Death in the Woods Study Guide

Death in the Woods by Sherwood Anderson

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Introduction

Sherwood Anderson published early versions of "Death in the Woods" as a sketch in *A Story- Teller's Story* (1924) and as a chapter in his autobiographical *Tar: A Midwest Childhood* (1926). He worked on "Death in the Woods" periodically for nine years before publishing it in final form as the title story in his 1933 collection *Death in the Woods and Other Stories*.

According to many critics, Anderson's artistic powers were waning at this point in his career; yet "Death in the Woods" stands out as a masterpiece, paralleling the brilliance of the stories collected in his best known work, *Winesburg, Ohio*.

"Death in the Woods" chronicles the deceptively simple story of the life and death of a poor and downtrodden farm woman. The narrator, an adolescent boy at the time of these events, observes her dead body—a formative moment in his development as a man and an artist. He puts together the pieces of her story, which takes on mystery and mythic meaning as he reflects back on it years later.

"Death in the Woods" exemplifies 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.

Author Biography

Anderson was born on September 13, 1876, in Camden, Ohio. In his early years, his large family moved frequently and struggled with poverty. When Anderson was eight, the family settled in Clyde, Ohio, the small town that became the model for his famous book *Winesburg, Ohio* and the setting for many of his other writings. From a young age, Anderson was an ambitious, responsible, and enterprising fellow.

At the age of nineteen, Anderson left Clyde for Chicago, where he worked as a laborer and fell in love with the city. For the rest of his life, he would always be torn between the excitement of life in the big city and the charms of small-town life.

Anderson served in the Army during the Spanish- American War and then studied at Wittenberg Academy for a year before returning to Chicago to work as an advertising copywriter. After twelve years and much success in the advertising field, he married and started his own business in the town of Elyria, Ohio.

It was during these years in Elyria that Anderson first began to write. With his business and marriage failing, he had a nervous breakdown in 1912. Two years later, he got divorced and moved back to Chicago to begin his career as a fiction writer.

In Chicago he fell in with an influential circle of writers, such as Floyd Dell, Carl Sandburg, Burton Rascoe, and Robert Morss Lovett. He wrote his first novel and began the stories that were to be published as *Winesburg, Ohio* in 1919.

With *Winesburg, Ohio* Anderson was recognized as one of the most important American writers of his generation. He soon made his first trip to Europe and met literary luminaries such as Gertrude Stein and James Joyce. Anderson also became an instrumental mentor for younger modernist writers William Faulkner and Ernest Hemingway, who were soon to eclipse him in stature.

Anderson never matched the triumph of *Winesburg, Ohio*. He continued to publish prolifi- cally, but seldom with great success. In the 1920s Anderson bought two newspapers and became involved in labor politics, championing the proletarian cause. He died in 1941 during a trip to South America.

Plot Summary

The narrator of "Death in the Woods" introduces the central character of the story: an anonymous old woman who periodically comes to town to sell a few eggs and buy a few supplies. The woman is known only by her last name, Grimes.

The story is the narrator's fictionalized account of her life and death, focusing on one fateful trip into town.

The narrator recounts what he knows of Mrs. Grimes's background, things that "must have stuck in my mind from small-town tales when I was a boy." The old woman's husband, Jake Grimes, was a known horse thief. He came from a family that had once been prosperous, but Jake and his father had squandered their money.

Jake met his wife when she was a young "bound girl," an orphan working for a German farmer in exchange for her room and board. There were rumors that the farmer sexually harassed and perhaps even raped the girl. Jake came to work for the farmer and began to take the girl out. The farmer caught them, and he and Jake fought. The girl confided in Jake about the farmer's abuse.

Jake married the girl out of defiance toward the farmer. They had a son and a daughter, but only the son survived. She settled into a life of caring for the animals on their impoverished farmstead and making sure there was food for her husband and son.

Jake's threshing business failed because of his dishonest reputation, so he resorted to cutting firewood at a small profit. Jake and his son went on trips and got drunk together while the woman tried to manage the small farm. She no longer was intimate with her husband or even spoke to him. Not yet forty years of age, she had begun to look old.

One winter day, Mrs. Grimes went into town with a few eggs to trade in exchange for some supplies. She went to the butcher to beg for some meat scraps for the family dogs that accompanied her. The butcher was kind to her and expressed anger at her husband and son for letting her go out on such a cold and snowy day. It was the first time anyone had spoken to her warmly in a long time.

The woman set out for home with the heavy grain bag of food on her back. She decided to take a shortcut through some woods in the hope of getting home before dark. Part of the way through, she stopped to rest in a small clearing and fell asleep under a tree. She would never wake up from that sleep.

The four dogs that accompanied the old woman were used to foraging for food, so they killed a few rabbits while she slept. Excited, they began to play and circle the woman, beating a track in the snow around her in a "kind of death ceremony." One at a time they came up to the woman and stuck their noses into her face, waiting for her to die.

When she eventually died there in her sleep, the dogs dragged the woman out of the clearing by the grain bag tied to her back—tearing her dress but leaving her body intact—and took the food out of the bag.

The narrator recounts hearing that a local hunter had found a dead body in the woods. The narrator and his brother accompany the town marshal and a party of men as they go out and investigate. They know that they will be late for supper but choose to go because "we would have something to tell." The hunter reports that the body belonged to a beautiful young girl.

When they get there they view the body—the first naked woman the narrator has ever seen. Frozen in the snow, the old woman looks young and lovely. The boys return home, and the narrator's brother tells the dramatic story of the body in the woods. The narrator isn't satisfied with his brother's account, but says nothing.

Mrs. Grimes's body is not identified until the next day. The narrator hears fragments of her life story around town. He says that the story was something he had to pick up slowly over time, "like music heard from far off." Years later he remembers and recounts the story of her death.

Characters

The Butcher

The butcher is the last person to talk to Mrs. Grimes before she dies. Taking pity on her, he gives her a generous portion of meat that makes her pack too heavy and causes her to stop and rest in the cold.

The German Farmer

The German farmer once hired Mrs. Grimes as a "bound girl," which meant that she lived on his farm, cooked for him, and fed his animals. She suffered from his unwanted sexual advances until she married Jack Grimes.

Jake Grimes

Jake Grimes is married to Mrs. Grimes. He is a profligate, a drunk, and a known horse thief. Jake counts on his wife to make ends meet at their small farm, and does not contribute to the family economy. He expects her to provide for him and treats her with indifference or cruelty; the marriage is a loveless one. After Mrs. Grimes dies, the townspeople suspect Jake and his son of wrongdoing. Though they have alibis, they are banished from the town.

Mrs. Grimes

"Death in the Woods" chronicles the story of a woman, known as Mrs. Grimes, who lives on the outskirts of town. The narrator recounts her sad history as a "bound girl" and an abused wife as a background to the story's central drama—the events surrounding her freezing to death in the woods and the ensuing discovery of her body.

The old woman is the story's central character, but she remains an enigma because her life experiences are filtered through the narrator's consciousness; therefore we know that the narrator has filled in the gaps with experiences from his own life.

Anderson is known for creating characters based on the concept of the "grotesque." While the word grotesque—meaning something that is outlandishly or incongruously distorted—normally has a negative connotation, Anderson viewed such distortion or imbalance sympathetically, as part of the human condition.

In some ways, the old woman is a grotesque. Her life—as the narrator views it—revolves around the feeding of animal life. With other people, she is uncommunicative and isolated. However, in her death she becomes a mythic figure that represents womanhood.

The Hunter

The hunter discovers the old woman's dead body in the woods. He reports that the body belonged to a "beautiful young girl."

The Marshal

The marshal leads a party of men to the site in the woods where the hunter found the body. He questions the hunter and initially suspects murder.

The Narrator

The narrator is a boy growing up in the town near where Mrs. Grimes lived. He did not know her personally but reports the facts of her life and death. He passes along information that he has heard, as well as recounting a few experiences as a direct observer—most notably, the discovery of the woman's body in the woods.

Viewing the body has a strong impact on him: it is the first naked woman's body that he has ever seen and he, like the others, perceives her as beautiful and young. When he and his brother return home that night, it is his brother who reports what happened.

The narrator is dissatisfied with his brother's rendering of the story, and this is his motivation for retelling the story in its current form years later, when he is an adult. The narrator admits that he added details from his own experience until Mrs. Grimes's story becomes something "complete" and thus beautiful.

The Narrator's Brother

The narrator's brother is delivering papers when word reaches town about a woman's body found in the woods. He joins the party rather than finishing his task and knows that this will make him late for supper. When the narrator and his brother return home, it is the brother who recounts the remarkable events.

Old Woman

See Mrs. Grimes

Old Woman's Son

The old woman's son is nameless throughout the story. Like his father, he gets drunk and treats the old woman like a servant. The son has a sexual relationship with a "rough" woman that he conducts under his mother's nose. She is not particularly offended, having "got past being shocked early in life."

Themes

Human vs. Animal

The main theme of the story, as described by the narrator, concerns Mrs. Grimes's aim to "feed animal life"—including both humans and animals. She spends her life trying to sustain other life forms.

In other words, she feeds the German farmer and his wife, her husband and son, and the animals on their farm, making no particular distinction between them. The men in her life are crude, selfabsorbed, abusive, not significantly different from animals.

Mrs. Grimes is an outsider in the town; therefore it seems natural that she dies in the woods, surrounded by dogs. In turn, the dogs are endowed with civilized, almost human qualities. Anderson even assigns dialogue to them: "Now we are no longer wolves. We are dogs, the servants of men. Keep alive, man! When man dies we become wolves again." Moreover, the dogs do not eat the woman's body when she dies, which preserves the human/ animal distinction.

In life, the woman goes unnoticed by the townspeople. In death, she becomes an object of fascination for the narrator as he grows up and remembers and reconstructs her story. The events of her simple life take on mystery and beauty as the narrator crafts them into art, a high expression of humanity.

Sex Roles

The old woman's role as a provider of food is closely tied to her gender role. Feeding is conventionally seen as woman's work. There is no emotional, nurturing quality to her constant feeding of others; in fact, she views this role as a duty and a burden.

Nevertheless, the fact that she provides sustenance is closely associated with femininity and women's biological role in gestating and nursing babies. Some critics have interpreted the woman as an "earth mother," representing the sustenance offered by a feminized nature. However, this is a dark portrait of Mother Nature as a powerless, passive woman forced to endure the abuse of men.

The theme of woman's role as a provider of food is echoed by her role as an object of sexual desire. Feeding even becomes a metaphor for sex: "Thank heaven, she did not have to feed her husband— in a certain way. That hadn't lasted long after their marriage and after the babies came." Sex is another form of providing for the physical needs of the men around her. The woman's sexuality is prematurely depleted, as her hard life and loveless marriage render her old before her time.

In death it is restored. Her slight, frozen body looks young again, and both the hunter and the narrator see her as a beautiful object of desire. In this sense, she can be

understood as representing an idea or prototype of Woman in all of the phases of her life cycle.

Since this was the first naked woman's body that the narrator had ever seen, her representation of womanhood is crucial to the development of his own adolescent sexuality. As Jon S. Lawry writes in *PMLA*, viewing her body in the snow is, for the narrator, "no mere event, but rather definition for him of the mystery and beauty of woman."

Truth and Fiction

"Death in the Woods" is a story within a story that comments upon the creative process. The narrator recounts Mrs. Grimes's life; yet he also reflects on his status and qualifications as a narrator, telling, in effect, the story of how he came to understand and relate the story in its present form.

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. Most of the story he has either heard secondhand or extrapolated from his own experiences. Interrupting his narration of the old woman's past, 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."

He initially claims that he has little knowledge of the woman, and he admits that details of the story were "picked up slowly, long afterwards," from his own experiences. Yet as he relates the story years later, he deems it "the real story"—more complete and satisfying than the version his brother told on the night the body was discovered. His story— crafted and fictionalized—transcends anecdote and becomes a thing of beauty, mystery, and meaning.

Style

Point of View

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 qualifications for telling the old woman's story seem somewhat 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 one of the nameless ones that hardly anyone knows, but she got into my thoughts. I have just suddenly now, after all these years, remembered her and what happened." He initially describes the old woman only as a type, not an individual, and admits that his sources of information are not particularly reliable.

Much of the old woman's past he recounts based on anecdotes and gossip and experiences of his own that he later merges with her story. For example, he recalls seeing Jake Grimes at the local livery barn and quotes his speech, only to admit, "He did not say anything, actually. 'I'd like to bust one of you on the jaw,' was about what his eyes said. I remember how the look in his eyes made me shiver."

The narrator feels a need to understand the woman's life and death. Eventually, he finds beauty in the "completion" he is finally able to bring to the story as a story, without regard to its factual accuracy. Just as important as this thematic "completion" is the mystery and resonance the story gains through the narrator's own personal investment in its symbolic significance.

The narration of "Death in the Woods" shows how a formative moment in the narrator's personal experience acquires meaning over time. Anderson's subtle manipulation of point of view highlights the fiction-making process and illustrates how an active imagination can create mystery and beauty.

Structure

"Death in the Woods" does not just tell the old woman's tale, but *re*-tells it. Thus its structure is based on repetition, which may begin to explain why several critics have described the story as being similar in form to a poem.

At the first telling of the story, the narrator's brother gives an unsatisfactory version of the story while the narrator remained silent. Thus the whole text can be understood as the narrator's retelling of that initial, formative, unprocessed experience that he could not articulate. "The whole thing, the story of the old woman's death, was to me as I grew older like music heard from far off. The notes had to be picked up slowly one at a time.

Something had to be understood," reads the narrator's famous reflection on the his impulse to retell.

Lawry suggests that "Death in the Woods" is structured by "the narrator's progress from recorder to creator." It opens with the narrator's account of a certain type of old woman, describing trips into town and characterizing her as "nothing special." This is the first and most brief telling of the old woman's tale, from which little meaning is derived.

His authority to tell the story grows as he describes climactic scene of her death. "I knew about it all afterward, when I grew to be a man, because once in the woods in Illinois, on another winter night, I saw a pack of dogs act just like that." As he adds scenes and parallels from his own life to Mrs. Grimes's story he becomes a creator of her story.

Historical Context

Anderson's Midwest

When Anderson wrote "Death in the Woods," the modernist literary movement was raging; many American writers took up explicitly modern themes— such as the disenfranchisement of the middle-class during the Industrial Revolution and effect of technological change on human existence—to explore the distinctive experiences, mores, and sensibilities of the early twentieth century.

Anderson is unique because his writing style is decidedly modern—his pared-down style is often compared to that of modernist giants Gertrude Stein and Ernest Hemingway—but his subject matter is not. To the contrary, Anderson's stories appear to take place in something of a historical vacuum. While many modernists gathered in and wrote about the world's cosmopolitan cities—Paris, London, New York—Anderson wrote about life in the American Midwest.

"Death in the Woods" takes place in a Midwestern town, likely based on Anderson's childhood home of Clyde, Ohio. In the 1890s, Clyde was a town of a few thousand people on the brink of expansion and modernization. It had its own respectable institutions and cultural events, but its streets weren't paved and had no electric streetlights. It was, in the words of biographer Kim Townsend, "still a frontier town."

Anderson recalled it as a warm and intimate community where people knew and looked after each other. These qualities were becoming scarce by the time Anderson began to write about his Midwestern childhood, and his representations are always tinged with nostalgia for a way of life on the verge of extinction.

Autobiographical Connections

A different version of "Death in the Woods" appeared as part of Anderson's autobiography, *Tar: A Midwest Childhood*. Beside the story's smalltown setting, there are other significant autobiographical elements to the story.

In many of Anderson's writings he expresses hostility toward his good-for-nothing father and sympathy for his long-suffering mother. In "Death in the Woods," the Grimes marriage can be seen as an exaggeration of the dynamics between Anderson's parents: Anderson's father, Irwin, was unable to hold a steady job; he drank too much; cheated on his wife; and would disappear for days on end. During these times, his mother Emma kept the impoverished family warm and fed. "Emma was continually providing," Townsend writes. She died of tuberculosis when Anderson was eighteen.

Another parallel between the woman in "Death in the Woods" and Emma Anderson is Anderson's description of his mother as having been a "bound girl," rejected by her own mother and sent to work to support herself until adulthood. His account of his mother's

youth (which may not be factually accurate) has striking similarities to the history of the woman in the story.

"Our mother had been so bound out, to some farming family somewhere in the southern part of the state of Ohio, and my father, no doubt then a young dandy, had found her there and married her," Anderson writes in his *Memoirs*.

He describes his mother's life:

She must have worked, all her life, even from childhood, for others, a childhood and young girlhood of washing dishes, swilling cows, of waiting at table, a kind of half-servant in a house of strangers to her own blood, only after marriage and children to become a wash woman.

Townsend considers Anderson's lifelong interest in working women and his attitude toward women in general as a direct result of his unresolved feelings toward his mother. "He would always think of her as Woman, a figure who inspired him to do good, to write," Townsend writes. "If he could not approach her when she was alive, he would approach her through his works."

Critical Overview

A prolific writer, Anderson published eight novels, four collections of short stories, autobiographical works, poems, plays, and essays. Critics agree that his reputation rests on his influential short fiction, although his stories seem to range greatly in quality.

Anderson published his most important and influential work, *Winesburg, Ohio*, when he was forty-three years of age. By 1926, after two novels were panned by the critics, his critical reputation suffered. Although Anderson's style is modernist, his themes and subject matter are not, which led him to be considered as old-fashioned or irrelevant before his time.

Soon after Anderson's death, there was a renewed critical interest in his work. In the 1940s several anthologies of his fiction appeared and the first two biographies of Anderson were published. In his critical study *Sherwood Anderson*, Rex Burbank asserted, "No other writer has portrayed so movingly the emerging consciousness of the culturally underprivileged Midwesterner with neither condescension nor satiric caricature."

The fact that Anderson's reputation was in decline may have influenced the early reviews of 1933's *Death in the Woods and Other Stories*. Reviewers of the book were tepid in their praise. "This collection of short stories neither augment nor diminish the affection with which America regards Sherwood Anderson," maintained T. S. Matthews of the *New Republic*.

Matthews continued: "The almost childish unevenness of his performance, shown in most of his earlier books, is echoed in *Death in the Woods*; but as almost always there are compensating high spots."

Many critics singled out the title story as one such "high spot." As Louis Kronenberger contended: "In a few of the short stories here there are a simplicity and tenderness, there are evocations of phrases and moments in American life which, as things go, are the real thing."

In the opinion of Ray Lewis White, editor of *The Achievement of Sherwood Anderson*:

In only one case were critics of Anderson's later work seriously wrong in their judgment. *Death in the Woods* (1933), Anderson's last collection of short stories, contains works that are among our finest short fiction. . . . Perhaps because these were stories and not extended writing, Anderson recaptured the tender charm of *Winesburg, Ohio, The Triumph of the Egg*, and *Horses and Men*.

Other critics also consider this volume as one of Anderson's best, and singled out "Death in the Woods" for special praise. Writing in the introduction to the *Portable Sherwood Anderson*, Horace Gregory described the story as a "masterpiece":

Beyond any other story that Anderson wrote," Gregory opines, [*"Death in the Woods"*] "was the summing up of a lifetime's experience, and in its final version it became Anderson's last look backward into the Middle West of his childhood."

Recent Anderson criticism has explored the themes and mechanics of the story, with special attention to the narrator's point of view. Writing in *PMLA*, Jon S. Lawry offered an extended interpretation of the narrator's complex relation to his subject:

The creative narrator is not, as is usually the case with narrators in Anderson's stories, involved with his subject through personal concerns, familial relation, or friendship. The distance between them, however, serves to enhance their sympathetic contact; they have only disinterested humanity in common.

David R. Mesher also focused on the underlying importance of the "narrator-turned-creator," who openly admits that he has "fabricated the most important elements of the story he is telling" and "projects the reality of his own psychology onto the history of his subject.'

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1
- Critical Essay #2
- Critical Essay #3
- Critical Essay #4

Critical Essay #1

Madsen Hardy has a doctorate in English literature and is a freelance writer and editor. In the following essay, she discusses Anderson's ideas about what is commonplace and what is beautiful as expressed in "Death in the Woods."

"Death in the Woods" opens with a description of its central character, the old woman, as a familiar type that anyone from a small town would recognize. She is a common and simple woman who lives on the outskirts of town, coming there only occasionally to beg and barter for a few supplies.

The narrator initially characterizes Mrs. Grimes as "nothing special." She is not known personally to anyone in the community, and, being such a familiar figure, she is easy to ignore. "People drive right down a road and never notice a woman like that."

Having emphasized her anonymity, the narrator then goes on to tell and retell her tale, which, by the end of the story, has taken on mythic proportion. The imagined scene of her death is full of solemn mystery, and the meaning of her life is revealed as transcendent.

In his introduction to *The Portable Sherwood Anderson*, Horace Gregory calls the story "universal," praising Anderson's skill in "giving the socalled common experiences of familiar, everyday life an aura of internal meaning." Through reconstructing her tale over time, the narrator transforms an old woman's life and death into a piece of art.

In his work Anderson focused on the lives of simple and downtrodden people as his subjects, often representing them as the embodiment of a kind of purity and integrity that he saw as becoming increasingly rare in modern American life. He is praised by critics for a deceptively simple, declarative writing style that had a great influence on Ernest Hemingway, the modernist writer most famous for simple, spare prose.

As opposed to his worldly contemporaries, who also wrote in this modern style, Anderson considered himself provincial and unsophisticated. In his most famous book, *Winesburg, Ohio*, Anderson uses a youthful, autobiographical narrator who denies his own artistry in statements such as, "It needs the poet here," implying that his own descriptions are nothing spec

"Death in the Woods" shares with *Winesburg* a plain-speaking narrative voice and descriptions that are short, direct, and free of figurative language. However, in this story the narrator has become confident in his storytelling capabilities— someone who knows what a powerful story is and how to tell it beautifully.

Like his narrator, Anderson came back to the story again and again over a period of many years. He first drafted a version of "Death in the Woods" on the back of the manuscript to *Winesburg, Ohio*, which was published in 1919. He published signifi-cantly different versions of the story in *A Story- Teller's Story* and *Tar: A Midwest*

Childhood, where it was presented as a sketch and an autobiographical anecdote respectively.

Neither of these versions is equal the artistry of the final version. In the final version, which was published as a short story in a volume of the same name, the mature narrator reflects on the artist's role in giving form and meaning to his commonplace subject matter.

So how does such a modest character as the old woman acquire such mythic stature? And how does a mere anecdote come to be retold as something "complete," with meaning that transcends its specific place and time? One can fruitfully explore these questions by focusing on Anderson's description of the recovery of the old woman's body from the woods clearing where she died. "The scene in the forest had become for me, without my knowing it, the foundation for the real story I am now trying to tell," the narrator says.

This scene is transformational to the narrator as a man, in terms of the development of his idea of womanhood. It is also transformational to him as an artist, in terms of the development of his ideas of what makes a powerful story. Both of these issues involve questions of aesthetics—that is, questions about what is defined as beautiful. Thus there is an implicit parallel between the narrator's struggle to understand female and literary beauty.

Important to Anderson's complex idea of womanhood is the issue of sexuality. Though it may be hard for contemporary readers to believe, in his time Anderson was known for his shockingly direct discussions of sex.

In "Death in the Woods," Anderson demystifies sexuality through his narrator's descriptions of the woman's difficult life. He frankly describes how the woman, as a young "bound girl," was nearly raped by her employer. "He tore her dress down the front. The German, she said, might have got her that time if he hadn't heard his old woman drive in at the gate." He is matter of fact about her son's disrespectfully flagrant affair with a "rough enough woman, a tough one." Also he describes her relief at no longer having to be intimate with her husband.

Here, sexuality is base and ugly. It is represented as nothing more than an inevitable part of the cycle of "animal life" in which the woman is trapped. Beauty, it would seem, has nothing to do with it.

Furthermore, the woman herself is characterized as so negligible that it is not even necessary to describe her appearance or to say that she isn't beautiful. From the start, she is described as old and, implicitly, sexually irrelevant, despite the fact that she is barely middle-aged.

However, later in the story the woman undergoes a strange transformation that renders her young, beautiful, and eerily alluring—she dies. The narrator and his brother join a party of men who go out into the woods clearing where a hunter has discovered the body of an unidentified woman, which he describes as that of a "beautiful young girl."

When they arrive, they see her naked body and he, along with the others in the party, also perceives her as beautiful. This is the first time he has ever seen a woman's naked body.

In death, which usually corrupts the body, the woman is instead restored to youthful perfection— at least in the collective imagination of the town's men. "It may have been the snow, clinging to the frozen flesh, that made it look so white and lovely, so like marble."

Whiteness is associated with purity, and marble suggests the idealized nudes of ancient sculpture. She has become an aesthetic object, transformed by the projected ideas and desires of the community of men as much as by the cold and snow.

The old woman is unknown when she trudges into town on her thankless chore, and she is equally unknown when her youthful-looking body is reverentially carried back to town. Yet she has been completely transformed from a base and sexless beast of burden into a tragic and mysterious beauty. These are two crucial and opposing ways that men see women that the narrator must try hard to piece together as he grows into a man.

The woman's transformation in turn transforms the young narrator. "She did not look old, lying there in that light, frozen and still. One of the men turned her over in the snow and I saw everything." In viewing her, the narrator glimpses two of life's darkest and most essential secrets—that of sexuality and that of death.

This startling vision has the quality of a revelation. He sees "everything"—which makes sense both as a boy's embarrassed way of describing her nudity and as a statement about how the scene marked the end of his childish innocence, forever altering his outlook on the world.

He goes on, "My body trembled with some strange mystical feeling and so did my brother's. It might have been the cold," which has a similar effect of mixing literal-minded and transcendental interpretations of the experience. Throughout the story, Anderson offers such a dual perspective— romanticizing his plain subject matter and de-romanticizing it at once.

Like the woman, the narrator's rendition of her story is transformed from something simple and crude into something transcendent and beautiful. He recognizes right off that the experience has the makings of a good story—"something to tell. A boy did not get such a chance very often."

However, he also cannot tell it completely—in a way he considers authentic and therefore beautiful— until he has matured. And this, like the woman's transformation, is not a matter of uncovering objective truth, but of seeing in the crude and commonplace glimpses of beauty.

The narrator needed to wait to tell her story in order to reconstruct it, "like music hear from far off," from a combination of observation, hearsay, and empathetic conjecture. In

his viewing of her dead body and his retelling of her story, the "real" beauty that is found is not objective, but created in the eye and imagination of the beholder.

While Anderson has sometimes been denigrated as a "primitive" artist—vivid but naive in his representations of simple subject matter—"Death in the Woods" reveals his degree of self-consciousness and artistic control. In this story, one of the strongest works of his later career, he can be seen as reflecting on his artistic process.

Through his narrator—a mature man fictionalizing a formative experience from his youth — Anderson reveals something about his own relationship to the simple people who populate his fiction. Amidst the crude and commonplace Anderson perceives mystery, and uses his art to transform the life stories of those who are "nothing special" into things of beauty.

Source: Sarah Madsen Hardy, *Short Stories for Students*, Gale, 2000.

Critical Essay #2

In the following essay, Colquitt examines Anderson's belief that art is a means for a man to find personal salvation whereas women find their destiny through childbirth.

Like most writers, Sherwood Anderson was vitally concerned with the workings of the imagination and the creation of art. For Anderson, these concerns were also inextricably linked to questions of personal salvation. In letters to his son John, himself a painter, Anderson asserted that "The object of art . . . is to save yourself": "Self is the grand disease. It is what we are all trying to lose" (*Letters*). Given Anderson's faith in the redemptive possibilities of art, it is not surprising that the writer frequently compared "literary [and nonliterary] composition to the experience of pregnancy and deliverance, and also to the poles of maleness and femaleness in life" (*Letters*). One letter composed three years before the author's death well illustrates Anderson's understanding of the problematic nature of such "deliverance":

The trouble with the creative impulse . . . is that it tends to lift you up too high into a sort of drunkenness and then drop you down too low. There is an artist lurking in every man. The high spots for the creative man come too seldom. He is like a woman who has been put on her back and made pregnant, but even after he gets the seed in him, he has to carry it a long time before anything comes out. (*Letters*)

If, as Anderson claims, "There is an artist lurking in every man," so, also, did the writer believe that there is a woman "lurking" in every artist. Indeed, the image of the male artist whose "lurking" burden is the female within is depicted repeatedly in the correspondence, perhaps nowhere more explicitly than in a letter Anderson sent late in life to his mother-in-law, Laura Lou Copenhaver: "There is a woman hidden away in every artist. Like the woman he becomes pregnant. He gives birth. When the children of his world are spoken of rudely or, through stupidity, not understood, there is a hurt that anyone who has not been pregnant, who has not given birth, will never understand" (*Letters*).

The assumptions "hidden away" within such assertions are easily gleaned from letters in which Anderson frankly acknowledges his "old-fashioned" views about men and women. In another letter to his son John, Anderson admitted, "I do not believe that, at bottom, they [women] have the least interest in art. What their lover gives to work they cannot get" (*Letters*). As a result, the writer held that the sole "high spot" available for women to experience in life is childbirth. To be sure, Anderson understood that the biological impulse also moves man, but, as he makes clear in letters to his male friends, the love of woman "isn't enough for an eager man": "No woman could ever be in herself what we want or think we want" (*Letters*). Thus, whereas woman's destiny is circumscribed by biology, man's destiny transcends the purely physical and finds consummate expression only in the creation of art. As Anderson explained to Dwight MacDonald in 1929:

There is no purpose other than the artist's purpose and the purpose of the woman. The artist purposes to bring to life, out of the . . . hidden form in lives, nature, things, the living form as women purpose doing that out of their lovely bodies. The artist there[fore] is your only true male. . . . (*Letters*)

The "tru[ly] male" quality of Anderson's artistic imagination and of his polarized worldview is forcefully represented in his short stories and novels, as well as in his letters and memoirs. Indeed, to speak of woman's destiny in the context of Anderson's fiction is to call to mind what is undoubtedly one of the master storyteller's most disturbing tales, "Death in the Woods." Written at the "peak of his [creative] powers" (Howe), "Death in the Woods" has provoked a varied critical response, ranging from interpretations that see the tale much as Anderson claims he did, as a biological allegory depicting woman as feeder, to more recent interpretations that focus less upon the plight of the old farm woman and more upon the narrative consciousness that constructs her story. This shift of focus has led several critics to conclude that "Death in the Woods" is "a story about the creation of a story" (Joselyn; see also Robinson), hence Anderson's many attempts to unveil the mechanics of the creative process through the workings of the tale's narrative center, an older man who looks back to one scene from his childhood out of which he will spin his yarn. To borrow from the title Anderson gave to his first published memoir, "Death in the Woods" has been increasingly viewed as "a story teller's story." As Wilfred Guerin argues, "It is a story about how fragments become a whole and have meaning, partly through the workings of the unconscious, partly through the conscious memory."

That there exists an intricate bond connecting the "real story" ("Death") of an old woman's life and death and the "creating" consciousness who narrates her tale has long been acknowledged. Critics have also observed that the relationship between narrator and reader is similarly complex. As early as 1959, Jon Lawry astutely perceived that the narrator's tortuous labors to give meaning to the death he describes are offered as both an interpretative and experiential model for the reader of "Death in the Woods" to follow: "The audience is invited to enter as individuals into a process almost identical with that of the narrator. . . . to share directly not only the narrator's responses but his act of discovering and creating those responses." What few critics have since examined, although both Lawry and William Scheick point toward the issue, are the implicatory bonds that result when the reader blindly accepts this enticing invitation; for if the reader succumbs to the narrator's interpretative wiles, he becomes enmeshed in a web of guilt that connects him not only with the "I"/eye of the tale but also with the other men and boys in the woods who pruriently feed upon the body of a dead woman. By further exploring the peculiar design of this web, I hope to illumine the obsessive concern evidenced in this short story with the process of reading and making meaning. This is of course the very experience that Anderson's reader must also enact if the story is to be grasped, as the narrator himself claims to have done, as an aesthetic whole: "A thing so complete has its own beauty."

Several critics have noted the somewhat unorthodox alternation of tenses that operates throughout "Death in the Woods," as in the first paragraph of the story: "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." Although critics differ as to the effects of such shifts, many would agree with Guerin's explanation that "In this and in the second paragraph of the story the historical present tense of the verbs makes clear the timeless quality of the regularity of such old women and their doings." Diverting the reader's attention from the particular to the general, from the life of one old woman to the experience of "such old women," the narrator strives to "universalize" his story in a timeless setting by removing the "she" of his opening description from history and by granting himself the authority to speak of "all country and small-town people" in categorical terms. Such ahistorical maneuvering complements another effect of this passage that no critic has yet observed: "Death in the Woods" begins much like a fairy tale. Further, any reader who reflects upon the tales passed on in childhood may note a slight echo here with one of our culture's most famous allegories of female feeding, the Mother Goose story of the old woman who lived in a shoe. In addition, the reader may come to see Anderson's narrative as cautionary, particularly if other tales of wolves, women, and dark woods come to mind. From this initial description then the reader comes to two important realizations. First, the frame in which the "Death in the Woods" occurs is both fanciful and remote, a timeless realm that suggestively resonates with the surreal landscape of children's stories. Second, the reader learns that the tale is not to be interpreted simply as the narrative of an isolated farm woman but rather as a fiction that has universal implications. After all, one of the first statements the narrator makes about the old woman is that she is "nothing special."

Having been thus directed toward the ostensible subject of the story, the reader soon finds that the interpretative process is effectively impeded by obtrusive references the narrator makes concerning his own past. Indeed, in the opening section of "Death in the Woods," the reader learns almost as much about the narrator's childhood as about the plight of old country women. Interestingly, the narrator's allusions to his past closely resemble the boyhood recollections set forth in Anderson's memoirs; yet, despite the similarities that seem to link the storyteller with his tale, Anderson himself "persistent[ly]" interpreted the narrative of Mrs. Jake Grimes in thematic, not autobiographical, terms:

In a note for an anthology Anderson wrote that "the theme of the story is the persistent animal hunger of man. There are these women who spend their whole lives, rather dumbly, feeding this hunger. . . . [The story's aim] is to retain the sense of mystery in life while showing at the same time, at what cost our ordinary animal hungers are sometimes fed." (Howe)

Anderson's reading is a superb illustration of what John Berger calls critical mystification —"the process of explaining away what might otherwise be evident"—for as Irving Howe noted more than thirty years ago, this interpretation is "apt, though limited. . . . Anderson could hardly have failed to notice that the story may be read as an oblique rendering of what he believed to be the central facts about his mother's life: a silent drudgery in the service of men, an obliteration of self to feed their 'persistent animal hunger,' and then death." Regardless of the limits of Anderson's analysis, one fact is

clear: Anderson, like his narrator, is trying to steer critics of "Death in the Woods" away from the realm of history—from the varying records of a writer's conflicted relationship with his mother—to the hallowed domain of myth. Having fastened upon a presumably "safe" and unalterable interpre tation of his story, Anderson thereby avoids public confrontation with painful memories of his childhood.

How painful those memories were is suggested in several of Anderson's more revealing letters. Of these, perhaps none more poignantly illustrates the writer's anguished ties to his past than one addressed but never mailed to Paul Rosenfeld. Given the highly personal nature of its contents, it is easy to see why Anderson chose not to post it; for far more than a simple communication to a friend, this lengthy letter represents an aging artist's "effort to justify" his politics and clarify his "obligation" as a writer (*Letters*). Of primary importance to Anderson in 1936 was his relationship with the proletariat, a relationship that led the writer to remember the tedious "hopelessness" of his mother's struggles to support her family:

You must remember that I saw my own mother sicken and die from overwork. I have myself been through the mill. I have worked month after month in factories, for long hours daily, have known the hopelessness of trying to escape. I have seen my own mother stand all day over a washtub, washing the dirty linen of pretentious middle-class women not fit to tie her shoelaces, this just to get her sons enough food to keep them alive, and I presume I shall never in my life see a working woman without identifying her with my mother. (*Letters*)

Several points immediately emerge from this passage. First, Anderson sees a significant portion of his own adult experience as closely resembling his mother's. As members of the working class, they have both "been through the mill." Second, this excerpt obliquely suggests how much their lives diverged, for, unlike his mother, Anderson "escaped" and rose out of his class to enjoy a successful career as a writer. That he did so, he implies, is in some part a testament to his mother's decision to sacrifice herself "just to get her sons enough food to keep them alive." Not surprisingly, a legacy of unresolved guilt still haunts the writer. Anderson avoided his mother's fate, it seems, precisely because he chose another course; for Anderson, self came first. Indeed, the proliferation of I's in this passage points toward the egocentric nature of his interests. In short, Anderson as artist is evidently more enthralled by his own vision of martyred motherhood than by the grim particulars of his mother's impoverished existence, hence the heavy reliance upon varying forms of the verb "to see" in the passage above: "I saw," "I have seen," "I shall never . . . see."

This shift of focus away from the mother and toward the artist parallels the narrative stratagems employed in the opening section of "Death in the Woods." Here the narrator also moves quickly to guide the reader's attention away from his apparent subject, an old farm woman, to what is ultimately his larger concern—himself. Particularly jarring is the narrator's first substantial digression concerning the liver he was forced to eat as a child, a digression that interrupts his account of what old women do when they come to town:

Such an old woman . . . takes [eggs] to a grocer. There she trades them in. . . . Afterwards she goes to the butcher's and asks for some dog-meat. Formerly the butchers gave liver to anyone who wanted to carry it away. In our family we were always having it. Once one of my brothers got a whole cow's liver at the slaughterhouse near the fair grounds in our town. We had it until we were sick of it. It never cost a cent. I have hated the thought of it ever since.

Clearly, this is a narrator who needs close watch, for as such digressions multiply, the reader becomes increasingly fascinated not with the "real story" of an old woman's death but rather with the peculiar manner in which her story is told. This first digression is peculiar enough, suggesting as it does a puerile hostility on the narrator's part toward his past as well as the bonds of poverty and sickness that bridge the narrator's memories of his childhood with the experience of "nameless" country women. At this juncture, the narrator also reveals that when he first noticed the woman he soon identifies as Mrs. Jake Grimes, he himself was literally sick in bed with "inflammatory rheumatism," a statement that takes on added significance when he subsequently remarks that Mrs. Grimes had journeyed to town even though "she hadn't been feeling very well for several days . . . ." Given the vehemence of these boyhood reflections, the reader might justifi- ably wonder at this point if the "inflammatory" child has ever fully recovered, for as the unpredictable narrator continues to weave his tale, the reader begins to sense that this man is still none too well.

Following this unsettling digression, the narrator sketches the rough outlines of Mrs. Grimes's life. Through him we learn that in her youth she worked as a "bound girl" for a German farming couple: "At the German's place she . . . cooked the food for the German and his wife. . . . She fed them and fed the cows in the barn, fed the pigs, the horses and the chickens. Every moment of everyday, as a young girl, was spent feeding something." That her life was neither one of ease nor happiness becomes plain when the narrator discloses that the "young thing" was sexually abused, perhaps raped, by her employer. Interestingly, however, the reader's knowledge of the bound girl's life is unstable, for the narrator evidences uncertainty concerning the particulars of her story. Thus, in the opening section of "Death in the Woods," the narrator first hesitantly supposes that the young girl was "bound"—"You see, the farmer was up to something with the girl— she was, I think, a bound girl . . ."—whereas only shortly afterwards he claims that he knows the woman was so: "I remember now that she was a bound girl and did not know where her father and mother were." Such wavering causes the reader to question the narrator's confidence in the truth of the tale he says he has only "suddenly" remembered: "I have just suddenly now, after all these years, remembered her and what happened. It is a story." By calling attention in this way to the manipulative possibilities of narration, Anderson directs his audience to larger questions concerning the nature of "story" telling. As Mary Joselyn observes, "the fact that [Anderson] goes out of his way several times to tell us that the story might have been told . . . differently is important, for these statements emphasize that the process of creation is essentially one of choice and of selection."

The role that choice plays in the shaping of fiction is stressed on several occasions in "Death in the Woods" when the narrator returns to scenes or conversations that he has

previously described. In the opening section of the story, the narrator records two conversations that take place between the bound girl and Jake Grimes, another employee on the German couple's farm. Although the conversations are not identical, the subject of these talks is: both focus upon the sexual abuse that the young girl allegedly suffered on the farm. The narrator first recounts that before Jake became the bound girl's lover, she confided in him that "when the wife had to go off to town for supplies, the farmer got after her. She told young Jake that nothing really ever happened, but he didn't know whether to believe it or not." Between this and a later dialogue occurs a fight involving the German and his hired hand, which the narrator delightfully describes: "They had it out all right! The German was a tough one. Maybe he didn't care whether his wife knew or not." In the midst of this passage, the reader gradually realizes that the narrator could not possibly know all the details he provides of the scene, for there were no witnesses to the brawl. Indeed, the narrator himself seems aware of this problem when he parenthetically inserts: "(I wonder how I know all this. It must have stuck in my mind from smalltown smalltown tales when I was a boy)." Following this admission, the reader learns of the conversation that takes place after the fight when Jake finds his lover "huddled up . . . crying, [and] scared to death." Now, however, the narrator's phrasing suggests that the bound girl's "stories" are not to be believed: "She told Jake a lot of stuff, how the German had tried to get her, how he chased her once into the barn, how another time . . . he tore her dress open clear down the front." The narrator's unwillingness to grant the woman any degree of credibility in either of these confessions is further emphasized when he reveals that Jake Grimes "got her pretty easy himself, the first time he was out with her," an assertion that may once again lead the reader to wonder how the narrator can possibly "know all this."

What Anderson himself knows of course is how to construct a story, a story that, as its narrative voice becomes increasingly assured, causes the reader to question any interpretation offered concerning the meaning of the life and death of Mrs. Jake Grimes. Indeed, as the description of the fight scene suggests, the narrator identifies himself less with the plight of the "young thing" who is "scared to death" than with the men who are able to bind such women to their will. This is, moreover, not the only occasion in which the narrator reveals his sympathy with brutal forms of masculine expression, as is evident in the second section of the story when Mrs. Grimes makes her last trip to the butcher's:

she went to the butcher and he gave her some liver and dog-meat. It was the first time anyone had spoken to her in a friendly way for a long time. The butcher was alone in his shop when she came in and was annoyed by the thought of such a sick-looking old woman out on such a day. . . . [He] said something about her husband and her son, swore at them, and the old woman stared at him, a look of mild surprise in her eyes as he talked. He said that if either the husband or the son were going to get any of the liver or the heavy bones with scraps of meat hanging to them that he had put into the grain bag, he'd seen him [*sic*] starve first.

In spite of the narrator's tacit assumption that his audience will see this interchange as positive, many readers imagining this encounter might question how "friendly" such a

conversation would appear to a woman grown accustomed to "the habit of silence" who suddenly finds her family being sworn at and threatened by a man she hardly knows.

Immediately following this passage, the narrator depicts the death that has been anticipated since the opening lines of the story. In this middle section of the narrative, the old woman starts her journey home. Laden with a sack of provisions too heavy for her, Mrs. Grimes decides to take "a short cut over a hill and through the woods. . . . She was afraid she couldn't make it" otherwise. In the midst of her "struggle" home, the old woman "foolish[ly]" allows herself to rest against a tree and "quietly" falls into a sleep from which she never completely awakes. The interest in the "strange picture" her death presents lies with the several dogs that are "running in circles. . . . round and round" her sleeping form: "In the clearing, under the snow-laden tree and under the wintry moon they made a strange picture, running thus silently in a circle their running had beaten in the soft snow." At this point, the narrator shocks the reader by disclosing that he also has been part of a similarly "strange picture": "I knew all about it afterward, when I grew to be a man, because once in the woods in Illinois, on another winter night, I saw a pack of dogs act just like that. The dogs were waiting for me to die as they had waited for the old woman that night when I was a child . . . ." Like most critics, Jon Lawry dismisses this revelation as fictive, suggesting that Anderson is striving to unveil the "negative capability" necessary to the artist. According to Lawry, even the narrator knows that at this moment he is telling tales. Evidence in the memoirs, however, suggests that the adventure in the Illinois forests may be interpreted less figuratively; for the experience the narrator records seems modeled on a "strange performance" Anderson himself claims to have witnessed when, as a young man, he awoke to find himself encircled by a pack of dogs:

In the forest on the winter night dogs kept leaving the mysterious circle in which they ran and coming to me. Other dogs ran up the log to put their forelegs on my chest and stare into my face. It seemed to me, that night, that they were caught by something. They had become a wolf pack. . . . That there was such a thing as man, that they were the servants of man, that they were really dogs not wolves in a primitive world. That night I stood the strange performance as long as I could and then I arose and ran. . . . I shouted. I . . . picked up a stick and ran among the dogs, hitting out at them. (*Memoirs*)

"It was on that night," Anderson avers, that he "got the impulse for one of [his] best stories" (*Memoirs*)— "Death in the Woods."

In many respects these three "moonlit" pictures are strikingly similar, as if Anderson is attempting to suggest that the shared experience of the "primitive world" unites all human beings. To be sure, within the story itself, this is the moment at which the narrator most identifies with the plight of the dying woman; yet as soon becomes clear, his identification with her is remarkably short-lived. Indeed, the narrator survives the nightmarish "performance" precisely because he, like the combative writer depicted in the memoirs, is "young" and male and "ha[s] no intention whatever of dying" ("Death"). By contrasting the two male-centered portraits with the "strange picture" of Mrs. Grimes's death, I hope to show how fundamentally separate these varying wintry

images are. A brief look at the history of the composition of "Death in the Woods" will aid this contrast.

If, as Anderson claims, "the telling of the tale is the cutting of the natal cord" (*Story*), then the creation of "Death in the Woods" was an exceptionally laborious birth. In his memoirs Anderson reveals that he "did not succeed in writing it at once. It was one of the stories I wrote, threw away and rewrote many times." One fragmentary reference to an "old woman . . . who died alone in a wood on a winter day" appeared in 1924 in a passage from *A Story Teller's Story* where Anderson describes at some length the "strange life" that peopled his boyhood imagination:

As a boy lying buried in the hay I presume I had some such notion as that and later as a man standing by a lathe in some factory some such notion must have still been in my mind. I wanted then to be something heroic in the eyes of my own mother, now dead, and at the same time wanted to be something heroic in my own eyes too.

One could not do the thing in actual life so one did it in a new world created within one's fancy. And what a world that fanciful one—how grotesque, how strange, how teeming with strange life!. . . There are so many people in that land of whom I should like to tell you. . . . There is the old woman accompanied by the gigantic dogs who died alone in a wood on a winter day, the stout man with the grey eyes and with the pack on his back who stands talking to the beautiful woman as she sits in her carriage, the little dark woman with the boyish husband who lives in a small frame house by a dusty road far out in the country.

Somehow this "grotesque" image of an old woman's death became fused in the artist's imagination with that "strange performance" depicted in the posthumously published memoirs. There as well the experience in the woods looms larger than life as if the dogs roaming within and without Anderson's "fancy" world were all "gigantic[ally]" "large German police dogs." Although Anderson never admitted to being "frightened" by this "primitive" encounter, certainly most people would see this experience as threatening:

How long I lay there that night I'll never know. I was warmly clad. It is possible that I slept and dreamed although I do not think so.

The dogs had become silent and then suddenly there was one of them, a large German police dog with his bare leg on my chest. He was standing, his hind legs on my legs, his forelegs on my chest and his face close to my face. In the moonlight I could look directly into his eyes.

I thought there was a strange light in his eyes. Was I frightened? Well, I can't remember. (*Memoirs*)

Importantly, neither passage from these autobiographical writings is dominated by sexual overtones; nor does an undated precursor of "Death in the Woods" entitled "The Death in the Forest" depict as sexually menacing the "big ugly dogs" that accompany

Ma Marvin (Mrs. Grimes in the final version) on her journey to town. Rather, the narrator simply mentions as a matter of fact that "of course [the] pack . . . one always saw lying about Ike Marvin's ruined saw mill . . . had come with her." This early version of the story differs from "Death in the Woods" in other ways as well. Notably, in "The Death in the Forest," the "Mar vin dogs . . . gro[w] bold" only after the old woman is dead, at which time they tear through the bag on her back in order to get "the hunk of salt pork within." Between this and the final version of the story we know as "Death in the Woods," Anderson drastically reenvisioned the particulars of this scene. Whereas the "Marvin dogs" were merely "big" and "ugly," the "Grimes dogs" are "all tall gaunt fellows," and when one of them "left the running circle and came to stand before" the half-conscious woman, the "dog thrust his face close to her face. His red tongue . . . hanging out." Clearly, this image represents a significant departure from those winter landscapes depicted in the memoirs and in the undated manuscript of "The Death in the Forest." Bluntly put, in "Death in the Woods" the narrative thrust is directed elsewhere, for the threat Mrs. Grimes faces from these "tall gaunt fellows" is the threat of rape, as becomes plain when the narrator records what happens after the sleeping woman dies.

The seven dogs, which had run round Mrs. Grimes as if operating by "some old instinct, come down from the time when they were wolves" now drag her thinly clad corpse into the open. As they rip the food sack from her back, they tear through her clothing "clear to the hip," conveniently leaving her body unharmed. This last image echoes the earlier "rape" scene in which the German farmer tore the bound girl's "dress open clear down the front," even as it also nicely complements the second section of "Death in the Woods" in which the narrator reasserts woman's role as feeder. According to his report, Mrs. Grimes's married life was merely an extension of the monotony she knew on the German couple's farm: "Horses, cows, pigs, dogs, men . . . [all] had to be fed." Even her sexual relations with her husband are imaged by the fixated narrator as a form of feeding when he envisages Mrs. Grimes's relief at no longer being sexually desirable: "Thank heaven, she did not have to feed her husband—in a certain way. That hadn't lasted long after their marriage."

In the final sections of "Death in the Woods" the process of reading and interpretation is brought to the fore, for the first person to discover the partially exposed body is a hunter who seemingly "misreads" the scene. "Something, the beaten round path in the little snow-covered clearing, the silence of the place, the place where the dogs had worried the body trying to pull the grain bag away or tear it open—something startled the man and he hurried off to town" to tell "his story": "'She was a beautiful young girl. Her face was buried in the snow.'" Once again, the reader notes the narrator's identification not with the woman herself but rather with the man who had been so "frightened" by his discovery that he "had not looked closely at the body": "If something strange or uncanny has happened in the neighborhood all you think about is getting away from there as fast as you can." This rationalization sets the stage for the "mystical" transformations that result when a "crowd of men and boys," including the narrator and his brother, accompany the hunter back into the forest. Following this journey, the young boy knows that he and his brother, like the hunter before them, will "have something to tell."

The "fragments" with which narrator pieces together his story are modeled upon the hunter's wish-fulfilling vision of the "beautiful young girl":

She did not look old, lying there in that light, frozen and still. One of the men turned her over in the snow and I saw everything. My body trembled with some strange mystical feeling and so did my brother's. It might have been the cold.

Neither of us had ever seen a woman's body before. It may have been the snow, clinging to the frozen flesh, that made it look so white and lovely, so like marble.

What the narrator remembers from this epiphanic moment is "only the picture there in the forest, the men standing about, the naked girlishlooking figure, face down in the snow. . . ." He further acknowledges that "the scene in the forest had become for me, without my knowing it, the foundation for the real story I am trying to tell. The fragments, you see, had to be picked up slowly, long afterwards." As several critics have observed, this "real story" can be interpreted on one level as the boy's sexual awakening, or as William Scheick has argued, his failure to do so. On another level, however, this experience represents an aesthetic metamorphosis: the "slight thing," who previously moved through town unnoticed, becomes in death a symbol for the feminine ideal, an objet d'art worthy to serve as the "foundation" for a "real story."

This final metamorphosis—woman into art— can prove disturbing, particularly if the reader has accepted Anderson's invitation "to enter . . . into a process almost identical with that of the narrator" (Lawry). Yet no matter how appealing this invitation is, our experience of this "mystical" transformation differs considerably from what the male posse "saw" in the woods, for even as Anderson's trembling narrator reenvisions this scene, we know, as the crowd in the forest does not, exactly who this woman is. Indeed, it is only when her body is carried back to town and protected from men's eyes by the blacksmith's coat that the beautiful marbled nude is discovered to be the naked corpse of the old Mrs. Grimes. In distinguishing between Mrs. Grimes's shifting status as "naked" and "nude," I follow John Berger's analysis of these terms set forth in his insightful study *Ways of Seeing*. There Berger asserts that "To be naked is to be oneself," as Mrs. Grimes is when there are no men or boys about pruriently relishing the "lovely" vision of her "frozen flesh." Mrs. Grimes becomes "nude," however, when she is put "on display." As Berger maintains, "To be nude is to be seen naked by others and yet not recognized for oneself. A naked body has to be seen as an object in order to become a nude. (The sight of it as an object stimulates the use of it as an object.) Nakedness reveals itself. Nudity is placed on display." Had the crowd encircling the "faceless" torso not been exclusively male, Mrs. Grimes might have been identified more quickly. That Anderson himself sensed this is suggested by a significant revision he made in the course of composing his story. In the early version of the tale I have already discussed, "The Death in the Forest," the crowd that "went out to Grimes' woods" includes both men and women: "Even women who had no babies to look after went." Largely because of this, the townspeople's discovery of Ma Marvin's clothed body seems quite prosaic when compared with that "mystically" male moment in "Death

in the Woods" when the men and boys "see" only a projection of their collective imagination.

Importantly, the narrator returns in the final section of "Death in the Woods" to the episode in which he also "had a half-uncanny, mystical adventure with dogs in an Illinois forest." What startles the reader in this passage is not the narrator's repeating himself—he has done that before—but rather the vague confession that prefaces this second reference to the "mystical adventure": "Things happened. When I was a young man I worked on the farm of a German. The hired-girl was afraid of her employer. The farmer's wife hated her. I saw things at that place." If nothing else has previously alerted the reader to the narrator's disturbing identification with the community of males that, within the bounds of this short story, routinely victimizes women, this hesitant admission should; for here the narrator firmly locates himself in a position of power identical to that of Jake Grimes, a position that grants him the ability to "get" frightened "young things" to satisfy his various hungers. Contrary to what William Scheick has argued, the young boy's sexual development clearly has progressed according to the definition of masculinity accepted by "all country and small-town people."

Several critics have discerned the shattering effect with which Anderson's male narrators depict their initial sexual encounters with women. Judith Fetterley's analysis of "I Want to Know Why" pertains well to "Death in the Woods": "What Anderson's boy resists is not just growing up, it is specifically growing up *male*." Yet as Fetterley demonstrates in her criticism of the earlier story, and as I hope to have shown in my own study of "Death in the Woods," any resistance felt by Anderson's narrators on this score is eventually overcome. Indeed, one might argue of "Death in the Woods," as Fetterley does of "I Want to Know Why," that the story is "infused with the perspective it abhors, because finally to disavow that perspective would be to relinquish power." Or in the terms offered within Anderson's own interpretation of "Death in the Woods," to abandon power is to become like one of those "women who spend their whole lives, rather dumbly, feeding" the "persistent animal hunger of man." Thus, despite the narrator's attempts to sympathize with the "simple story" of Mrs. Jake Grimes, his allegiances are ultimately with the powerful and most definitely closed male community—with the "crowd of men and boys" who go to the woods, with the "frightened" hunter and the "friendly" butcher, and most especially with the two men who strive to "get" the bound girl. Admittedly, the narrator does seem to regard Mrs. Grimes more compassionately than any other man who is fed by her; yet the story he tells deals less with the miserable reality of an old woman's life than with the transforming power of artistic genius. Indeed, it is only as an artist that the narrator can justify this woman's life by envisioning her in death as a "slight" but nonetheless "beautiful" "thing." The "foundation" of this "real story" of the artist-as-a-young-man may rest upon the bones of a dead woman, but certainly little concerns her. In short, the narrator/artist can effectively ignore the political realities facing "such old women" by making of one woman's life a poetical whole, a lyric that suggests that Mrs. Grimes's destiny—and by implication, the destiny of her sex—is biologically determined: "The woman who died was one destined to feed animal life. Anyway, that is all she ever did. She was feeding animal life before she was born, as a child, as a young woman working on the farm of the German, after she married, when she grew old and when she died." The many

cyclical images within the story, as well as the narrator's passing references to his own mother and sister, reinforce such a constricted view of woman's fate.

The essential hopelessness that pervades Anderson's fiction has long been recognized. As Robert Morss Lovett observed in 1922,

This hopelessness is not an interpretation playfully or desperately imposed on the phenomena of life from without by thought or reason; it springs from within; it is of the essence of being. . . . It is as if, to use Cardinal Newman's words, man were implicated from birth in some "vast aboriginal calamity"; only instead of placing the fall of man historically in the Garden of Eden Mr. Anderson traces it biologically to the egg.

To recall that Mrs. Jake Grimes herself takes eggs to market in order to buy food for her family; to recall that this woman dies only when she "foolish[ly]" deviates from her customary route home; to recall that the narrator interprets her existence solely in terms of feeding—to recall these is to realize that Anderson's own aesthetics are most narrowly "bound." Naturally the story proves unsettling to many readers today; for if we are taken in by the interpretative web Anderson's narrator seductively dangles before us, if we also become trembling voyeurs in the woods, then we also implicate ourselves in that "vast . . . calamity" of masculinist convention that proceeds to dehistoricize woman by objectifying her into art. We may of course recognize the alluring contours of this web without becoming ensnared in the trap, which led one of America's most distinguished storytellers, Edgar Allan Poe, to maintain that the "most poetical" of melancholy subjects is not the story of a real woman's life but rather the "death of a beautiful woman" as imagined by the artist who loves her.

Source: Clare Colquitt, "The Reader as Voyeur: Complicitous Transformations in 'Death in the Woods'" in *Modern Fiction Studies*, Vol. 32, No. 2, Summer 1986, pp. 175-90.

Critical Essay #3

In this essay, Scheick looks at the role of the narrator in Anderson's "Death in the Woods," specifically the attempt to gain mastery over an unpleasant situation through a compulsion toward repetition in describing the situation, in this case the old woman's death.

In spite of its generally recognized excellence, "Death in the Woods" has frequently escaped careful study. It has been read as a story presenting death as inevitable though not terrible, concerning the pathos of a woman's life and the narrator's response to her death, and focusing on the narrator's enlarged consciousness of the human condition. More perceptive is a recent emphasis on the old woman's representation of the Demeter-Proserpine- Hecate trilogy and on four transformations that occur in the account. Most valuable are two essays concentrating on Sherwood Anderson's notions about art as revealed in the story. None of these studies focuses on the narrator in depth. To do so, however, not only indicates that an alleged narrative problem in the story—"a clumsiness in perspective that forces the narrator to offer a weak explanation of how he could have known the precise circumstances of the old woman's death"—is in fact a crucial feature but also reveals hitherto unacknowledged aesthetic features.

On the surface the story seems a simple allegory on feeding. What has not been sufficiently stressed concerning this theme is the narrator's preoccupation with male (and by implication his own) involvement in the recurrent feeding cycle: "things had to be fed. Men had to be fed, and the horses that weren't any good . . . . Horses, cows, pigs, dogs, men." This view pertains not merely to man's animal hunger for food but, in a disturbing way for the narrator, includes the adult male's hunger for the sexual victimization of women. At one point the narrator revealingly remarks of the old woman: "Thank heaven, she did not have to feed her husband— in a certain way. That hadn't lasted long after their marriage and after the babies came." Throughout the story the narrator symptomatically discloses a fascination with and a repulsion to this aspect of male feeding. He intends, for instance, his description of the scene in which the dogs tear the dead woman's dress "clear to the hips" to parallel directly an earlier episode in her youth when a German farmer "tore her dress open clear down the front," with the ironic difference that "the dogs had not touched her body."

His perception of man's relation to animal feeding, in this double sense, becomes an important factor in assessing the reason why and the manner in which the narrator tells his story, as we shall see. Equally significant is his awareness of a connection between sex and death. Twice in his report of the battle between the German farmer and Grimes for sexual possession of the woman, then "a young thing," the narrator remarks that she was "scared to death." That this phrase is more than a cliché for him becomes clearer when he relates his first encounter with sex, which occurs in the woods when he sees the dead woman, stripped to the hips: "One of the men turned her over in the snow and I saw everything. My body trembled with some strange mystical feeling." What he experiences and begins to comprehend is more than he can express; *mystical* is the

only word he has for it. But as his relation obliquely indicates, he has received a most disturbing impression of the relation between feeding, sex, and death.

In attributing this strange feeling to the weather—" It might have been the cold" —the narrator unconsciously provides a clue to what has happened to him. In one sense during that mystical moment he identifies with the cold dead body, which no longer looks old but as young as his own. Significantly just as the woman had learned "the habit of silence," so, too, he now "kept silent and went to bed early." Furthermore, throughout the story, the product of his long silence, it becomes increasingly clear that the narrator is incorporating the facts (insofar as he has ascertained and imagined them) of the old woman's life into his own experience, with the consequence that he completely identifies with several events in her life. He, too, he tells us, had been circled by dogs one winter night.

Whether or not this incident really occurred is less important than that it underscores the narrator's identification with the old woman. However, the reader's suspicion as to its authenticity is aroused by the revelation of another incident paralleling one during the woman's youth: "Things happened. When I was a young man I worked on the farm of a German. The hired-girl was afraid of her employer. The farmer's wife hated her." What he says may be true, however unlikely the coincidence seems; but what is important is the level at which he identifies with the woman, resulting in a story that finally recounts *their* experience rather than merely *hers*. The narrator's capacity for imaginative interpretation is evident in a scene in which Grimes confronts the men of the town: "When he was leaving he turned around and stared at the men. There was a look of defiance in his eyes. 'Well, I have tried to be friendly. You don't want to talk to me . . . .' He did not say anything actually. 'I'd like to bust one of you on the jaw,' was about what his eyes said." Similar interpretation occurs throughout the story whenever the narrator elliptically moves from objective observation of the woman's dilemma to imaginative identification with her thoughts.

As a result of this intense identification, the narrator readily mixes past and present tense in his account. His confusion of tenses represents a suspension of time identical to what occurs during a mystical experience. He cannot pass beyond that frozen mystical moment when he unconsciously identified with the dead woman. His incomprehensible and therefore inarticulate impression of the underlying bond between feeding, sex, and death has proved traumatic for him; and now he remains suspended between the past of the woman's experience and the future of his own destiny as a mature male.

He cannot escape nor does he really seek release from this frozen moment. To advance would mean that he must embrace maturity, become an adult male, and like grown men partake of sexual feeding. His arrested state of psychological development, the consequence of his trauma, simulates death, the ideal state: "A thing so complete has its own beauty." Such a suspended condition permits him to preserve childhood innocence, to reject the threatening reality of what he has perceived in the woods—"I saw everything"—concerning man and himself as a future adult male. Significantly the narrator stresses that the "frozen and still" body of the old woman took on, in death, the

appearance of regained youthfulness, that it "looked like the body of some charming young girl." Through death the old woman has regained innocence and beauty; and through his identification with this woman, though a simulation of her death with regard to the frozen suspended state of his psychological development, the narrator hopes to reinstate his earlier condition of unconscious innocence.

From another but germane perspective, the narrator has participated in a traditional rite held in the woods and intended to initiate him into the world of adult sexuality. Clearly only men and boys go to see the body, and even the dogs circling the body are male. This ritual provides for the narrator's first encounter with sex, but he fails to emerge from the initiation with a mature outlook. Ironically his development is arrested, and death rather than participation in life becomes for him the ideal condition, a state of suspension whereby he can maintain youth and innocence. Thus, not only does his story chiefly take place between summer and fall, but his psychological condition is likewise symbolically suspended between the summer of his youthful, preinitiation innocence (past-present) and the autumn of his conscious, adult awareness (present-future). To progress to the autumn stage would necessitate his development as a mature male who, with regard to feeding, will victimize women. Indeed contributing to his trauma is the realization, appropriately arising after his experience in the woods, that he is already guilty of victimizing women in terms of feeding (and by implication its symbolic connection to sex and death): "When he [my brother] got back to town he would have to go on distributing his papers before he went home to supper. . . . we would both be late. Either mother or our older sister would have to warm our supper."

The narrator's paralysis between the summer and autumn of his psychic development is reflected not only in his mingling of past and present tense but also in his simple, rather terse sentences, very unsophisticated in vocabulary and style, which time and again sound as if a child were speaking: "In a woods, in the late afternoon, when the trees are all bare and there is white snow on the ground, when all is silent, something creepy steals over the mind and body." Such verbal simplicity belies the real complexity of the mystical experience he has undergone; but it is entirely organic to his suspension in an eternal present staving off maturity and reinstating innocence. Especially pertinent in this regard is the narrator's evasiveness when referring to sexual matters. Such remarks as "the farmer was up to something with the girl" and "maybe she did not have any father. You know what I mean" emphasize the child persona of the narrator, though in fact he is a grown man. Even his comment that "things happened," pertaining to the German farmer's sexual interest in the young girl, and that he "saw everything," referring to the naked body in the snow, suggest the narrator's evasiveness when speaking about sexual matters as well as his perception of some large unexpressible truth beyond the specifics of the immediate incidents. Clearly "Death in the Woods" does not present a "matured narrator," nor does it represent a "mature man's creation," as two critics have claimed.

Although the narrator apparently prefers his frozen, deathlike condition, he does experience a counter instinct, the thrust toward maturity. A tension results from the conflict between these two instincts, a neurotic anxiety necessitating the narrator's attempt to restructure his experience in order to fathom what has happened to him: "The

fragments, you see, had to be picked up slowly, long afterwards," for "something had to be understood." What he almost consciously recognizes about feeding, sex, and death has remained as elusive as his first mystical encounter with their meaning: "The whole thing, the story of the old woman's death, was to me as I grew older like music heard from far off. The notes had to be picked up slowly one at a time." Painstakingly the reality of what he had perceived had to be retrieved from the unconscious. Never in control of his problem, however, the narrator constantly remains at the receiving end of his experience and its aftermath. Consequently, it is "just *suddenly* now, after all these years" (italics added) that he discovers fragments emerging into consciousness. Although one might argue that he seems to understand a little better what these fragments mean, it is even truer that he is unable to piece them together with utter clarity: "I wonder how I know all this. It must have stuck in my mind from small-town tales when I was a boy."

Because the fragments are only dimly perceived and essentially beyond his control, the narrator's story is related in a disjointed manner with segments out of chronological order. What strikes the rational mind as murky, disorderly fragments in fact represents a disguised underlying pattern to the unconscious. Struggling for a glimpse of this pattern the narrator's conscious mind must continually circle around the woman's frozen body in a manifestation of what Freud described as a compulsion toward repetition, a tendency to repeat an unpleasant incident in order to gain mastery over it. The circle in fact is the principal image in the narrator's account, for he does not regress to an earlier period but tries to stand still. Paradoxically in striving to restructure his experience, the narrator performs the very activity he seeks to escape; he, too, is fed by the woman, for she remains the substantive, vital core of his story and his experience. Like the dogs running "silently, in a circle," around her body, like the hunter and the other men who later surround it, the narrator compulsively circles and recircles "the oval in the snow." In a sense he is guilty of precisely the act he tries to renounce, a situation he does not consciously realize but seems to sense intuitively at the end of his relation: "even after her death [she] continued feeding animal life."

The narrator's story, then, is not about *a* death or *the* death in the woods but, as the title reads, death in the woods. The old woman has died and so has the narrator, who in identifying with her emerges from his initiation rite psychologically frozen. Even the narrator senses that the scene in the forest represents only "the *foundation* for the real story" which he is "now *trying* to tell." (italics added). In his attempt to resolve the tension between the instinct to remain psychologically suspended in simulation of death (thereby retaining innocence) and the other instinct to mature (thereby consciously facing painful reality), the narrator continually circles the subject and the meaning of his story, compulsively trying, albeit never quite managing, to attain composure. Composure remains as unattainable as the exact meaning of his narrative, the meaning that his brother's version failed to make clear and from which his own account retreats: "I shall not try to emphasize the point." The final sentence of the story summarizes the narrator's plight: "I speak . . . that you may understand why I have been *impelled* to try to tell the *simple* story *over again*" (italics added). This recapitulation, reflected in the narrative technique and imagery of "Death in the Woods," evinces the narrator's compulsion toward repetition as he circles and recircles the elusive, the always

incomplete and uncomprehended significance of his initiation experience in the woods. This psychological circular pattern is objectified in the simulated frozen ideal state of death, that timeless present in which the narrator remains suspended between an innocent unconscious past and a conscious future as an adult male who expresses animal hunger with all its symbolic implications with regard to women. Like the old woman in her youth, the narrator was, as a boy, "scared to death."

Source: William J. Scheick, "Compulsion Toward Repetition: Sherwood Anderson's 'Death in the Woods'" in *Studies in Short Fiction*, Vol. XI, No. 2, Spring 1974, pp. 141-46.

Critical Essay #4

In the following essay, Sister Mary Joselyn examines the themes of transformation that are interwoven in the thematic and structural elements of the story.

Although Sherwood Anderson's "Death in the Woods" is widely regarded as the author's masterpiece and has been closely studied by at least two critics, its depths have not yet been plumbed. It is not the claim of this short paper to do so, either, but rather to indicate some dimensions of the story that so far have scarcely been identified but which in fact have both structural and thematic importance. An appreciative reader of the modern short narrative marvels at Anderson's skill in this story—the "circling," resonating effect created by the several retellings of the events, the deft but strong and pointed ironies thrown off as it were in passing, a time scheme intricate in the extreme yet managed in a relaxed and casual-seeming style, above all the unerring movement back and forth between the mode of ordinary realism and a highly-charged, universalized and poetic vein. It is this characteristic of "Death in the Woods," no doubt, that prompted Horace Gregory's observation that though its external form is "plainly that of a story, its internal structure is that of poetry; it has the power of saying more than prose is required to say, and saying it in the fewest words." A sentence that illustrates this quality occurs near the end of the narrative, in the climactic fourth section, where, describing his feeling as a boy gazing on the snowy circle where the woman's body lies, the narrator says, "Darkness comes quickly on such winter nights, but the full moon made everything clear." The first part of the sentence is purely a statement of fact from and about the "real" world, a generalization framed in the present tense as a truism should be, but the second clause leaps out of the level of realistic detail to suggest a more universal realm where deeper issues are raised—the meaning of seeing, the amazing possibility of seeing better in a transforming halflight, of perceiving something not revealed clearly by the physical sight. Thus the second clause not only goes beyond the first but offers a commentary upon it, constituting a critique of the consciousness that originated it and indeed of the context of meaning available to such a consciousness. The concern of this paper, however, rather than defining the perfect amalgamation of modes that the story demonstrates, will be centered upon the "transformations" that occur in the narrative.

One of Jon Lawry's chief findings in "'Death in the Woods' and the Artist's Self in Sherwood Anderson" is that a main theme of the story is the creation of the narrator's consciousness as a man and as an artist. Lawry has correctly identified a transformation theme in the story, as has Mary Rohrberger in relating the woman's life to the metamorphosis of Proserpine, Demeter, and Hecate. Yet both readings are incomplete, for, whether or not one accepts the full mythical interpretation, it can be shown that "Death in the Woods" is built upon at least four transformations, which Anderson has interwoven with unparalleled skill. If, for purposes of analysis, Anderson's intricate time scheme is restructured as straightforward chronology, the outline of the four basic changes of the story immediately becomes clearer. The most obvious of these— and the one that provides the firmest "story line"— concerns the transformation of Mrs. Grimes.

Piece by piece Anderson fills in the picture of the stages of the woman's life. Almost at the end of the story, the narrator refers to Mrs. Grimes's girlhood "at the German's, and before that, when she was a child and before her mother lit out and left her." The girl, the narrator guesses, probably became a "bound girl" of the German farmer because she did not have any father: "You know what I mean." Bound children were often cruelly treated, were "slaves really." At any rate, the farmer's pursuit of the "young, scared" girl, the hatred and suspicion of the farmer's wife, as well as the girl's own inability to resist the rakish Jake Grimes when he appeared led to a situation by which "She got past being shocked early in life." As Mrs. Grimes and the mother of two children—the daughter died and the young son became a drunkard like his father—the woman sees her existence turn into a sordid round of silent, slavish labor that, before she is forty, has driven her to the edge of madness.

In the second section of the story Anderson develops in his brilliantly incantatory prose the picture of the woman in her symbolic role as feeder and nourisher of life. As a young girl at the German farmer's, she had spent every moment of the day feeding animals and men, and this work continues and increases after her marriage. Anderson's rhythmic cadences move from simple realism to mnemonic thematic statement: ". . . things had to be fed. Men had to be fed, and the horses that weren't any good but maybe could be traded off, and the poor thin cow that hadn't given any milk for three months. Horses, cows, pigs, dogs, men." The "feeder" motif remains in the background of all the remaining sections of the story, shading into irony as the maddened dogs tear the food pack from the woman's shoulders after she freezes to death in the snow. Near the conclusion of the narrative, Anderson returns explicitly to the feeder theme as the narrator attempts, however fumblingly, to probe the deeper meaning of the woman's life:

The woman who died was destined to feed animal life. Anyway, that is all she ever did. She was feeding animal life before she was born, as a child, as a young woman working on the farm of the German, after she married, when she grew old and when she died. She fed animal life in cows, in chickens, in pigs, in horses, in dogs, in men. . . . On the night when she died she was hurrying homeward, bearing on her body food for animal life.

While the interpretation of the woman's life afforded in the narrator's recapitulation contains truth, it does not exhaust it. For this, another stage in the woman's metamorphosis is necessary.

When a hunter finds the woman's body in the circle of snow around which the dogs have run their ritual chase, it is "frozen stiff . . . the shoul so narrow and the body so slight that in death it looked like the body of some charming young girl." The man who finds the body is succinct: "I didn't see any wounds. She was a beautiful young girl. Her face was buried in the snow. No, I didn't know her." Finally, the narrator presents his own direct view of the scene when the men and the two boys go to the woods. He remembers that "She did not look old, lying there in that light, frozen and still. . . . It may have been the snow, clinging to the frozen flesh, that made it look so white and lovely, so like marble." Years later, the memory of the picture there in the forest is still vivid to the narrator: "the men standing about, the naked girlish-looking figure, face down in the

snow, the tracks made by the running dogs and the clear cold winter sky above." The woman's metamorphosis is complete; she has passed from girl to woman, feeder, and victim, then to the perpetual, "frozen" embodiment of the young girl, caught in "marble." Through the stages of her transformation her meaning—"A thing so complete has its own beauty"—has been dramatically revealed. But other transformations, some not so dramatic and complete, take place in "Death in the Woods," one of the most interesting of them being the change in the narrator himself.

The most circuitous of the narrative threads in the story traces the development of the central consciousness, that of the narrator, itself. Lawry has already carefully analyzed the stages in the completion of the man's sense of his self through his telling of the woman's story expressed as a work of art. According to Lawry, "the discovery of the 'I' necessarily involves the artistic expression of that discovery." The "I" is revealed in three stages, as the boy before the woman's body, as the young man facing the circle of dogs in Illinois, and as the older man still holding to his ideal picture of woman. One may question Lawry's apparent conviction of the finality of this transformation; rather it would seem that since the narrator is still mulling over the deepest significance of what he has experienced, he is himself still "in process," his own future promising still further transformations.

A minor transformation (minor, that is, in relation to the plot of the story but not to its themes) is the change, also uncompleted, of the seven dogs into wolves. Much is made by the narrator of the large, gaunt-looking animals always hanging around the Grimes's place near the sawmill on the creek. "Such men, as Jake Grimes," the narrator holds, "always keep just such dogs. They kick and abuse them, but they stay." Two or three of the dogs insistently follow the woman as she goes about her chores, and four of them are with her on her walk into town to sell eggs and beg a packet of dog-meat from the butcher. On the return trip the animals trail behind her sniffing at the bag on her back. The narrator vividly re-creates, in the third section of the story, the actions of these huge, hungry animals:

The Grimes dogs, in order to keep from starving, had to do a lot of foraging for themselves, and they had been at it while the old woman slept with her back to the tree at the side of the clearing. They had been chasing rabbits in the woods and in adjoining fields and in their ranging had picked up three other farm dogs. After a time all the dogs came back to the clearing. They were excited about something. Such nights, cold and clear and with a moon, do things to dogs. It may be that some old instinct, come down from the time when they were wolves and ranged the woods in packs on winter nights, comes back into them. The dogs in the clearing, before the old woman, had caught two or three rabbits and their immediate hunger had been satisfied. They began to play, running in circles in the clearing. Round and round they ran, each dog's nose at the tail of the next dog. In the clearing, under the snow-laden trees and under the wintry moon they made a strange picture, running thus silently, in a circle their running had beaten in the soft snow. The dogs made no sound. They ran around and around in the circle.

Perhaps the woman opened her eyes and saw the animals before she died, noticing how the bolder ones came up to her with their red tongues hanging out and their faces

thrust at hers. The circling of the dogs, thinks the narrator, may have been a kind of death ceremony, for the primitive instinct of the wolf aroused in the animals by the night and the running may have made them "somehow afraid." Perhaps they said to themselves: "Now we are no longer wolves. We are dogs, the servants of man. Keep alive, man! When man dies we become wolves again."

The woman dies but the dogs do not become wolves; their transformation is not completed. The dogs stop running and gather about Mrs. Grimes, toppling her body face downward in the snow to loosen the bag in which the meat is tied, led by the most agile and quick of the animals. The narrator insists, "Had the dogs really been wolves that one would have been the leader of the pack." The dogs drag the woman's body into the clearing and tear her dress from her shoulders but do not touch the corpse itself. Although the animals act like wolves and have "lost" man in death, the narrator refuses to acknowledge their regression. This metamorphosis, then, remains incomplete, at least to the narrator.

The fourth transformation takes place at a different level. The first three changes, as the story's *donnée*, its material, are for the most part reported, verifiable incidents that occurred in the natural, "real" world, but the fourth transformation consists of the alteration itself of these facts into a work of art. There is no question that, as all readers will observe and as Lawry has noted in detail, "Death in the Woods" is not only a story but a story about the creation of a story. Lawry, it would appear to this writer, oversimplifies, though, in identifying the process of the creation of the narrator's consciousness with the process of the creation of the story. Certainly the two metamorphoses are related, but they are not identical. Possibly the most profound change in the narrator occurs when he finds the true *subject* of his story, but as a matter of fact the narrator is himself an outcome of the writer's art.

As evidence that Anderson is writing about the process of art, the fact that he goes out of his way several times to tell us that the story might have been told (seen, imagined) differently is important, for these statements emphasize that the process of creation is essentially one of choice and of selection. When, for example, the older brother tells the story of the woman's death the evening after it happened, the narrator remembers, "I kept silent . . . . It may have been I was not satisfied with the way he told it." Then there is the culminating section of the narrative—

You see it is likely that, when my brother told the story, that night when we got home and my mother and sister sat listening, I did not think he got the point. He was too young and so was I. A thing so complete has its own beauty.

I shall not try to emphasize the point. I am only explaining why I was dissatisfied then and have been ever since. I speak of that only that you may understand why I have been impelled to try to tell the simple story over again.

As the process of art is a process of choice, it may also be imperfectible, forever unfinished. If, in this view, art is responsible—and responsive—to existence itself, and

existence is in continuous state of change, art could not be other than unfinal. The aesthetic undertaking is difficult ("the story *I am trying* to tell") and it is slow ("The notes had to be picked up slowly one at a time").

Anderson's handling of the problems of verisimilitude, too, may emphasize the improvisatory character of the art process. Repeatedly the narrator indulges in explanations of how he "knew" some fact or event, though on the other hand Anderson does not hesitate to write in strict omniscient-author point of view when the material seems to call for it. Throughout Section Three and again in Section Four the account of the dogs' ritual dancing before the dying woman is presented at firsthand from the woman's point of view, yet near the end of Section Four, the narrator goes to the trouble of saying "I knew all about it afterward when I grew to be a man because once in a woods in Illinois, on another winter night, I saw a pack of dogs act just like that." The reader is inclined to feel the explanation—and others like it—is a pointless awkwardness; still these statements may be used to stress the gap between mere fact and what the imagination makes of it in the act of art.

The narrative contains other hints and implications relating to the aesthetic process, for instance on the way subjects are discovered. Over and over in "Death in the Woods," reference is made to the memory as a source of art: the story is sprinkled with the phrase "I remember," and more than once detail, even irrelevant detail, is brought in with no more purpose than to situate an event in the past, as in the generalized account of women's dealings with butchers in former days—

. . . she goes to the butcher's and asks for some dogmeat. She may spend ten or fifteen cents, but when she does she asks for something. Formerly the butchers gave liver to anyone who wanted to carry it away. In our family we were always having it. Once one of my brothers got a whole cow's liver at the slaughterhouse near the fairgrounds in our town. We had it until we were sick of it. It never cost a cent. I have hated the thought of it ever since.

While details like these serve to establish tone and may contribute something to the characterization of the narrator, their chief purpose would seem to be to stress the pastness of events and to reinforce indirectly the idea that memory is the main repository from which the subjects of art are drawn.

Anderson also suggests, however, that certain meaningful, more static scenes or "pictures" also may be the source of art. Thus the narrator, mulling for years over some of the events appearing in the story asserts, "I remember only the picture there in the forest. . . . The scene in the forest had become for me, without my knowing it, the foundation for the real story I am now trying to tell." The implication would seem to be that when these "pictures" or quintessential scenes have been forced to reveal their meaning, a work of art will be the result. The end of the process consists, doubtless, in understanding what has been seen. At the highest point of concentration in "Death in the Woods," when the men finally turn over the body of the woman in the snow, the narrator avers "I saw everything" and "My body trembled with some strange mystical feelings . . . ." Again, of the same moment: "I had seen everything, had seen the oval in

the snow, like a miniature race track, where the dogs had run, had seen how the men were mystified, had seen the white bare young-looking shoulders, had heard the whispered comments of the men." The materials of art, then, may be events or pictures; the act of art is to determine their meaning, for "The fragments, you see, had to be picked up slowly, long afterwards." The notes of the strange, far-off music must be "picked up slowly one at a time," for "Something had to be understood."

It is through these four interlocking transformations, then, that Anderson creates his story. As Mrs. Grimes undergoes a three-fold metamorphosis, the narrator himself is altered from the young boy who witnessed the original events to the youth facing the circle of dogs in Illinois to the older man with his picture of ideal woman and his artist's view of the events. A minor but not insignificant transformation is that of the seven dogs in the woods into wolves, a change not completed, like that of the other (major) transmutation, that of the welding of the materials of art into the work of art. Two of the changes are presented more or less directly, in their chronological order, that of dogs into wolves and events into story, while the other two transformations, those of boy into youth and man and of girl into frozen ideal or statue, are presented in a much more roundabout, circumstantial, "existential" manner. Casual as the linking of the metamorphoses may seem to be, a perusal of the story will show how intricate their inter-relationship really is, with one change occupying the foreground and the other three the background of each of the sections of the story. Thus the whole is implicit in each of the parts, and by these means and others, Anderson succeeds in creating a perfectly integrated work of art.

Source: Sister Mary Joselyn, "Some Artistic Dimensions of Sherwood Anderson's 'Death in the Woods'" in *Studies in Short Fiction*, Vol. IV, No. 3, Spring 1967, pp. 252-59.

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Matthews, T. S., Review, in the *New Republic*, June 7, 1933, p. 105.

Mesher, David R., "A Triumph of Ego in Anderson's 'The Egg,'"*Studies in Short Fiction*, Vol. 17, No. 2, Spring, 1980, pp. 18-83.

Townsend, Kim, *Sherwood Anderson*, Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1987.

White, Ray Lewis, ed., *The Achievement of Sherwood Anderson*, Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1966.

Topics for Further Study

Do you find Mrs. Grimes a sympathetic character? Why or why not? Cite specific passages from the text to support your point of view.

The narrator states that it was the woman's destiny to "feed animal life." Do you feel that this adequately explains the significance of the story? What are some of the other ideas and themes present in "Death in the Woods"?

Critics have suggested that Anderson's writing style was influenced by post-impressionist artists Paul Cezanne, Vincent van Gogh, and Paul Gaugin. Do some research into these artists' ideas about perception. How do they relate to the style of "Death in the Woods"—particularly, the narrator's changing perceptions of the old woman?

In his preface to *Winesburg, Ohio* Anderson describes his characters as "grotesques." Research some critical responses to Anderson's idea of "the grotesque" and relate your findings to "Death in the Woods." How does this concept help you to understand Anderson's portrayal of the old woman?

Compare and Contrast

1930s: American women have a life expectancy of sixty-five years, five years longer than their male counterparts.

Today: Women in the United States still outlive men by approximately five years, though life expectancies have changed (female life expectancy is seventy-nine years, male life expectancy is seventy-four years of age).

1930s: For generations the United States has been become an increasingly industrial and urban society. However, as a result of the Great Depression, for the first time in decades there is a reverse in the rural-urban migration pattern, with slightly more people leaving cities and returning to their towns of origin.

Today: A movement called "new urbanism" or "neo-traditionalism" seeks to restore the smalltown American way of life. Disney designs and builds an entire town, Celebration, Florida, based on old-fashioned city planning and social values.

1930s: The United States ceases to be a primarily agricultural nation, but 25% of the population still lives on farms. There are 6,300 farms in the United States. Most farms are 50—99 acres, but more farmers live on small farms of less than ten acres than live large farms of more than a thousand.

Today: There are approximately 2,000 farms in the United States. The farm population has dropped to approximately two percent of the total population of the country. Most food is grown on huge "factory farms" owned by corporations.

1930s: Working women have little protection against sexual harassment. In fact, the courts do not name sexual harassment as an illegal form of discrimination until 1976.

Today: Sexual harassment is a public issue in workplaces across the country, where strict new anti-harassment policies are introduced and implemented.

What Do I Read Next?

Winesburg, Ohio (1919), Anderson's collection of interlocking short stories set in a fictionalized Midwestern town, is considered his finest work.

The Triumph of the Egg (1921) is another classic short story collection written by Anderson. The fable-like title story is narrated by a child who openly fictionalizes an account of his father's failures.

Written by Theodore Dreiser, *An American Tragedy* (1925) traces the downfall of Clyde Griffiths. The story is a scathing indictment of American materialist values.

Main Street (1920), a novel by Sinclair Lewis, chronicles the story of a big-city girl who marries a small-town doctor. Lewis gently satirizes the provincial Minnesota setting, which is based on his own hometown.

The Nick Adams Stories (1972) are Ernest Hemingway's famous semi-autobiographical stories about his boyhood set mainly in rural Michigan. The Nick Adam stories were influenced by Anderson, sharing with his works autobiographical themes and simple language

Further Study

Burbank, Rex, *Sherwood Anderson*, New York: Twayne, 1964.

Offers a clear and concise overview of Anderson's life, work, and the critical reception of his work.

Small, Judy Jo, *A Reader's Guide to the Short Stories of Sherwood Anderson*, New York: G. K. Hall, 1994.

This guide offers insight into his influences and sources, as well as critical interpretations of selected stories.

Townsend, Kim, *Sherwood Anderson*, Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1987.

This biography offers detailed information about Anderson as both a writer and a man. Townsend views him sympathetically and argues for his continued relevance.

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Introduction

Purpose of the Book

The purpose of Short Stories for Students (SSfS) is to provide readers with a guide to understanding, enjoying, and studying novels by giving them easy access to information about the work. Part of Gale's□For Students□ Literature line, SSfS is specifically designed to meet the curricular needs of high school and undergraduate college students and their teachers, as well as the interests of general readers and researchers considering specific novels. While each volume contains entries on □classic□ novels

frequently studied in classrooms, there are also entries containing hard-to-find information on contemporary novels, including works by multicultural, international, and women novelists.

The information covered in each entry includes an introduction to the novel and the novel's author; a plot summary, to help readers unravel and understand the events in a novel; descriptions of important characters, including explanation of a given character's role in the novel as well as discussion about that character's relationship to other characters in the novel; analysis of important themes in the novel; and an explanation of important literary techniques and movements as they are demonstrated in the novel.

In addition to this material, which helps the readers analyze the novel itself, students are also provided with important information on the literary and historical background informing each work. This includes a historical context essay, a box comparing the time or place the novel was written to modern Western culture, a critical overview essay, and excerpts from critical essays on the novel. A unique feature of SSfS is a specially commissioned critical essay on each novel, targeted toward the student reader.

To further aid the student in studying and enjoying each novel, information on media adaptations is provided, as well as reading suggestions for works of fiction and nonfiction on similar themes and topics. Classroom aids include ideas for research papers and lists of critical sources that provide additional material on the novel.

Selection Criteria

The titles for each volume of SSfS were selected by surveying numerous sources on teaching literature and analyzing course curricula for various school districts. Some of the sources surveyed included: literature anthologies; Reading Lists for College-Bound Students: The Books Most Recommended by America's Top Colleges; textbooks on teaching the novel; a College Board survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; a National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; the NCTE's Teaching Literature in High School: The Novel;and the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) list of best books for young adults of the past twenty-five years. Input was also solicited from our advisory board, as well as educators from various areas. From these discussions, it was determined that each volume should have a mix of □classic□ novels (those works commonly taught in literature classes) and contemporary novels for which information is often hard to find. Because of the interest in expanding the canon of literature, an emphasis was also placed on including works by international, multicultural, and women authors. Our advisory board members□educational professionals□ helped pare down the list for each volume. If a work was not selected for the present volume, it was often noted as a possibility for a future volume. As always, the editor welcomes suggestions for titles to be included in future volumes.

How Each Entry Is Organized

Each entry, or chapter, in SSfS focuses on one novel. Each entry heading lists the full name of the novel, the author's name, and the date of the novel's publication. The following elements are contained in each entry:

- Introduction: a brief overview of the novel which provides information about its first appearance, its literary standing, any controversies surrounding the work, and major conflicts or themes within the work.
- Author Biography: this section includes basic facts about the author's life, and focuses on events and times in the author's life that inspired the novel in question.
- Plot Summary: a factual description of the major events in the novel. Lengthy summaries are broken down with subheads.
- Characters: an alphabetical listing of major characters in the novel. Each character name is followed by a brief to an extensive description of the character's role in the novel, as well as discussion of the character's actions, relationships, and possible motivation. Characters are listed alphabetically by last name. If a character is unnamed□for instance, the narrator in Invisible Man-the character is listed as □The Narrator□ and alphabetized as □Narrator.□ If a character's first name is the only one given, the name will appear alphabetically by that name. □ Variant names are also included for each character. Thus, the full name □Jean Louise Finch□ would head the listing for the narrator of To Kill a Mockingbird, but listed in a separate cross-reference would be the nickname □Scout Finch.□
- Themes: a thorough overview of how the major topics, themes, and issues are addressed within the novel. Each theme discussed appears in a separate subhead, and is easily accessed through the boldface entries in the Subject/Theme Index.
- Style: this section addresses important style elements of the novel, such as setting, point of view, and narration; important literary devices used, such as imagery, foreshadowing, symbolism; and, if applicable, genres to which the work might have belonged, such as Gothicism or Romanticism. Literary terms are explained within the entry, but can also be found in the Glossary.
- Historical Context: This section outlines the social, political, and cultural climate in which the author lived and the novel was created. This section may include descriptions of related historical events, pertinent aspects of daily life in the culture, and the artistic and literary sensibilities of the time in which the work was written. If the novel is a historical work, information regarding the time in which the novel is set is also included. Each section is broken down with helpful subheads.
- Critical Overview: this section provides background on the critical reputation of the novel, including bannings or any other public controversies surrounding the work. For older works, this section includes a history of how the novel was first received and how perceptions of it may have changed over the years; for more recent novels, direct quotes from early reviews may also be included.
- Criticism: an essay commissioned by SSfS which specifically deals with the novel and is written specifically for the student audience, as well as excerpts from previously published criticism on the work (if available).

- Sources: an alphabetical list of critical material quoted in the entry, with full bibliographical information.
- Further Reading: an alphabetical list of other critical sources which may prove useful for the student. Includes full bibliographical information and a brief annotation.

In addition, each entry contains the following highlighted sections, set apart from the main text as sidebars:

- Media Adaptations: a list of important film and television adaptations of the novel, including source information. The list also includes stage adaptations, audio recordings, musical adaptations, etc.
- Topics for Further Study: a list of potential study questions or research topics dealing with the novel. This section includes questions related to other disciplines the student may be studying, such as American history, world history, science, math, government, business, geography, economics, psychology, etc.
- Compare and Contrast Box: an □at-a-glance□ comparison of the cultural and historical differences between the author's time and culture and late twentieth century/early twenty-first century Western culture. This box includes pertinent parallels between the major scientific, political, and cultural movements of the time or place the novel was written, the time or place the novel was set (if a historical work), and modern Western culture. Works written after 1990 may not have this box.
- What Do I Read Next?: a list of works that might complement the featured novel or serve as a contrast to it. This includes works by the same author and others, works of fiction and nonfiction, and works from various genres, cultures, and eras.

Other Features

SSfS includes □The Informed Dialogue: Interacting with Literature,□ a foreword by Anne Devereaux Jordan, Senior Editor for Teaching and Learning Literature (TALL), and a founder of the Children's Literature Association. This essay provides an enlightening look at how readers interact with literature and how Short Stories for Students can help teachers show students how to enrich their own reading experiences.

A Cumulative Author/Title Index lists the authors and titles covered in each volume of the SSfS series.

A Cumulative Nationality/Ethnicity Index breaks down the authors and titles covered in each volume of the SSfS series by nationality and ethnicity.

A Subject/Theme Index, specific to each volume, provides easy reference for users who may be studying a particular subject or theme rather than a single work. Significant subjects from events to broad themes are included, and the entries pointing to the specific theme discussions in each entry are indicated in boldface.

Each entry has several illustrations, including photos of the author, stills from film adaptations (if available), maps, and/or photos of key historical events.

Citing Short Stories for Students

When writing papers, students who quote directly from any volume of Short Stories for Students may use the following general forms. These examples are based on MLA style; teachers may request that students adhere to a different style, so the following examples may be adapted as needed. When citing text from SSfS that is not attributed to a particular author (i.e., the Themes, Style, Historical Context sections, etc.), the following format should be used in the bibliography section:

□Night.□ Short Stories for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 234-35.

When quoting the specially commissioned essay from SSfS (usually the first piece under the □Criticism□ subhead), the following format should be used:

Miller, Tyrus. Critical Essay on □Winesburg, Ohio.□ Short Stories for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 335-39.

When quoting a journal or newspaper essay that is reprinted in a volume of SSfS, the following form may be used:

Malak, Amin. □Margaret Atwood's □The Handmaid's Tale and the Dystopian Tradition,□ Canadian Literature No. 112 (Spring, 1987), 9-16; excerpted and reprinted in Short Stories for Students, Vol. 4, ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski (Detroit: Gale, 1998), pp. 133-36.

When quoting material reprinted from a book that appears in a volume of SSfS, the following form may be used:

Adams, Timothy Dow. □Richard Wright: □Wearing the Mask,□ in Telling Lies in Modern American Autobiography (University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 69-83; excerpted and reprinted in Novels for Students, Vol. 1, ed. Diane Telgen (Detroit: Gale, 1997), pp. 59-61.

We Welcome Your Suggestions

The editor of Short Stories for Students welcomes your comments and ideas. Readers who wish to suggest novels to appear in future volumes, or who have other suggestions, are cordially invited to contact the editor. You may contact the editor via email at: ForStudentsEditors@gale.com. Or write to the editor at:

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