

Sherwood Anderson

Now that we are done talking about the major American writers of the 19th century. Let's turn our attention to 20th century writers and what influenced their writing. Truth be told, I can't think of anyone more influential than Sherwood Anderson. Well, I know his name probably doesn't ring a bell. So let's focus on this little known writer whose work never really generated much interest among American readers except for his collection of short stories, *Winesberg* Ohio. Anderson was born in 1876 and died in 1941. He was only 18 years of age when he married into a wealthy family and he managed a fairly successful mail order business and paint manufacturing company. But about 8 years later, he disappeared for 4 days, and when he was found, it was clear that he had suffered a mental break down. Well, soon after, he abandoned his businesses and his family, and started writing. It seems that it is dissatisfaction with his occupation and his not having time to work on the craft he loved-writing-precipitated that break down. So, for the next 3 decades, Anderson wrote novels, short stories, essays and autobiographies-three of them- in fact, his first two novels were published just four or 5 years after his break down. *Windy McPherson's* Son in 1916, and *Marching Man* the next year. The first was partly autobiographical and it incorporated a theme that Anderson frequently used. Small town American life and how it was affected by industrialization. . *Windy McPherson's* Son was a critically appraised first novel and it was in a sense , a duty novel. Sherwood thought that all writers should write novels even though they maybe artistically inclined toward a different genre, in Anderson's case, the short story. Now if in your life time, you decided to read just one Sherwood Anderson book, make that book *Winesberg* Ohio. Ernest Hemingway once said that it's one of two American works that he would rather read again than be assured of million dollar annual income. So this 1919 anthology is Anderson's first collection of short stories. It's considered a novel by many, because the stories are related to each other. They are like chapters. This was a new form of literature invented by Anderson. He said he wanted a looseness to his works, which is why he created individual tales about lives that were connected in some way. Now the, a, stories manifest as a usual theme, the conflict between a society swiftly becoming industrialized and the individual whose own pattern of behavior molded by a lifetime of living in a small town results in this individual both resisting and trying to come to terms with a changing society. The people in the small towns that Anderson wrote about have either become numb or terrified but can't express their feelings or even identify what it is they are terrified of. Well, they are frightened that industrialism has made

them **bereft** of any emotional or spiritual vitality, So, the way Anderson presented these characters? Well, he used the literary device called a grotesque. A grotesque is a deliberate exaggeration or distortion of an idea or character. Anderson used grotesques because he wanted to clearly represent the people who were living in a time of a great social change. So he made them more empty headed than real people actually were and this made it possible for ordinary readers to recognize the similarity between themselves and the grotesques. The readers couldn't express themselves. They were struggling to reveal something about themselves. But like the grotesques, they just didn't know how. Now, I want to point out that Anderson's tendency to focus his characters reveals something about his thoughts where plots are concerned. Anderson didn't seem to think that plots were important. I mean, they seemed to be less important than his characters. And this could be the reason why he used circular plots as opposed to linear ones in his stories. A linear plot has a beginning, a middle and an end. We're used to stories with linear plots, a circular plot starts and ends with the same scene. And the events in the stories are predictable. You sort of know what's going to end at the starting point. Circular plots leave you with an unresolved ending. So characters are key. If you are a fan of Anderson's writing though, you would have probably noticed that he placed primary emphasis on the narrator's role. Sometimes the narrator even became part of the story. In death in the woods, the main character is the narrator. A mature individual who looks back on past events and provides insight on the meaning of these events. And as the narrator speaks, he seems to be bringing the reader into the story. The reader feels like he's part of the story. Why did Anderson allow the narrator to play such a big role in his stories? Well, Anderson didn't simply chronicle the impact that industrialization had on the Mid West, he believed his role was that of a story teller. And that's why the narrator whether or not he was a character in the story, tells the story like he is right in the middle of it. Now a distinguishing feature of Anderson's writing style was one that fellow writers, Earnest Hemingway and William Faulkner embodied in their own writing. Anderson wrote clean and crisp sentences. He used exactly the right words. He was obsessed with precision. And they weren't simply short, clean sentences, they had the form of everyday speech. Unlike in 19th century American literature, which was developing and had largely incorporated the English romanticist style. Anderson's style sounded very native to the United States, and this is why readers thought his works sounded fresh and vital. So let me see if I can sum up how Anderson impacted writers and writing in the 20 of century. Essentially, Anderson loosened restrictions in writing styles and he made the writers think who am I writing for. Anderson wrote for the average working guy and his everyday speech reflected that.