anderson." *The Kenyon Review*, vol. 3, no. 3, 1941, pp. 293–302. *JSTOR*, JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/4332255.

Higher Education & Research Society

J H E R S O