Hands Study Guide

Hands by Sherwood Anderson

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Introduction

First published in the March 1916 issue of *Masses,* a Chicago literary magazine featuring avant-garde writing, Sherwood Anderson's "Hands" became the first story in his first and most important collection *Winesburg, Ohio*. Although he had published two novels already, Anderson had difficulty finding a publisher for his collection. The editor who had published his novels thought the stories were too dark to attract readers. In fact, *Winesburg, Ohio* sold well and was widely reviewed. Most critics admired the book for its insight and honesty, but others labeled it crude and disgusting.

The stories all featured "grotesques," or psychologically isolated people who live in the small post-Civil War town of Winesburg. The central character of "Hands" is Wing Biddlebaum, a man who was a schoolteacher in another town until his attentions to his students were misunderstood as being erotic. Now he lives alone in Winesburg, afraid to get close to people for fear his hands will betray him again. The suggestion of sexuality, and particularly of homosexuality, was unusual in 1919, and readers and critics reacted strongly. Nearly all contemporary reviewers compared the book to *The Spoon River Anthology,* Edgar Lee Masters' 1915 collection of poems about different figures in a small town. Some said that the two authors depicted similar characters and debated over whose approach to the characters was gloomier.

Anderson often said that he created "Hands" in one sitting in 1915 and never changed a single word. Now that scholars have access to Anderson's handwritten manuscripts, it is clear that this legend is untrue, that the story reached its final form through a combination of inspiration and careful revision.

Author Biography

Considered one of the most important literary voices to come out of the American Midwest, Sherwood Anderson was born in Camden, Ohio, on September 13, 1876. For the next several years the family moved from one small Ohio town to another, finally settling in Clyde in 1884. At the time, small-town America was still recovering from the Civil War, and had not yet been changed forever by industrialization. Clyde, the town Anderson used as a model for his fictional town of Winesburg, Ohio, was a small town set in the middle of farming country and had little to offer a young man who did not wish to be a farmer or a merchant.

Anderson's family was poor. His father was a harness maker, when he worked at all, and the demand for his skill lessened as industrialization grew and harnesses could be made quickly and inexpensively by machine. Anderson helped the family by taking any job that came along, from running errands to running numbers. He went to school irregularly, but like many young people who later become writers, he read everything he could. In 1896, when he was twenty, Anderson went to Chicago and found a job in a warehouse. By 1900, he was working as a writer of sorts, writing and selling advertisements in Chicago. He returned to Ohio in 1906, married, and started a paint business. Quietly, he also wrote novels but did not publish them. In 1912, he was found wandering the streets of Elyria, Ohio, in a daze. He never went back to his business, and he left his wife and children and returned to Chicago, determined this time to be a writer.

Anderson made the acquaintance of other writers in Chicago and became a part of the "Chicago Renaissance." His first novel, *Windy McPherson's Son* (1916), finally found a publisher after two years of rejections, and at the age of forty he was at work on an interwoven collection of short stories. They were published in Chicago literary magazines and eventually gathered together as a book, *Winesburg, Ohio,* in 1919. The first story in the collection, "Hands," is about a lonely and misunderstood man in a small Midwestern town. Both books were well received, as were two others Anderson produced in subsequent years. His stories of isolated and damaged people, whom he called "grotesques," touched a nerve with readers, and he became financially secure and a critical success.

Anderson remained a popular writer and lecturer for the rest of his life, although most critics believe that the quality of his work declined during the 1920s and 1930s. As he became more successful and more sophisticated, he could no longer write as movingly about his one true subject: the hearts and minds of simple people in small-town America. Anderson died on March 8, 1941, on his way to South America to meet and write about the common people there.

Plot Summary

The story opens with a sentence that establishes the setting and the main character: "Upon the half decayed veranda of a small frame house that stood near the edge of a ravine near the town of Winesburg, Ohio, a fat little old man walked nervously up and down." As he stands alone and looks out over the fields, he sees a wagon full of young people returning home from berry picking. They are laughing and enjoying each other's company, and one of them yells across to the man, mocking him for his baldness.

The man is Wing Biddlebaum, a loner who is "forever frightened" and who has almost no connection with the people of Winesburg, although he has lived near the town for twenty years. To the townspeople, he is a mystery, someone to ignore or to mock. But Wing has befriended George Willard, the local newspaper reporter, who walks out to Wing's house occasionally to visit. George is about twenty years old, and Wing, although he looks sixty-five, is about forty. As Wing paces on his porch, he looks down the road, hoping that George will come to talk. When he is not with George, he is alone and afraid. With George, he is confident and talkative, and he is able to express the ideas that he has developed over the lonely years.

Wing's most striking physical characteristic— the one that gave him his nickname—is his hands. They are in constant motion, gesturing while he talks, waving about. When Wing first came to Winesburg, he worked as a field hand, and with his quick, sure hands he once picked a legendary hundred and forty quarts of strawberries in a single day. George has noticed that frequently Wing seems to become suddenly aware of his hands and snatches them behind his back or shoves them into his pockets. He has wanted to ask about it, but as he comes to know Wing better and to respect him more, he finds he cannot invade his privacy by asking.

George remembers one day when he nearly asked. The two men were walking in the fields and Wing had talked "as one inspired." Wing was adamant that George should make something of his life, and not get tied down like the people of Winesburg. "You are destroying yourself," he cries to George. "You have the inclination to be alone and to dream and you are afraid of dreams." As he talks, he lays his hands on George's shoulder, urging him again to move beyond the ordinary, and dream. Suddenly, he looks horrified and snatches his hands away. With tears in his eyes, he abruptly leaves for home, leaving George standing in the field alone and confused. George resolves not to ask about Wing's hands, which obviously contain some painful secret.

The secret has to do with Wing's former life, when he was about George's age. He was a schoolteacher in rural Pennsylvania, and his name was Adolph Myers. He was a truly gifted teacher, dedicated to education and to the boys in his charge. He was "meant by nature to be a teacher of youth." With his students, Myers sat in the evenings and talked as he does now with George, and as he talked he rubbed the boys' shoulders or rumpled their hair.

Under the influence of Myers's gentle voice and gentle hands, the boys began to dream. One boy, however, "imagined unspeakable things" about himself and Myers, and told his parents that Myers had sexually abused him. Swiftly, the parents took action. One man came to the school and beat Myers, and the teacher was driven from town. Passing through Ohio, Myers saw the name "Biddlebaum" on a packing crate, and when he arrived in Winesburg, he took the new name.

No one in Winesburg knows what happened. Wing himself does not know what went wrong in Pennsylvania, only that somehow his hands were the cause of the trouble. Now he lives alone, has no friends, and tries to keep his hands to himself. As he paces on the porch of his house, he hopes that George Willard will come and relieve his loneliness. But George does not come this night, and Wing passes another evening alone.

Detailed Summary & Analysis

Summary

This story takes place one evening on the veranda of a small house in the fictional town of Winesburg, Ohio. The main character of the story, Wing Biddlebaum, is a short, fat, bald, white forty-year old man who lives alone. His only friend is a young reporter, George Willard.

In the beginning of the story, Wing is on his veranda watching a wagon filled with young people returning to town after a day of picking strawberries in the fields. One of the young girls in the wagon calls to Biddlebaum as they pass, taunting him about his baldness. After the wagon has passed, Biddlebaum crosses the field in front of his house to the edge of the road hoping to see his friend, Biddlebaum George, coming to visit him that evening, but the road is empty. Filled with fear, he runs back to his veranda.

Following the venture to the road, an omniscient narrator tells readers about the friendship between Biddlebaum and Willard. We are told that, with Willard, the generally quiet Biddlebaum becomes outspoken, punctuating his speech with active, animated hands that pound on the table or on the walls of his house. He cannot seem to keep his hands still, though he often tries to keep them hidden from view.

A flashback in which George Willard wants to ask about Biddlebaum's hands follows the details regarding Biddlebaum and Willard's friendship is. In this flashback, Biddlebaum is lecturing and encouraging Willard to follow his dreams in spite of other people's expectations. He places his hands on George's shoulders and caresses him. Then he is horrified that he has taken such liberty. He quickly excuses himself and rushes home. George vows never to ask Biddlebaum about his hands after witnessing such terror in his eyes.

The first flashback is followed by another flashback that travels even further back in Biddlebaum's past, to a time when he was a young teacher in a town in Pennsylvania. As a teacher, he was very close to his students and very involved in their lives. He often sat with them, counseling and advising them as a parent would. He often caressed their shoulders and touched their hair in an "effort to carry a dream into the young minds." His affection was mistaken as sexual in nature by a "half-witted" boy, who fell in love with the teacher, dreamed about him, and reported his sexual dreams as real events. The parents of the students confronted the young teacher, beat him up, threatened to hang him, and chased him out of town. The whole time, they warned him repeatedly, "Keep your hands to yourself." Biddlebaum did not understand why the boys' fathers were so angry, but decided that it was his hands' fault so he tried to keep them still and hidden after the incident.

Our story ends back in the present with Wing Biddlebaum again pacing on his veranda and eating supper in his kitchen. Readers are left with a final image of Biddlebaum on his hands and knees, cleaning the crumbs from the kitchen floor.

Analysis

Sherwood Anderson originally published this short story in 1919, which establishes the era in which the story takes place, although readers are not provided with an exact date or timeframe in history within the story. Most striking to modern-day readers is the fact that all of Biddlebaum's students are boys. However, readers must remember that at the turn of the century it was not common for girls to receive a formal education or for women to become teachers. Therefore, the depiction of a male teacher in an all-boy school is historically accurate. It is interesting to note that there are only two female characters in the entire story, and both are mentioned only briefly as very minor characters. The first is a young girl on the wagon who taunts Biddlebaum about his baldness. The second female character mentioned is Biddlebaum's elderly aunt with whom he lives in Winesburg until she dies, and he remains in the house alone.

Foreshadowing is apparent in the title of this piece, "Hands." Readers are struck by Biddlebaum's fear of his own hands and their movement, a condition that is uncommon and disturbing. Tracing the story from the present, backwards into the past adds to the element of foreshadowing, using current story events to foreshadow the climax of the story which actually takes place twenty years before our story begins.

Anderson employs an unusual technique to tell the story about Wing Biddlebaum's hands. He begins in the present, showing us what a fearful, timid man Biddlebaum is, and showing readers his unusually active hands playing with non-existent hair on his forehead, picking numerous strawberries in a short amount of time, and flapping like the wings of an imprisoned bird- which accounted for his nickname, "Wing." We move backwards in time to an event that shows his fear and horror of his own hands when he caresses and encourages George Willard to follow his dreams. Finally, Anderson takes readers far enough back in time to learn about the beating Biddlebaum endured for similar overtures with young students.

"Hands" focuses on themes of homophobia and penance. Biddlebaum's homosexual tendencies are apparent from the beginning of the story, and he is punished for them throughout, from the taunting of the young girl, his own horror at the expression of his feelings for George Willard, to the life threatening beating that he receives from the parents of his students in Pennsylvania. Although Anderson describes Biddlebaum as pale, fragile, and in many ways feminine, it is unclear whether Biddlebaum is actually homosexual or just perceived to be by his students' parents. George Willard is undisturbed by the physical contact initiated by Biddlebaum- hands on his shoulders with earnest concern and counsel, and confused by Biddlebaum's horrified reaction to his own behavior. As a result, readers are as uncertain as Willard is when it comes to defining Biddlebaum's behavior.

In the final scene, readers are left with the image of Biddlebaum on his hands and knees picking up crumbs from the kitchen floor. His hands move so quickly from floor to mouth that he looks like a penitent priest fingering his rosary beads before the altar. He is completing penance for a perceived sin, though readers are not privy to the direct sin as it took place before we met Biddlebaum on his veranda earlier that same evening.

Anderson's depiction of homosexuality as a painful, shameful sin is widely challenged in modern literature, providing the opportunity for open discussion of sexuality in today's literary forums.

Characters

Wing Biddlebaum

Wing Biddlebaum (also known as Adolph Myers) is a bald, fat recluse who lives in a small house outside the town of Winesburg, Ohio. He is bent, and looks like an old man, but he is only forty years old. His most distinguishing feature is his hands. They are active, expressive hands that move about in rapid gestures while he talks. Their movement has earned him the nickname "Wing." When Wing was a young man, still using his birth name Adolph Myers, he was a schoolteacher in rural Pennsylvania. He was a gifted teacher who inspired his students to learn, and who showed affection for them freely, rubbing their shoulders and ruffling their hair. When a "half-witted boy" took Myers's touches for sexual advances, Myers was run out of town. Now he lives alone in Winesburg, using a false name and avoiding people. Only with his friend George Willard is he able to talk and relax a bit, and to try to use his gift for inspiring young men. He urges George to follow his own inclination to dream. But when he forgets himself and lays his hands on George's shoulders, Wing panics and runs away.

Henry Bradford

Henry Bradford is a saloon-keeper in Pennsylvania, whose son is a student of Adolph Myers'. Suspecting that Myers has made improper sexual advances to his son, Bradford comes to school one day and, finding him in the school yard, beats and kicks Myers.

Half-witted Boy

One of Adolph Myers's students is a "halfwitted boy" who develops a crush on his teacher. The boy fantasizes about sexual contact with his teacher and reports his fantasies as fact. The boy's stories confirm the "hidden, shadowy doubts" that the men in town had already held about the gentle Adolph Myers.

Adolph Myers

See Wing Biddlebaum

George Willard

Wing Biddlebaum's only friend in the town he has lived in for twenty years is George Willard, the reporter for the *Winesburg Eagle*. George occasionally visits Wing in the evening, and as the story opens, Wing is pacing on his porch hoping George will appear. In the past, the two have taken walks together, in town or out in the country, and Wing has tried to encourage George to follow his dreams. George has been curious

about Wing's hands, noticing that he alternately waves them about and hides them away, but out of respect for his friend he holds his questions back.

Themes

The Grotesque

"Hands" is the first of twenty-three stories in *Winesburg, Ohio,* and they are all preceded by an introduction of sorts titled "The Book of the Grotesque." In this section, an old man dreams of a series of men and women passing by, a "procession of grotesques." He gets out of bed and writes down their stories. The narrator of "Hands" and the other stories has never seen the old man's writing, but it has inspired him to tell his own stories of grotesques.

The word "grotesque" has been used in art and literature to describe fantastical distortions of human and animal forms. Typically, something that is called "grotesque" is abnormal, ugly, strange. But Anderson is using the term in a special way, and the old man of *"The Book of the Grotesque"* sees that his grotesques are "not all horrible. Some were amusing, some almost beautiful."

Wing Biddlebaum is a grotesque, a man damaged and distorted by his treatment in Pennsylvania, but the term should not be understood as an indication that he is evil. His hands, which have caused him so much trouble, have made "more grotesque an already grotesque and elusive individuality," but the fault lies in the world around Wing, not in what is inside him.

Alienation and Loneliness

The central theme of the story is Wing Biddlebaum's loneliness. The first image of the story is of him pacing alone on his porch, hoping his only friend will come to call. From his porch, he can see a group of people laughing and playing, but his only contact with them is when they make fun of him. The last image of the story is of Wing, on his knees picking up bread crumbs, still alone. Between these two images are memories and scenes of loneliness and isolation. Wing has lived alone, outside of town, for twenty years, and almost no one in town knows anything about him except that he is a quick berry picker.

With George Willard, Wing is a little less alone, although even with him he cannot truly be himself. He is always holding something back, afraid. He desperately wants to see George on the evening of the story's opening, but he can do no more than hope for a visit. He is incapable of calling on George himself and must wait for his friend to take the initiative. Once he crosses a field and looks down the road, but even this frightens him, and he retreats to his porch. A man who is so afraid will not be able to climb out of his loneliness.

Yet Wing's alienation has not made him bitter toward humanity. He does not enjoy his isolation, and dreams of sitting under a tree in a garden and having young men gather

around to talk to him. He needs George because he needs and still desires human connection. George is "the medium through which he express[es] his love of man."

Appearances and Reality

Because Wing Biddlebaum has so little contact with the people of Winesburg, they know him only by his external appearances. In fact, he is not what he appears to be. His name is not really Wing Biddlebaum, but Adolph Myers. He looks sixty- five, but he is only forty years old. He is known in town as a skilled field laborer, but he is also educated and intelligent enough to have been a schoolteacher. By pointing out the differences between appearance and reality in Wing's character, Anderson raises the question about whether the appearance of impropriety in Wing's behavior toward his students was based in fact. The parents reject Myers because of the appearance of homosexuality, but as the story shows, appearance and reality can be quite different.

Sex

The cause of Wing's trouble is sex, or the idea of sex. Specifically, the parents of his students come to believe that Wing is a pederast, and that his touching of the boys' shoulders and hair had an inappropriate element of sexuality. Anderson is intentionally indirect in his depiction of Wing's sexuality. At times, the narrator seems to be hinting that Wing is homosexual, as when he states that "in their feeling for the boys under their charge such men are not unlike the finer sort of women in their love of men." Other times the narrator attributes the parents' suspicions to a "rare, little-understood" power that gifted teachers have.

Whether or not he is actually homosexual, Wing himself does not understand what he has done wrong. He feels no guilt or shame in his relationship with the boys, yet he learns that others find something shameful in his hands. The narrator endorses Wing, saying that he was "meant by nature to be a teacher of youth." Whether or not Wing is gay is not the issue that the story addresses. Instead, the story demonstrates what happens when people come to believe a man is homosexual, when they respond in anger and fear.

Style

Point of View and Narration

"Hands" is told in the third person, by an unseen narrator who does not participate in the story and who has only a limited ability to see into the characters' thoughts and feelings. For example, the narrator observes closely as Wing Biddlebaum paces up and down on his veranda and knows that Wing is hoping for a visit from George Willard. But when the young woman on the wagon mocks Wing's baldness, the narrator does not report any emotional reaction from Wing. Does the remark hurt his feelings? Does he share in the joke? The narrator reports only the physical manifestation of Wing's response, saying that Wing's "nervous little hands fiddled about the bare white forehead as though arranging a mass of tangled locks." Similarly, when Henry Bradford beats Myers, there is no description of Myers's pain or shock. The narrator describes only what can be seen: "the frightened face of the schoolmaster."

For most of the story, the narrator focuses on Wing as though from above, but for the scene in which George almost asks about Wing's hands, the narrative stance shifts slightly. The focus is still on Wing, but now the narrator reports what George saw and heard in the fields that day. There is no indication of George's responses through most of the scene. Presumably, he is listening with rapt attention as Wing launches into a "long, rambling talk." There is no hint that he finds anything objectionable in Wing's advice to him, or in Wing's hands on his shoulders. Wing's reactions are again depicted through what can be seen: his "look of horror," his "convulsive movement," and the tears in his eyes. When Wing is gone, however, the narrator directly quotes George's internal monologue, and states that George is "touched by the memory of the terror he had seen in the man's eyes." It is the only time in the story that thoughts are reported so precisely.

After this scene, the narrator moves back to the further distance for the rest of the story. Wing's thoughts and feelings are given only in the vaguest phrases. As he moves through his lonely evening, he seems to be an automaton, going through the motions of eating and cleaning and undressing while feeling nothing.

Symbol

When one image is repeated throughout a story and comes to represent an abstract idea, that image may be called a symbol. In his discussion of "Hands" in *Sherwood Anderson: A Study of the Short Fiction,* Robert Allen Papinchak examines the imagery of hands in the story. Of course, the title indicates the importance of the image, and Papinchak reports that the words "hand" and "hands" occur thirty times in the brief story. The hands stand for everything that is unusual about Wing Biddlebaum; they are his "distinguishing feature" and the things that make him grotesque.

They are the source of his fame when he uses them to pick strawberries, and the cause of his downfall when he uses them to caress his students. Most of all, they are the symbol of what Wing does not understand about himself and about the world. His hands seem to operate under a power of their own, alarming him, and he looks "with amazement at the quiet inexpressive hands of other men." Of course the hands of other men have not always been inexpressive: one man's hands became fists to beat Wing with, and another came at Wing with "a rope in his hands."

Images of hands being used against Wing, and Wing's determination not to use his own hands to touch his friend, highlight Wing's isolation and loneliness. As the narrator explains, "The story of Wing Biddlebaum is a story of hands." The use of a repeated image to make it take on a symbolic meaning has become a common element of short fiction, but according to Papinchak, Anderson was one of the first American writers to experiment with it.

Episodic Plot

Beyond the issues of sex and obscenity, the feature of the stories in *Winesburg, Ohio* that gave critics the most difficulty was the plot structure. Generally, the plot of a story is thought of as the pattern into which characters and their actions are arranged. A story that is plot-driven is a story in which what *happens* is the most important element, and inner or psychological development of the characters is less important. Individual scenes or episodes occur in a particular order to provide or withhold information about events. A mystery story, for example, might please its readers by providing an exciting story line, though its characters may be only standard, "cardboard" figures.

Many readers of "Hands" have come to the conclusion that there is no plot at all, that nothing really happens during the story. At the beginning and at the end, Wing is alone at home, wishing George would come. In between, the narrator re- flects on the friendship between Wing and George, recounts from George's point of view a walk the two took together, and tells the story of Adolph Myers in Pennsylvania. Myers never learns how George felt about their walk, and George never learns Wing's history. In terms of action and consequence, the episodes are not related. The sections fit together in creating a dominant impression, a psychological whole, but not a plot in the usual sense of the word. This type of structure is called an episodic plot, or an episodic structure. Anderson believed that this kind of structure, in which the connections between events is not always apparent, best echoed the structure of human life.

Historical Context

The Chicago Renaissance

For much of the twentieth century, New York City has been the literary center of the United States, but around the time of the First World War that distinction was held by Chicago. Sherwood Anderson was part of a group of writers and editors, called the Chicago Renaissance or Chicago Group, who flourished from about 1910 to about 1925. Other writers in the group included the poets Carl Sandburg and Edgar Lee Masters, and the novelist Theodore Dreiser. At first, these writers focused on Midwestern themes and reached mainly a Midwest audience, but their influence quickly spread.

Chicago was the home of *Poetry: A Magazine of Verse,* edited by Harriet Monroe. Founded in 1912, it was one of the first so-called little magazines, or noncommercial literary magazines dedicated to innovative writing. It was in the pages of *Poetry* that Pulitzer Prize-winning poet Carl Sandburg had his first publication, and the magazine also published early work of Ezra Pound, Marianne Moore, and T. S. Eliot. Down the street from Monroe's office were the offices of Margaret Anderson (who was not related to Sherwood Anderson), editor of *The Little Review*. In its fifteen-year run, it became one of the most important of the little magazines and after a few years was published out of New York and then Paris. In 1918 the *Little Review* began the first American publication of James Joyce's *Ulysses,* which was so controversial that issues of the magazine were seized and burned by the United States Post Office. Sherwood Anderson had contributed to the first two issues of the *Little Review* in 1914. The short story "Paper Pills," which follows "Hands" in *Winesburg, Ohio,* was first published in the *Little Review* in 1915.

Anderson was living and writing in the midst of this exciting time in Chicago. He and the other Chicago Group writers and editors knew each other socially, worked together, read aloud to each other, contributed to each other's projects, and discussed theories of politics and art. They rejected what they saw as the stuffy forms that writing had taken in the nineteenth century and worked on poetry in free verse and fiction that was not constricted by the formal demands of plot. They disagreed with "genteel" nineteenth-century writers who said that optimistic themes and healthy characters should take center stage, and instead they experimented with unhappy and damaged characters engaged in impolite behaviors.

Among the fiction writers of the Chicago Group, Anderson took the greatest risks with subject matter and with form, according to Welford Dunaway Taylor's *Sherwood Anderson.* Not only did he write about sex with a frankness that shocked his contemporaries, but he insisted on episodic structures for his fiction. Taylor writes that even the editor of *Masses,* the progressive magazine in which *"Hands"* first appeared, "is said to have felt that some of the *Winesburg* stories were formless. After publishing two, the magazine stopped accepting them."

Arriving in Chicago at the right time, Anderson was able to find a supportive and talented group of friends to help him shape his own art and career. Along with his colleagues, he was able to straddle two worlds, writing about issues and ideas with bigcity sophistication, but planting his work firmly in the small-town Midwest.

Psychology

Just before Anderson and his companions were attempting to revolutionize literature during the early part of the twentieth century, Sigmund Freud was revolutionizing the understanding of human psychology. His many books, including *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1900) and *Three Contributions to the Theory of Sex* (1910), were widely read and discussed in Europe by both professionals and general readers, and by 1914 or so Freud's ideas had even reached the Midwest. Anderson and the others in the Chicago Renaissance discussed the latest psychological theories, just as they discussed socialism and literary criticism.

The combination of the arrival of a new set of controversial theories and the publication of a collection of unconventional short stories was beyond the power of critics to resist. Critics who could see no other explanation for his interest in mentally unstable characters quickly labeled Anderson a "Freudian." For his own part, Anderson insisted all his life that he had never actually read Freud. Rex Burbank concludes in his book *Sherwood Anderson* that "Anderson repeatedly rejected Freudian formulas, for he resisted what he regarded as the oversimplification of the human mind and heart." Nevertheless, because Freud and Anderson both wrote about neurotic people, readers of Anderson's works have often associated him with Freudianism.

Critical Overview

Though it has been widely anthologized since its publication, there is little substantive criticism of "Hands" as a separate work. The story first appeared in a small Chicago literary magazine called the *Masses,* where it attracted some attention from the literary elite in that city, but the magazine did not enjoy a large body of readers. Typically, the story is studied as one integral part of the whole book that is *Winesburg, Ohio.*Perhaps because "Hands" is essentially the first story of the larger work, it is frequently discussed as it introduces themes, techniques, and characters found throughout the larger work.

Anderson often complained toward the end of his life that the early reviews of *Winesburg, Ohio* were too harsh, but in fact they were largely favorable. The book's success brought "Hands" to readers all across the country, and reviews were published in New York, San Francisco, and every important newspaper and magazine in between. One of Anderson's goals was to create a new form for the short story, to free it from the confines of being as plot-driven as most nineteenth-century short stories had been. One critic who appreciated the new form was the influential editor and critic H. L. Mencken. In a 1919 review, he describes the stories in *Winesburg, Ohio* as "half tale and half psychological anatomizing, and vastly better than all the kinds that have gone before." Other critics agreed that Anderson had attempted something new and worthy in the book, and that his new emphasis on honestly revealing the psychology of characters instead of on tracing their actions called for new forms.

Some critics felt that Anderson was perhaps too honest in the book, revealing things that were better left hidden. Rather than seeing in Anderson any tenderness and compassion for his characters, these critics saw the author as cold and unfeeling. Many thought that there was too much emphasis on sex. Though it may be difficult for readers at the turn of the twenty-first century to understand, Anderson's stories were considered quite daring, even obscene, when they were published in the first part of the twentieth century. The anonymous reviewer for the *New York Sun* was not alone in feeling disgusted by the perverted characters in *Winesburg, Ohio* and their "nauseous acts." In fact, the hints at sex and sexuality in the book are never more direct than those in "Hands."

For decades, critics hinted at but did not frankly discuss a central question raised by the story: Is Wing Biddlebaum homosexual, or just misunderstood? Since the 1960s, critics have weighed in on this issue, but have not reached a consensus. Some critics argue, as Rex Burbank does in his *Sherwood Anderson* volume for Twayne, that Biddlebaum was not homosexual, and that "his caresses were interpreted as homosexuality by stupid, insensitive townspeople." Welford Taylor, in another book titled *Sherwood Anderson,* concludes that the townspeople "have made an innocent man an unfortunate victim."

As the general public has become more comfortable with the idea of homosexuality, and as more has been learned about Anderson's own curiosity about homosexuality, critics

have become more willing to consider that Biddlebaum is gay. According to these readings, Biddlebaum's contacts with his students might have had a taint of inappropriate sexuality, and his fear of touching George Willard is a fear of his sexual urges. Judy Jo Small's *Reader's Guide to the Short Stories of Sherwood Anderson* summarizes this line of reasoning, but adds the caveat that even eighty years after Anderson wrote, "sexuality in general and sexual orientation in particular is still far from being well understood."

The collection as a whole is frequently read as a *Bildungsroman*—a German literary form that focuses on a character during his developmental years. In their view, the stories in *Winesburg, Ohio* trace the development of the repeated character George Willard. Therefore much criticism of "Hands" gives more emphasis to George's development than would be given him if the story were studied alone. Small, for example, identifies George as "the central figure of the book," though it is a stretch to see him as the central figure of "Hands." Walter Rideout analyzes *Winesburg, Ohio* in an essay in *Shenandoah*. He finds that "Hands" provides a statement of the central theme of the book: the conflict between "the world of practical affairs" and "the world of dreams." Through the rest of the stories George explores the two choices, and finally resolves the conflict for himself. In this analysis, and others like it, "Hands" functions more as a chapter in a novel than as a story.

After the reviews that appeared shortly after the book's publication, criticism of *Winesburg, Ohio* appeared infrequently for about thirty years, although the book never went out of print. The 1960s and 1970s were a time of renewed interest in Anderson, and especially in *Winesburg, Ohio,* and many books and articles about Anderson were published before interest began to fade again. His reputation has waxed and waned, but for fifty years he has been generally considered the author of several bad books and one great one.

Criticism

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Critical Essay #1

Bily teaches writing and literature at Adrian College in Adrian, Michigan, and writes for various educational publishers. In the following essay, she examines Sherwood Anderson's use of repeated imagery in "Hands."

When Sherwood Anderson wrote fiction in the early 1900s, he was consciously experimenting with new short-story forms and with a new kind of written language to fit the new forms. In *Sherwood Anderson: A Study of the Short Fiction,* Robert Allen Papinchak describes Anderson's style as "less cluttered with lengthy sentences and multisyllabic words than that of Irving, Hawthorne, Poe, and other American writers to that time. Instead, Anderson used short, direct sentences, frequent modifications of nouns, series of prepositional phrases, and the repetition of phrases and ideas, which often depend on a structural circularity." Papinchak asserts that in "Hands," all of Anderson's stylistic qualities may be observed. In this essay I examine one of these qualities—the use of repeated phrases and ideas.

Walter B. Rideout, in an article in *Shenandoah,* traces several elements that run through the entire *Winesburg, Ohio*. These repetitions contribute to a sense that "the seemingly artless, even careless, digressions are rarely artless, careless, or digressive. . . . If this is simplicity, it is simplicity— paradox or not—of a complicated kind."

The most obvious example is the word "hand," which by Papinchak's count occurs in the singular or the plural thirty times in the story, which runs just over 2,350 words. The image of Wing Biddlebaum's fluttering, fiddling, nervous hands is repeated so many times that it becomes a symbol of his alienation and loneliness, as thoroughly documented by Papinchak and others. More interesting is the repetition of the idea of *beating* hands—not yet another look at the movement of nervous hands, "like unto the beating of the wings of an imprisoned bird," but the picture of Wing as he "closed his fists and beat them upon a table or on the walls of his house."

This beating, which seems so out of character for a man "forever frightened and beset by a ghostly band of doubts," actually makes Wing feel more comfortable. He seems unable to talk without something to beat on. If he and George Willard are out walking, and he feels the urge to speak, he finds "a stump or the top board of a fence and with his hands pounding" he talks easily. The images of the hands like a bird and the beating hands come together the day Wing and George are in the field: "By a fence he had stopped and beating like a giant woodpecker upon the top board [he] had shouted at George."

It must be difficult for the first-time reader to imagine where this beating comes from. The narrator repeatedly points out that Wing's hands are expressive, that he talks with his hands. He looks "with amazement at the quiet inexpressive hands of the other men," but he cannot control his own. This begs the question, What are the hands expressing? What can Wing be saying to George when he beats the walls or pounds a stump? We know part of the answer. He is urging George to dream.

But why should this advice require such strong gesturing? The ideas of dreams and dreaming form another cluster of repeated phrases in the story. After his outburst to George, Wing settles down and for a short time he is able to talk softly, forgetting his hands, "speaking as one lost in a dream." "You must try to forget all you have learned," he tells George. "You must begin to dream." As the reader soon learns (but George does not), Wing has spoken of dreams before. When he was Adolph Myers, a schoolteacher in Pennsylvania, he went for walks with his students and talked while he was "lost in a kind of dream." In those days, his voice was always soft, and his hands did not beat the fence tops but only gently touched the boys' shoulders or hair. The gentle voice and the gentle touch were "part of the schoolmaster's effort to carry a dream into the young minds." Under his touch, the boys lost their "doubt and disbelief" and "they began also to dream."

Ironically, it is a dream that is Wing's undoing. One of his students imagines "unspeakable things and in the morning [goes] forth to tell his dreams as facts." And once the image of the dream is corrupted, the image of the beating hands snaps into focus. When Henry Bradford comes to the school yard, the imagery of the beating is insistent: "he began to beat him with his fists"; "his hard knuck les beat down into the frightened face"; "tired of beating the master, [he] had begun to kick him."

The beating gestures are tied up in Wing's mind with the dreams and the horrible mistake and the father's wrath. When he calls up one, he calls up them all. Because he never understood at the time what all the fuss was about, he does not know how to separate them twenty years later. The imagery of beating hands links Wing Biddlebaum and Henry Bradford together.

Another set of repeated phrases reinforces this connection. Wing is "beset by a ghostly band of doubts." When he is not with George, he has a "shadowy personality, submerged in a sea of doubts." Before the tragedy, it was Wing who cast "doubt and disbelief" from the minds of his students, but now he himself is filled with doubts. What does he doubt? Again, the imagery links him to the students' fathers. When the half-witted boy tells his story, "Hidden, shadowy doubts that had been in men's minds concerning Adolph Myers were galvanized into beliefs." The men have doubted Myers's sexual orientation. Does Wing share the same doubts about himself? Again, Anderson does not answer, but the imagery clearly links Wing with the other men.

A third set of repeated phrases arises out of the few paragraphs describing the accusation against Myers. The community's reaction to the boy's accusation is immediate: "Through the Pennsylvania town went a shiver." It is the shiver of fear that the men experience upon identifying a homosexual man in their midst. Just five paragraphs earlier, Wing has run away from George after touching his shoulder. George gets up and goes home "with a shiver of dread." Does George also have doubts about Wing's sexual orientation? "'There is something wrong,'" he says, "'but I don't want to know what it is.'"

One effect of the repeated images and phrases is to add a subtle bit of shading to what is generally considered to be a major theme of *Winesburg, Ohio,* alienation and

loneliness. There is no doubt that Wing Biddlebaum is lonely, friendless, isolated. But his feelings and emotions are essentially human. In his gestures, in his doubts, and in his love of the boys who are sons and students, he is very like the fathers, the very men who might seem to be as unlike him as is possible. The Wing Biddlebaums of the world might not be so isolated if we were all more attuned to the things we share as humans.

Early readers of "Hands" struggled with the structure and organization. There seemed to be no reason for the order of the different scenes, and no sense that one scene was the cause of the next. A clue to Anderson's method of organization might be found in another series of repeated phrases. The narrator, in the manner of an epic poet, twice calls upon a poetic muse to help him tell the story. "The story of Wing Biddlebaum's hands is worth a book in itself," says the narrator, but "It is a job for a poet." The narrator cannot adequately explain Myers's power over his students, because "it needs the poet there."

If the story of "Hands" is read as a poem instead of as a conventional, plot-driven short story, the organization makes more sense. In this way of reading, the impressions created by the imagery are more important than the sequence of action. The images appear and reappear and all come together in one climactic scene. They create echoes between characters and between situations, and they provide structure for the story. David D. Anderson, analyzing *Winesburg, Ohio* in an article in *Critical Studies in American Literature,* describes Anderson's "intuitive approach" to his characters' deepest secrets. Anderson's "intuitive perception," he writes, is "accomplished not through analysis but through empathy, and his purpose is not to diagnose and to cure but simply to understand and to love."

Source: Cynthia Bily, in an essay for*Short Stories for Students,* Gale Group, 2001.

Critical Essay #2

In the following excerpt, Stouck discusses Anderson's continued pattern of "loneliness and frustration" in "Hands."

In *Winesburg, Ohio* the idea of death does not signify only the grave, but more tragically it denotes the loneliness and frustration of the unlived life. As in *Poor White* we are aware in *Winesburg, Ohio* of movement as characteristic of American life, but here it is the restlessness of the individual who grows increasingly oppressed by his loneliness and his inability to express himself to others. In each story when the character reaches an ultimate point of insupportable frustration or recognizes that he can never escape his isolation, he reacts by waving his hands and arms about, talking excitedly, and finally running away. In a very stylized pattern almost every story brings its character to such a moment of frenzy where he breaks into something like a dance.

The introductory sketch, "The Book of the Grotesque," is either ignored by critics or dismissed as a murky and confusing allegory. That Anderson intended it to carry significant weight in relation to the rest of the book is clear when we remember that "The Book of the Grotesque" was the publication title Anderson first gave to the whole collection of stories. In its oblique and terse fashion the sketch defines the relationship of the artist to his characters. The subject is an old man who is writing a book about all the people he has known. The first thing we notice is that the writer is preoccupied with fantasies about his failing health. When he goes to bed each night he thinks about his possible death, yet paradoxically that makes him feel more alive than at other times; thoughts of death heighten his awareness to things. In this state the old writer has a waking dream in which all the people he has known are being driven in a long procession before his eyes. They appear to the writer as "grotesques," for each of these characters has lived according to a personal truth which has cut him off from the others. These are the characters of Anderson's book. The procession they form is like a dance of the dead, for as mentioned above most of these people from Anderson's childhood are now dead. The youth in the coat of mail leading the people is the writer's imagination and also his death consciousness— his memory of the past and his awareness that loneliness and death are the essential "truths" of the human condition. We are told in this sketch that the old carpenter, who comes to adjust the height of the writer's bed and who instead weeps over a brother who dies of starvation in the Civil War, is one of the most lovable of all the grotesques in the writer's book. Just such a character apparently befriended Anderson's lonely mother in Clyde, Ohio; this detail indicates both the personal and the elegiac nature of the book.

The first story, "Hands," tells about Wing Biddlebaum whose unfulfilled life typifies the other life stories recounted in the book. From his little house on the edge of town Wing can watch life pass by: ". . . he could see the public highway along which went a wagon filled with berry pickers returning from the fields. The berry pickers, youths and maidens, laughed and shouted boisterously. A boy clad in a blue shirt leaped from the wagon and attempted to drag after him one of the maidens, who screamed and protested shrilly. The feet of the boy in the road kicked up a cloud of dust that floated across the face of

the departing sun." With its archetypal images of the public highway, youths and maidens, the berry harvest, and the cosmic image of the sun, the scene Anderson has created is a tableau depicting the dance of life. By contrast Wing Biddlebaum ventures only as far as the edge of the road, then hurries back again to his little house. He lives in the shadows of the town. Yet, like the berry pickers, his figure is always in motion, walking nervously up and down his half decayed verandah. His hands especially are always moving and are compared to the beating wings of an imprisoned bird.

Source: David Stouck, "'Winesburg, Ohio' As a Dance of Death," in *American Literature,* Vol. XLVIII, No. 4, January, 1977, pp. 532-33.

Critical Essay #3

In the following essay, Bort examines "Hands," the first story in Winesburg, Ohio, *by tracing the recurrent theme of loneliness and desperation born of the failure to communicate.*

A recurrent theme of the literature of recent times has been the difficulty and even impossibility of communication . . .

Sherwood Anderson's *Winesburg, Ohio* is vitally concerned with the difficulty of understanding. The characters in that work are all desperately trying, in a strange variety of ways, to make meaningful contact with someone or something outside themselves. The opening chapter, "The Book of the Grotesque," explains how each tried to live by one or perhaps several truths and closed his eyes to the immense world of reality beyond the margins of that province.

These distortions of reality labelled truths immure each character within the isolation of his selfhood but they do not preclude an attempt to escape from this inner loneliness. Any passion, any ideal, however genuine or commendable, is liable to the distortion that can destroy its living malleability. Even the man who understands this may fall victim to the rigidity of his conception.

Winesburg, Ohio opens with "Hands," the story of ultimate frustration. Wing Biddlebaum sees himself reaching out to others, his marvelous hands complementing the truth of his words. As a school teacher he had "walked in the evening or had sat talking until dusk upon the schoolhouse steps lost in a kind of dream. Here and there went his hands, caressing the shoulders of the boys, playing about the tousled heads." . . . But a half-witted boy imagines "unspeakable things" and Biddlebaum narrowly escapes lynching by fleeing to his aunt's farm near Winesburg. George Willard, the town reporter and the unifying figure in most of the sketches, watches his hands perform the lovely ritual of their movement.

"A few stray white bread crumbs lay on the cleanly washed floor by the table; putting the lamp on a low stool he began to pick up the crumbs, carrying them to his mouth one by one with unbelievable rapidity. In the dense blotch of light beneath the table, the kneeling figure looked like a priest engaged in some service of his church." . . . The ritual has but one celebrant and the church no communicants.

Source: Barry D. Bort, "'Winesburg, Ohio': The Escape from Isolation," in *The Midwest Quarterly,* Vol. XI, No. 4, Summer, 1970, pp. 443-56.

Critical Essay #4

In the following essay, Maresca shows how different symbols in the story "Hands" are used to portray or reveal hidden meanings.

Dialogue, a common vehicle for characterization and theme in fiction, is conspicuously limited in Sherwood Anderson's *Winesburg, Ohio.* The characters rarely indulge in conversation with one another and rarely debate a problem within themselves. Thus, the novel, which attempts to study the isolation of mankind, achieves a success of the highest order by isolating the reader from the characters at least on the verbal level. Anderson's message, however, is *not* that man can never learn to know his fellow man, but rather that conversation is, at best, an elementary and often a false indication of a man's personality. Kate Swift, the school teacher in *Winesburg,* tells reporter George Willard that he must learn "to know what people are thinking about, not what they say." To learn what a man is "thinking about," then, the more perceptive person will study a man's exterior being, his actions and his appearance.

Anderson uses both eyes and hands to reveal meaning in *Winesburg,* but in particular he makes the reader aware of the hands of his characters. Where "they fought" would convey meaning adequately, he deliberately writes they "fought *with their fists* on Main Street. . . ." (underscoring added).

The first function of the hand images appears to be a substitution for lengthy character description. "Hands," the first story in the collection, explicitly reveals Anderson's conscious intention: "Wing Biddlebaum talked much with his hands. The slender expressive fingers, forever active, forever striving to conceal themselves in his pockets or behind his back, came forth and became the piston rods of his machinery of expression."

In and of themselves, the hands of Anderson's characters may indicate the character's state in life. The knuckles of Doctor Reefy's hand remind the storyteller not only of the twisted, yet delicious apples in the Winesburg orchard, but also of the doctor's own life, his courtship, and his short mar- riage. Tom Foster's industrious and aged grandmother has hands which are "all twisted out of shape" and Elizabeth Willard's white hands, "dropping over the ends of the arms of the chair," betray the secret of her unsuccessful life.

Hands assume wider significance as symbols, however, when they are used to express a character's emotions or passions. When a character in *Winesburg* expresses anger, he does so with his hands and, in particular, with his fists. George Willard's mother, for example, "clenched her fists" when she thought of her own failure in life and vowed to return from death, if necessary, to keep defeat from her son, though God might "beat her with his fists." When Belle Carpenter, a young milliner in Winesburg, felt anger and frustration, she wished she could "fight someone with her fists" and Ray Pearson longed to "shout or scream or hit his wife with his fists" when he realized that he was caught in life's web of responsibility. The large fists of Belle Carpenter's boy friend, Ed Handby,

were the bartender's most characteristic feature (his surname enforces this association) and once "with his fist he broke a large mirror in the wash room of a hotel." And when the Reverend Curtis Hartman succeeded in overcoming his temptation to sin, he joyfully shouted to George Willard, "The strength of God was in me and I broke the window with my fist."

Flying arms indicate high excitement in Anderson's characters. The town baker, chasing a meddlesome grey cat, "swore and waved his arms about." Similarly, Elmer Cowley, who thought himself "queer," was eager to explain himself to a farm hand, whom he greeted by "making motions with his long arms," and to George Willard. As Elmer talked, "his arms began to pump up and down" and later started to "flay the air."

Experiencing the sense of confusion which occurs before maturity, three young boys in *Winesburg* thrust their hands into their pockets. With this gesture, which is more subtle than clenched fists or flying arms, Elmer Cowley walks away from town feeling friendless, Seth Richmond releases Helen White's hand and, to indicate his maturity, declares he is going to leave home to find work, George Willard helplessly listens to Elmer's problems, and in "An Awakening" he, too, uses the gesture while asserting his maturity.

But it is at the point where the characters express love that gestures, in addition to revealing character, begin to illuminate the theme of the novel. In the expression of this theme, two impulses stimulating the gesture of touch are important: the offering of love, by which a character reaches out to comfort another, and the need for love, by which a character reaches out to grasp.

Jesse Bentley needed love and, being a religious person, he sought this love from God. He prayed for a sign from God and felt that God "might at any moment reach out his hand, touch him on the shoulder, and appoint for him some heroic task to be done." Jesse's daughter, Louise, was lonely but not religious, and she turned to man to satisfy her cry for love. "Sometimes it seemed to her that to be held tightly and kissed was the whole secret of life." When John Hardy did not hold her, Louise put her head on the shoulder of her father's farm hand and hoped that he would caress her.

Alice Hindman was extremely sensitive to the sense of touch and refused to have anyone move the furniture in her room. After Ned Currie deserted her she sometimes dated the drug clerk and occasionally "she put her hand out and touched softly the folds of his coat." In her darkest moment of isolation she wanted "to find some other lonely human and embrace him."

The sense of touch, of course, often involves sexual love in the novel. Yet we are less aware of the love gesture as an expression of desire than as an expression of the lover's own isolation. George Willard "wanted to touch Louise Trunnion with his hand. . . . Just to touch the folds of the soiled gingham dress would, he decided, be an exquisite pleasure." Seth Richmond imagined his arm around Helen White, Ed Handby pressed Belle Carpenter to him tightly, Kate Swift held George Willard by the shoulders, and

Enoch Robinson married because, in his loneliness, he wanted "to touch actual flesh and bone people with his hands."

The most meaningful gesture in *Winesburg,* however, is stimulated by the attempt to comfort and to offer love, and seems to originate in a Christian concept of love. Only after the Reverend Curtis Hartman chipped the bell tower window, which pictured the figure of Christ laying his hand on the head of a child, did he begin his life of sin. He later told his congregation, "I have been tempted. . . . It is only the hand of God, placed beneath my head, that has raised me up." Clearly, the communication of love gives man the strength and courage he needs in life.

Many examples of love gestures between characters in the novel involve a parent-child relationship, recalling and perhaps receiving inspiration from the Christ-child image. David Hardy thought his mother must be a new person when, relieved to find the boy she believed was lost, she "clutched him eagerly in her arms. Having experienced love, David was able to impart it and at his grandfather's farm he "wanted to embrace everyone in the house" and made his great-aunt "ecstatically happy" by caressing her face. In a later incident David's terror left him only when his grandfather held his head "tenderly against his shoulder." Tom Hard tried to comfort his crying daughter by "taking her into his arms" and Ray Pearson, having thought of his children and having "in fancy felt their hands clutching at him," could not advise Hal Winters to escape marriage.

When the love gesture is used outside the family circle, as in the stories of Elizabeth and George Willard, it includes all of mankind and illuminates Anderson's central theme which is too often misinterpreted as one of isolation. Isolation is present and is part of the human condition, but man can release himself from that isolation by reaching out his sympathies, his understanding, his very selfness, until he forgets self and becomes one with the person he is reaching toward. In this way, gestures not only convey meaning but also cause meaning, for they take man out of himself and into the heart of another.

As a young woman, Elizabeth Willard had wanted to escape her isolation. She often dated the men who stayed in her father's hotel and when "they took hold of her hand, she thought that something unexpressed in herself came forth and became a part of an unexpressed something in them." Had the traveling men experienced a reciprocal release of love, Elizabeth would have known happiness. Years later, shortly before her death, Elizabeth remembered these men and how she was "forever putting out her hand into the darkness and trying to get hold of some other hand." Her description of human isolation is pathetically accurate.

Elizabeth's son, George, achieved the happiness which his mother was denied. Like his mother, George wished to express his love through touch, but he also wished to be touched. Man must give and accept love, he must join in a mutual exchange of understanding and affection. George was fortunate in loving Helen White for she, too, comprehended the nature of love. Significantly, "Sophistication," the last story in *Winesburg* (for "Departure" is a statement of conclusion), relates that Helen ran from home to find George at the same moment that George was walking to the White home, causing them to meet each other halfway. Together they walked to the fair grounds.

They "held each other tightly and waited. In the mind of each was the same thought. 'I have come to this lonely place and here is this other.'. . . "

Embrace has been responded to by embrace, understanding by understanding. Man has escaped, at least for a short time, the isolation of his own being.

Source: Carol J. Maresca, "Gestures as Meaning in Sherwood Anderson's 'Winesburg, Ohio,'" in *CLA Journal,* Vol. 9, No. 3, March, 1966, pp. 279-83.

Critical Essay #5

An American critic and scholar, Burbank has written studies of Thornton Wilder, Jane Austen, and early American literature. In the following excerpt from his Sherwood Anderson, *Burbank discusses the significance of the unconventional narrative sequence used in* Winesburg, Ohio.

In 1914, the famous exhibition of post-Impressionist paintings was held in the Chicago Armory, where Anderson went . . . on afternoons to see the works of Cezanne, Van Gogh, Gauguin, and others among the "French moderns." Like such "Impressionists" as Monet, Renoir, and Degas before them, these painters portrayed the impressions of experience upon the consciousness of the artist, or of an observer with whom the artist identified himself, rather than the external appearances of events and objects. But they went even beyond the Impressionists in attempting to convey not only the subjective experience of the artist or observer but the abstract structure beneath natural forms. . . .

Van Gogh deliberately distorted his figures, used violent splashes of color, and swirled his brush across his canvasses to signify his own tumultuous feelings. Gauguin, the one-time stockbroker who, like Anderson abandoned business for art, drew his Tahitian natives with bold colors restrained by simple but clear lines, thereby synthesizing complex and powerful inner feelings with external forms.

Anderson's interest in painting at this time was more than casual: he himself painted. . . . [The] techniques of composition in Impressionist and post-Impressionist art . . . offered possibilities in form and texture for fiction that were agreeable to his own views of life and art. More specifically, the new art suggested the shaping of a narrative sequence in accordance with the flow of feelings and thoughts, or impressions, of the narrator rather than according to time: according to psychological instead of chronological time. This meant that form would develop in two ways: first, from within the narrative (as Van Gogh saw nature's form as essentially an inner thing), which required that the traditional "plot" sequence of action (Anderson particularly despised the highly plotted stories of O. Henry) would be abandoned for a form that moves with the mind and feelings; and, second, because both mind and feelings operate in a continuum of time, following moods, attitudes, or ideas rather than a chronological order, form would grow by means of a series of disconnected images which are thematically and symbolically related and coalescent like the paintings of the French impressionists. . . .

Though he deeply admired Dreiser (who himself had broken away from the neatly plotted story) for the uncompromising honesty with which he drew his characters, Anderson moved away from Dreiser's graceless journalistic style and from his brand of stark Naturalism and surface realism in favor of techniques that permitted him to penetrate the external forces of Naturalistic fiction, to bypass the ponderous collection of external social facts, and to get to the feelings and the irrational impulses of his characters, their innermost struggles.

The style and structural techniques of Impressionism and Symbolism lent themselves admirably to these aims, and so did the stylistic practices of Gertrude Stein, whose *Tender Buttons* and *Three Lives* Anderson read . . . in 1914. . . . In his *Memoirs* he declared that, through Stein, he adopted the conscious stylistic intention of capturing the color and cadence of his own Midwestern speech, to lay word against word "in just a certain way" in order to convey the feelings (as distinguished from the facts) of life by means of "a kind of word color, a march of simple words, simple sentence structure."

The influence of the post-Impressionists and of Gertrude Stein may best be demonstrated by perusal of "Hands," one of the best tales in *Winesburg,* in which Anderson's technique of constructing the tales around epiphanies can be seen in the portrayal of Wing Biddlebaum, whose deeply creative nature has been thwarted and perverted, through a central image of hands whose restless, bird-like activities expend themselves in random and trivial actions. The incidents of the story are clustered about this image, intensifying it and in turn being unified by it. As the incidents charge the image with meaning, the narrative proceeds to a climactic epiphany which reveals Biddlebaum's defeat to be that of the innermost self.

The narrative opens with an objective, scenically rendered paragraph showing Biddlebaum's alienation from the town and suggesting a relationship between his alienation and his "nervous little hands." It then moves in succeeding paragraphs to a generalized exposition of his more intimate acquaintance with George Willard and Willard's curiosity about the hands. Another short-view scene follows, revealing the connection between Biddlebaum's thwarted, imaginative nature and his fear of his hands. Establishment of Biddlebaum's fear shifts the narrative to a review of the events that caused him to flee from Pennsylvania to become a recluse in Winesburg. In that review we see that his hands were his means of expressing love and that the nature of this love was creative, for it found its outlet in communicating to schoolboys, through his gentle caresses, his own tendency to dream. But his caresses were interpreted as homosexuality by stupid, insensitive townspeople, and he was driven from the town. In Winesburg, he has withdrawn from the lives of others; and, unable to find creative outlet for his imaginative life, he has become a human fragment, a grotesque. The hands change from image to symbol as the narrative progresses and the themes of alienation, fear, love, and shame become in turn associated with them; and as the symbol gathers its meanings the narrative builds toward the final symbolic act, the epiphany. The epiphany occurs after Willard leaves, and the full ironic meaning of Biddlebaum's life is felt in the discrepancy between his religious posture, as he kneels, and the meaningless drumming of his fingers as they pluck bread crumbs from the floor: Biddlebaum is a kind of defeated, strangely perverted priest of love.

The narrative structure thus follows the course of the omniscient author's mind as he explores various times in the past, probes into his characters' minds, relates bits of descriptive detail, and cites scraps of dialogue—all of which add up to the final symbolic scene in which Biddlebaum's defeat is seen in the fullness of its nature. As in the best stories of Chekhov and of Crane—Anderson's Impressionistic forebear—the final scene of "Hands" is anticlimactic, for nothing happens to Biddlebaum." If the story has a "climax," it comes at the point— about half way through—in which Biddlebaum urges

Willard to leave Winesburg. By deliberately violating a straight time sequence, Anderson avoids the traditional, and often artificial, plot of clear-cut cause and effect actions culminating in a decisive action, and at the same time he gains an almost tragic irony. Nothing in Biddlebaum's life can be climactic any more. His life is characterized by disillusionment, futility, and defeat; and both the anticlimactic structure and the muted tone of reminiscence support the vision of an inner life quietly but desperately submerged, and of a static, imprisoned external life. The stasis of his life, the impasse between social repression and need for expression, can be seen in the following paragraph, in which the feeling of Biddlebaum's seething but frustrated passions is rendered by what Gertrude Stein approvingly termed "clear and passionate" sentences: sentences with simple diction and structure whose passion is conveyed by the contradictory effects of emotional balance and antithesis. We should notice how the terms *beat, action, desire, sought,* and *pounding* are subdued and counterpointed by *comfortable* and *ease:* "When he talked to George Willard, Wing Biddlebaum closed his fists and beat with them upon a table or on the walls of his house. The action made him more comfortable. If the desire to talk came to him when the two were walking in the fields, he sought out a stump or the top board of a fence and with his hands pounding busily talked with renewed ease."

Not all the tales in *Winesburg* are so felicitously constructed and executed as "Hands," but the best of them, like the book as a whole, convey the feeling of isolation, loneliness, and defeat through grotesque characters. Though the tales are self-contained and complete in themselves and may be read individually with enjoyment, they gain an added and very important dimension when read consecutively as episodes in a single narrative; for *Winesburg* as a whole presents a unified portrayal of the growth to maturity and consciousness of young George Willard, who develops as the symbol of the "whole" man against whom the grotesques stand as fragments.

Like Dickens' *David Copperfield,* Meredith's *The Egoist,* and Joyce's *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man, Winesburg* is—in addition to being a collection of tales—a *bildungsroman,* a story of a boy growing to manhood and becoming involved in the perplexing world of adults. Though he does not appear in all the tales, Willard shares importance in the narrative with the grotesques, to whom he is the symbolic counterpoint. . . .

In George Willard, Anderson presents the *making* of an artist of life. Willard wants to become a writer, but before he can do so he must serve his apprenticeship to life itself. In his development we see Anderson's implied belief that the solution to the "terrifying disorder" of life, the alternative to grotesqueness, is the kind of absorption of other lives that is seen in George and in the old man in the prologue. While the artist is the archetype of the psychologically and socially liberated person, liberation is not confined to the artist; for Willard achieves freedom before he becomes a writer, and the old writer never writes his book about the grotesques.

By contrast, the grotesques are so because for one reason or another they have (willfully or because of circumstances they cannot control) become isolated from others and thus closed off from the full range of human experience. Where the old writer has

accepted isolation and opened his mind and imagination to the truth of all human experience, they have attempted to embrace a single truth to live by (often, because their alternatives are limited, they have *had* to), thereby closing off other possibilities of experience and compounding their loneliness and becoming enslaved by it. The writer himself is saved by the "young thing" inside him; his imaginative receptiveness to all human feelings. . . .

The structural form of the narrative from prologue to epilogue is psychological and episodic rather than linear; the tales are built about these moments of consciousness or revelation instead of following a simple sequence of time or causality. For Willard, those moments follow a pattern of progression toward increasing consciousness as he absorbs the experiences of the grotesques. On the other hand, these symbolic moments reveal the psychic limitations, confinement, or defeat of the grotesques whose lives are in a state of arrest. The narrator emphasizes in "The Book of the Grotesque" that the grotesques are not all horrible. Joe Welling in "A Man of Ideas," is comical; Dr. Reefy, in "Paper Pills" and in "Death," is a man of insight and understanding; Louise Trunnion, in "Nobody Knows," is simply pathetic.

All, however, are characterized by various types of psychic unfulfillment or limitation owing in part to the failure of their environment to provide them with opportunities for a rich variety of experience and in part to their own inability or reluctance to accept or understand the facts of isolation and loneliness. The nature of their psychic unfulfillment is revealed in the tales by epiphanies. Their development may roughly be compared to the action of a fountain which, fixed at its base and therefore moving toward nothing, suddenly overflows—as the pressure within builds up—and shows what has remained hidden from view. Just as a fountain retains the contents that have overflowed and re turns them to their source, so the briefly revealed inner lives of the grotesques return unchanged to their imprisonment or defeat.

Like Joyce's Stephen Daedelus, Willard is the nascent artist serving his apprenticeship to life; but the important fact about him is that, while he is subject to the same environmental restrictions as the grotesques, he grows toward maturity and ultimately frees himself from Winesburg, while the grotesques do not. Like McPherson and McGregor of *Windy* and of *Marching Men*. Willard is a prototype of the man who is liberated from the confinement of a narrow and oppressive environment. But he differs from those earlier heroes in that he leaves at a point in his life when he has gained an intense love for the people of the town of his birth and youth, and his departure is prompted not by rejection of the town and hope for success but by a determination to broaden the range of his imaginative experience. . . .

Willard grows from passive observer of life to active participant, from aimlessly curious boy to intensely conscious adult. . . .

At the death of Elizabeth Willard in "Death," his adolescent resentment at the inconvenience caused by his mother's death in keeping him from seeing Helen White gives way to realization of the finality of death and to consciousness of the tragic beauty his mother represented. His full awareness of life's paradoxes comes in

"Sophistication," when he becomes conscious of the "limitations of life" and of "his own insignificance in the scheme of existence" while at the same time he "loves life so intensely that tears come into his eyes."

With this ephiphany, which is also the climax of the book, Willard "crosses the line into manhood" as "voices outside of himself whisper a message concerning the limitations of life," and as consciousness of the condition of man's isolation and loneliness is followed by his beginning "to think of the people in the town where he had always lived with something (illegible line-note in report) and confused, overlapping feelings; to distinguish passion from compassion, for instance. . . .

George Willard achieves maturity when he realizes and accepts loneliness as the essential human condition and understands the value of all human suffering. Understanding comes, paradoxically, only when he has emancipated himself from this Winesburg influence. . . . [He] can understand that all men are alone with their feelings and that only through sympathy and compassion toward others do those feelings have any meaning or, to put it another way, those feelings are the only really meaningful things in life. The grotesques are people whose instinctive desires, aspirations, and deepest emotions have no meaning because they have no "other" who will impose a meaning upon them; thus they are drawn to the receptive aspiring writer Willard, who accepts and will ultimately give meaningful expression to their feelings, or in the case of Dr. Reefy and George's mother, to each other.

Those grotesques who are the most sensitive and articulate find their desires and aspirations thwarted by a repressive conventionalism that offers little opportunity for fruitful human relationships. . . .

In the portrayal of all these defeated people a vision of American small-town life emerges in which we see a society that has no cultural framework from which to draw common experiences; no code of manners by which to initiate, guide, and sustain meaningful relationships among individuals; no art to provide a communion of shared feeling and thought; and no established traditions by which to direct and balance their lives. They live in the midst of cultural failure.

The theme of cultural failure rises by suggestion from background images of decay and decomposition. The town is a wasteland ruled by dull, conventional people. Its religion has deteriorated into an empty moralism; its people have lost their contact with the soil. While Anderson uses his images sparingly, interweaving them subtly with narrative and dialogue, they evoke an atmosphere of desolation which impinges with crushing effect upon the lives of the grotesques; and, as the images recur, they become symbolic of a culture which, as Waldo Frank has said, has reached the final stages of deterioration. Rubbish and broken glass clutter the alleys and streets and of the village. . . . Dr. Reefy's office is located off a "dark hallway filled with rubbish"; Belle Carpenter lives in a "gloomy old house" in which the "rusty tin eaves-trough had slipped from its fastenings . . . and when the wind blew it beat against the roof of a small shed, making a dismal drumming noise that sometimes persisted all through the night"; and Wing Biddlebaum's small frame house offers a view of a "half decayed veranda." . . .

[Though] the characters who embody convention are shadowy or fragmentary, their power over the lives of the grotesques is felt as an intangible but decisive, sinister influence. They present a background of moral decay, calculation and artifice, of a rampant egoistic individualism. George Willard's father ("Mother") and John Hardy ("Surrender") embrace the religion of success; Wash Williams' mother-in-law and Helen White's mother ("Sophistication") exploit sex with varying degrees of crudity and subtlety to draw men to their daughters. Collectively, the citizens of Winesburg torture Wing Biddlebaum with shouts of deprecation. The Hardy sisters crush the sensitive Louise Bentley with hypocritical and degrading conventional courtship rites characterized by crafty use of sex.

In such an atmosphere the grotesques typically isolate themselves in rooms as barren of joy as the town itself, emerging—often at night—to walk alone or with George Willard, in whom they confide. In the darkness or within their rooms, their secret inner lives "show forth" in an epiphany, an outburst of emotion, or in a casual, unguarded remark and reveal the full extent of their psychic defeat. . . .

The point of view of the omniscient author—of the mature George Willard, recalling tenderly but with detachment of time and place his small-town youth—softens the tone; it permits the town and the grotesques to emerge as objects of compassion rather than of attack, as they are in Masters' *Spoon River* and in Lewis' *Main Street*. Tone and point of view thus effectively and almost imperceptibly become thematic in themselves—in the manner of lyric poetry.

While Anderson later wrote individual tales that are superior to the stories in *Winesburg,* he never again wrote a long work that combines with such felicity the penetrating insights into the impoverished inner lives of broken, sensitive people; the sustained, pervasive mood of social degeneration; and the quiet, unforced portrayal of a hero liberating himself from the confines of his limited environment as *Winesburg* does. It is his most complete and authentic plea for freedom of expression of the inner life and for sympathetic receptivity to the needs of the human heart. Written at the dawn of an era of revolt against American provincialism and against the romanticized stories of idyllic and virtuous village life, it has outlasted both the nostalgic, sentimental romances and most of the iconoclastic satires about village life written before and since, precisely because it goes well beyond both of those oversimplified extremes to acknowledge both the worth and the tragic limitations of life in the small Midwestern towns and—by easy geographical extension— of all human life. . . .

Source: Rex Burbank, *Sherwood Anderson*, Twayne Publishers, Inc., 1964, pp. 61-77.

Adaptations

Two unabridged audio versions of the complete *Winesburg, Ohio* have been released recently. In 1995, Audio Bookshelf issued a version read by Terry Bregy. The set includes four cassettes running a total of six-and-one-half hours, including an introduction to Anderson and his work. Recorded Books issued another version in 1997, read by George Guidall. Its five cassettes run seven-and-one-half hours.

Topics for Further Study

Using the Oxford English Dictionary and a dictionary of literary terms, investigate meanings of the word "grotesque," especially as it is used as a noun. Learn how the meanings have changed over time. In what ways is Wing Biddlebaum a grotesque?

Look at a few paragraphs from short stories by Nathaniel Hawthorne, Herman Melville, Edgar Allan Poe, Mark Twain, or other nineteenthcentury American writers. Compare individual sentences in these writers' works with sentences in "Hands." How do the styles compare? What new things was Anderson attempting to do with his prose?

Some early reviewers of Anderson's short stories wrote that the author was cold and distant and created characters even he did not care about. Based on "Hands," do you think this assessment is accurate?

Look closely at the passages in "Hands" where Adolph Myers' relationship with his students is described. Do you think his physical contact with the students is appropriate? How would such contact be viewed in your community?

The half-witted boy's accusations confirm "hidden, shadowy doubts" in the minds of the men in town. What might have contributed to these doubts?

Readers and critics have disagreed over the years about whether or not Wing Biddlebaum was sexually attracted to his young students. Does it make a difference to how you read the story? Discuss the ways in which the meaning of the story—and of Wing's friendship with George Willard—is affected by Wing's sexual orientation.

Compare and Contrast

1890s: The "public highway" running between town and the berry fields of Winesburg, Ohio, is a dirt road. Field workers travel by wagon, and goods are shipped by train.

1990s: Although there are still unpaved highways and freight trains in the rural parts of the Midwest, they have mostly been replaced by paved roads on which trucks pass.

1890s: Strawberries are grown throughout the country and picked by hand by day laborers who are mostly local. The fictional Wing Biddlebaum picks one hundred and forty quarts in a day.

1990s: Most large-scale strawberry farms are in California. The berries are still picked by hand, because they bruise easily, but the picking is done by migrant workers, many of them from Mexico.

1890s: Most schools, like Adolph Myers' school in the story, have only one teacher for all the grades, and the teachers have little direct supervision.

1990s: Except in the most remote areas, American schools are larger, with more teachers in each building and with large bureaucracies to hire, supervise and, if appropriate, to discipline teachers.

1890s: The fictional *Winesburg Eagle,* like many small-town papers, is put out by two men: an owner/editor and a reporter.

1990s: Even most small-town papers have larger staffs, and most small papers have been put out of business or been purchased by large multimedia corporations. The Internet, however, allows small groups of people to produce online periodicals, and to achieve much wider circulations than the small, print newspapers of a century before.

What Do I Read Next?

Winesburg, Ohio (1919), by Sherwood Anderson, is the highly acclaimed collection that includes "Hands." In each of the twenty-three stories, young George Willard establishes a connection with one of the lonely, isolated people in his small town.

The Spoon River Anthology (1915), by Edgar Lee Masters, is a collection of verses in which the men and women of Spoon River tell their stories from the grave.

The Women of Brewster Place (1980), by Gloria Naylor, is a collection of stories that won the American Book Award. It gives voice to seven African-American women in seven interconnected short stories.

Ethan Frome (1911), by Edith Wharton, depicts a farmer with a poetic soul who struggles with poverty, loneliness, and a bad-tempered wife in rural New England.

Everything that Rises Must Converge (1965), by Flannery O'Connor, is a collection of stories of grotesque characters confronting religious questions in the backwoods of Georgia.

The *Collected Poems* (1950) of Carl Sandburg, a friend of Anderson's and another voice of the Chicago Renaissance, celebrates American agriculture and industry and the American people.

Further Study

Howe, Irving, *Sherwood Anderson*, William Sloan Associates, 1951.

A highly readable critical biography by a man who admired Anderson's early works, and who was strongly disappointed by the later ones. Howe does not address "Hands" separately, but devotes a chapter to the influences and themes of *Winesburg, Ohio*. Still the most important book-length Anderson study.

Papinchak, Robert Allen, *Sherwood Anderson: A Study of the Short Fiction*, Twayne, 1992.

A thorough analysis of all of Anderson's short fiction. Papinchak uses "Hands" as an example to illustrate Anderson's "representative stylistic technique," citing the use of hands as a repeated symbol, and the author's clean and direct sentence style.

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

In a useful chapter on "Hands," Small outlines circumstances of composition of the story, Ander son's sources and influences, the publication history, some connections between the story and other Anderson works, and a review of important criticism.

White, Ray Lewis, ed., *The Merrill Studies in "Winesburg, Ohio,*" Charles E. Merrill, 1971.

A small but important compilation of background information and critical pieces, including an analysis of Anderson's writing process by William L. Phillips; several contemporary book reviews; and brief and accessible critical articles on themes, imagery and symbolism.

—, *Sherwood Anderson: A Reference Guide*, G. K. Hall, 1977.

An annotated list of more than 2,500 pieces of criticism published between 1916 and 1975, including criticism written in non-English languages. Includes citations with brief summaries of twenty-three reviews of *Winesburg, Ohio* from 1919.

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Anderson, David D., *Critical Studies in American Literature,* The University of Karachi, 1964, pp. 108-131; reprinted in *Critical Essays on Sherwood Anderson*, edited by David D. Anderson, G. K. Hall, 1981, p. 167.

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"A Gutter Would Be Spoon River," *New York Sun,* June 1, 1919, p. 3.

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Papinchak, Robert Allen, *Sherwood Anderson: A Study of the Short Fiction,* Twayne, 1992, pp. 8-9.

Rideout, Walter B., "The Simplicity of *Winesburg, Ohio,"* in *Shenandoah*, Vol. 13, Spring ,1962, pp. 20-31; reprinted in *Critical Essays on Sherwood Anderson*, edited by David D. Anderson, G. K. Hall, 1981, pp. 146, 150-151.

Small, Judy Jo, *A Reader's Guide to the Short Stories of Sherwood Anderson,* G. K. Hall, 1994, p. 37.

Taylor, Welford Dunaway, *Sherwood Anderson,* Frederick Ungar, 1977, pp. 29, 37.

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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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