

“Grotesques” in *Winesburg, Ohio*

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Abstract

The grotesques in Winesburg, Ohio are a group of small town people who cling to the traditional beliefs and could not adopt themselves to the transitional society. The major reasons for their grotesqueness lie not only in neurosis but also in the industrial alienation.

Key words: grotesqueness, alienation, neurosis

Sherwood Anderson’s masterpiece *Winesburg, Ohio* is hailed as both “a first-rate psychological document”¹ and “a fable of American estrangement”². With his sophisticated writing skills, Sherwood Anderson depicts a picture of a group of grotesques in a small mid-western town in American’s transition from rural to industrial society. With his delicate, incisive social perception, he explores the lonely spirits of the small town people who have dropped out of their time. Their souls are twisted by the sharp conflict between their obsessed old beliefs and the new materialism. Thus, they suffer loneliness, frustration and desperation and become “grotesques” in the eyes of the “normal people” who pursue the materialism. *Winesburg, Ohio* is a book about a group of such “grotesques” in Winesburg—a typical mid-western small town in America.

The word “grotesques” derives from an Italian word “*grotto*”—cave, whose adjective is *grottesco*. It denotes a kind of decorative ornament consisting of medallions, sphinxes, foliage, rocks and pebbles. Being found in grottoes, they were called *grotteschi*. The term comes to be applied to paintings that depicted the intermingling of human, animal and vegetable themes and forms.³ Toward the end of the eightieth century, it came to “denote a literary medium for depicting a world beyond rational grasps, in contrast to the imitation of nature of its beauty.”⁴ In a sense, the word “grotesque” is synonymous to ridiculous, bizarre, extravagant,

fresh and unusual. It emphasizes aberrations from the desire of harmony, balance and proportion. Writers usually employ “grotesque” for comic and satirical purposes.

Despite the usual sense of “grotesque”, Anderson’s application of this word is quite different. He named the original title of *Winesburg, Ohio* as “The Book of the Grotesque”. Although the publisher changed the name of the book, Anderson left the title of the prologue the same. So *Winesburg, Ohio* began with a sketch about the concept of the grotesque. In this introductory sketch, Anderson pointed out the theoretic causes for the grotesque in a symbolic way.

“That in the beginning when the world was young there were a great many thoughts but no such thing as a truth. Men made the truth himself and each truth was a composite of great many vague thoughts... There was the truth of virginity and the truth of passion, the truth of wealth and of poverty, of thrift and of profligacy, of carelessness and abandon.

...

It was the truth that made people grotesques... the moment one of the people took one of the truths to himself, called it his truth, and tried to live by it, he became a grotesque, and the truth he embraced became a falsehood.”⁵

Anderson’s statement implied that individuals established their own truths as moral principles. Whether they believed in love, virginity or godliness, their truths became such narrow views that distorted reality and tragically cut them from each other and made them lose ability of communication. Their obsessed beliefs, which caused them to refuse to meet the demands of the transitional society, inevitably twisted their inner selves and personalities, and finally made them grotesque. Therefore, Anderson’s grotesques are more spiritually twisted than physically crippled. Most of the grotesques behaved somewhat like neurotics.

In *Winesburg, Ohio*, with his “hunger to see beneath the surface of the lives”⁶ of his characters, Anderson found that in the transitional time, industrialism alienated the small town people from nature, their lands and each other, and it also twisted people’s personality. He realized that the industrial alienation was the very social root of the grotesques.

“Alienation” has the notion of being or feeling a stranger or an outsider. It denotes the estrangement of the individual from key aspects of his or her social existence. “The word ‘alienation’, as a translation of the German word *Entfremdung*, was given philosophical currency early in the nineteenth century by Hegel, who used it to denote what he thought to be characteristic of the individual in the modern society, man’s sense of inward estrangements, of more or less conscious awareness that the inner being, the real ‘I’, was alienated from the ‘me’, the person as an object in society.”⁷

Karl Marx followed and amended Hegel’s conception of alienation, and introduced it into sociological theory. For Marx, it is Man’s nature to be his own creator by transforming the world outside him in co-operation with the others. However, this nature has become alien to man; it is no longer his belongs to another person or thing.

Marx’s Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts suggests the classification of four forms of man’s alienation: the alienation of man from the productions of his own activity, the alienation of man from his productivity itself, the alienation of man from his human essence, and the alienation of man from other men.⁸

Alienation becomes a major theme of many works in twentieth century American literature. Quite a lot of writers concerned more about the effect of alienated labor on the lives and social structures of American culture. Yet, Anderson showed more interests in self-alienation and alienation from one another. He observed that “one of the most characteristic things about American life is our isolation from one another.”⁹ And he said, “I’ve a sort of notion that men – in our day – having – because of the coming of machine — got rather far away from their own hands, bodies, eyes, ears — having rather depended too much upon intellectual development, have got into a jam.”¹⁰ Irving Howe regarded *Winesburg, Ohio* as “a fable of American estrangement”:

The book’s major characters are cut off from the basic source of emotional sustenance, from the nature in which they live but to which they can no longer have an active relation; from the fertility of the farms that flank them but no longer fulfill their need for creativity; from the community which once bound men together in fraternity but is now merely an institution external to their lives; from the work which once evoked and fulfilled their sense of craft but is now a mere burden; and, most catastrophic of all, from each other.¹¹

Modern alienation is mainly caused by the social and economic change. In Fromm’s view, when the new economic circumstance comes into being, the traditional personalities still exist.¹⁰ The traditional personalities of the Mid-western small town people could not be adjusted to the transitional society. They are alienated by the industrialism from their harmonious relationship with nature and community. As Fromm said, “After being cut off from nature, the individual begins to feel anxious, nervous ... and miserable because of the loss of the natural and harmonious relationship.”¹² But if such anxiety is repressed and finds no way to let out, the individual will suffer neurosis.

Neurosis is one form of expression of alienation. The French word “aliene” and the Spanish “alienado” are both old terms in neurology. In English, “alienist”—the old use for “psychiatrist”, means a doctor who treats disease of the mind, especially when it is considered as a branch of medicine. In a broad sense, every neurotic results from alienation.¹²

Neurosis is a common phenomenon in modern people. As Karen Horney said, “In our time, many people have neurosis. That is to say, though their personalities are normal and untwisted, their conflicts response to the surroundings may also result in neurosis.”¹³

Anderson has not neglected this phenomenon. He described Louise Bentley as “from childhood a neurotic, one of the race of over-sensitive woman that in later days industrialism was to bring in such great numbers into the world.”¹⁴ The grotesques in *Winesburg, Ohio* are such neurotics whose traditional personalities fail to fit with the social change. Their estrangement is so extreme that they could not turn to each other though it is each other that they really needed. What they sought is not physical or material satisfaction but the re-establishment of their lost harmonious relationship with the lands, nature and other people.

In a conversation with an interviewer, Fromm said that the most normal people are the sickest ones, and the sickest people are the healthiest ones.¹⁴ To him, from the sick people, we can see some untamed human nature. But many normal people have managed so hard to adjust themselves to needs of society that they remain little of their own. Consequently, they are alienated to be a tool or a robot. Their true feelings of love and hatred are repressed and withered.

Although the grotesques in *Winesburg, Ohio* are in a sense the defeated and distorted by alienation, they are shown all the time as better than their fellow-citizens who are “normal”. In fact, the grotesques who seem to suffer from neurosis are merely those neglected people whose normal needs have been short-circuited. The apparently normal persons like Tom Willard--George’s father and Will Henderson--George’s boss who do not feel such need may be the most completely grotesques of all.

Notes:

1. Regis Michaud, *The American Novel Today* (New York: Kennikat Press, 1967), p.128
2. 11. Irving Howe, “Sherwood Anderson: Winesburg Ohio” in *The American Novel From Fenimore Cooper To William Faulkner Wallace Stegner* (New York: Basic Books. Inc., Publishers), p.159
3. J.A. Cuddon, ed., *A Dictionary of Literary Terms and Literary Theory*. (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers Ltd., 1988), p.367
4. Wolfgang Bernard Fleischmann, *Encyclopedia of World Literary in the Twentieth Century*. Vol.2 (Fredrick Ungar Publishing Co. Inc., 1977), p.65
5. 14. Sherwood Anderson, *Winesburg, Ohio*, Malcom Cowley, ed., (London: Pan Books, 1988), p.23-4, p.87
6. Ibid, title page
7. Herbert Marcuse, *Reason and Revolution: Hegel and the Rise of Social Revolution* (New York: Haper & Row, 1941), p. 273
8. Erich Fromm, see *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Vol. 2, ed. by Paul Edwards (New York: Ferderick Ungar Publishing Co. Inc., 1977), p.78.
9. Howard M.Johns and Walter B. Rideout, eds., *The Letters of Sherwood Anderson*,(Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1953), p.305.
10. Charles E. Modlin, ed., *Sherwood Anderson: Selected Letters*. (Konxville: The Up of Tennessee, 1984). p.61
- 12, 13, 15. Feng Chuan, ed., *The Collection of Erich Fromm* (Beijing: Reformation Press, 1997), p.120, p.9, p.567.