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Grotesques in *Winesburg, Ohio*

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Abstract

This paper analyses characters of three short stories: “Hands”, “Adventure” and “A Man of Ideas” of *Winesburg, Ohio* for exploring features of Anderson’s grotesques, using his definition. Despite the fact that all characters and their stories are completely different, it can be concluded that grotesque characters are common people of a common town, who gained their grotesqueness mostly in difficult or unusual living situations, that deformed their personality and made it static, unchangeable. Most of them suffer from their sensitivity to world’s imperfections and tendency to escape reality.

Key words: Sherwood Anderson; *Winesburg, Ohio*; grotesque

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INTRODUCTION

Sherwood Anderson is one of the most popular and well-known American writers of the twentieth century, who demonstrated his literary talent in different genres, such as novels (*Dark Laughter*, *Tar: A Midwest Childhood*), collections of short stories (*The Triumph of the Egg*,

Winesburg, Ohio) and even poetry “A New Testament”. *Winesburg, Ohio*, published in 1919 is one of the most popular of his works. According to Varlamova, it is “one of the central works of American literature, in which the author manages to overcome regional tendencies in the depiction of reality and reach a national, philosophical level of understanding of modernity” (1).

Winesburg, Ohio consists of twenty one short stories and an introductory chapter “The Book of the Grotesque”, in which the author describes his definition of grotesque. All stories of the book are settled in Winesburg, a fictional town, which is an embodiment of common American provincial town. Although all short stories have their own characters and are not connected by plot, they are structured around one person, a journalist George Willard, who was born and spent most of his life in Winesburg. One of the main themes in the story is describing the phenomena of grotesqueness with examples of the common people living in a common provincial town.

Winesburg, Ohio attracts attention of literary critics because of the accurate description of American provincial community with lively characters and psychological state of common citizens, trapped in commonness and alienation. According to Glen Love, Anderson expressed his “concern about the isolation of man from nature and from his fellow man, his aversion to noise and especially the noise of words and talk are set in uneasy balance against his preoccupation with, and reverence for, the psychic states” (40). Studying representation of American society in the novel, Varlamova notices that grotesque people “is a kind of discovery made by Sherwood Anderson, who distinguished them from common citizens” (96). Describing Winesburg’s community, Odeh claims that citizens suffer from lack of communication between themselves and society because of fear to be misunderstood and Sherwood Anderson tried to express the idea that people can become “happy when they have the freedom to follow dreams and ideals, and that

they should be encouraged rather than hindered in this endeavor” (59). John J. Mahoney also emphasizes that Anderson’s characters are described as “generally lonely, frustrated”, hardly come into contact with other characters and seldom ask for reply (251). While most of scholars concentrate on features of American provincial society and its description in the novel, this paper aims to pay attention to grotesqueness and its manifestation.

According to *The Routledge Dictionary of Literary Terms*, “the grotesque usually presents the human figure in an exaggerated and distorted way” (101). Sherwood Anderson has his own understanding of grotesque. For him, grotesque is associated with people and is strongly connected with truth. According to Sherwood Anderson, grotesques were people who stuck to their own truth and lived with it during all their lives, but their truth turned to be false, which made these people grotesques (2). The opening chapter “The Book of grotesque” is very important for understanding his short stories, as the author formulates and explains the term grotesque in it, telling about truths, which are comparable with different characters of the book and types of grotesque. “There was the truth of virginity and the truth of passion, the truth of wealth and of poverty, of thrift and of profligacy, of carelessness and abandon. Hundreds and hundreds were the truths and they were all beautiful” (2).

Grotesques are people with some deviations from the norm and are meant to be not only the individual inhabitants of the fictional town of Winesburg in the Midwest, but people in general, people who are immersed in themselves, suffering from excessive individualism and isolation, inability to find a common language with others, to find their place in society. This paper aims to study the phenomena of grotesqueness, its representation and understanding of American realist writer of the twentieth century, Sherwood Anderson, using his own theory of grotesqueness for analyses of three completely different characters, such as Wing Biddlebaum, Alice Hindman and Joe Wellings. Although these characters are completely different and have unique features, all of them share something in common, that can be described as “grotesqueness”.

1. WING BIDDLEBAUM

Grotesqueness of Wing Biddlebaum has deep roots in his tragic biography and is closely related to an accusation of pedophilia, public beating and exile from his hometown, which provoked development of psychological trauma and led to his acquiring grotesque characteristics. Before turning into a grotesque, Wing Biddlebaum was a dedicated teacher and true mentor, who “was meant by nature to be a teacher of youth... He was one of those rare, little understood men who rule by a power so gentle that it passes as a lovable weakness.” (Anderson 5). During his teaching in Pennsylvania he tried to open to children the

world of creativity, imagination, incredible magnificence of the genuine life, full of diversity, idyllic life without fatal separation of body and soul, but his attempt to teach people to dream and to share his love with students turned into dire consequences as he was accused of pedophilia, severely beaten and narrowly escaped being hung, but in the end was just banished. Adolf Myers ran to Ohio and after changing his name, settled in the house of his aunt with no intention to teach people.

Another cause of Wing Biddlebaum’s grotesqueness is the collision of dream and reality, the individual and the surrounding world. Wing Biddlebaum was not only a gifted teacher, but also a person with philosophical way of thinking, which can be known from his conversation with George Willard: “Out of the dream Wing Biddlebaum made a picture for George Willard. In the picture men lived again in a kind of pastoral golden age. Across a green open country came clean-limbed young men, some afoot, some mounted upon horses. In crowds the young men came to gather about the feet of an old man who sat beneath a tree in a tiny garden and talked to them.” (Anderson 4) In such a way, the world of the main character becomes similar to Plato’s explanation of separate world of ideas and world of forms and is split into two ones: the ideal world, in which all people live in harmony and where wisdom and love are highly valued in society and the real world of injustice and cruelty, where a talented person is undervalued by society and where his kindness or good intentions are viewed in a negative light.

The final cause of Wing Biddlebaum’s grotesqueness is his inability to self-develop and apply his skills for the benefit of society. Deep down he is still a teacher, which can be noticed from his dialogues with George Willard “You must try to forget all you have learned... You must begin to dream” (Anderson 5), but he cannot apply his skills and is unable to continue teaching as he believes that his emotions and gestures of hands that are closely connected with them will lead to misunderstanding again, which is why he tries to control his hands and scares when unintentionally touches his friend. As a result, he not only loses a way of expressing himself, but also tends to isolate himself from society and gradually degrades. Wing Biddlebaum is similar to a bird with clipped wings, which was born to fly, but deprived of such opportunity to manifest his real nature.

As a result of difficult life circumstances, Wing Biddlebaum stuck to the truth that avoidance of gesticulation and communication is the best way for him to spend the rest of his days. This truth makes him grotesque character and is represented in the text in two ways. First of all, the writer shows external representation of Wing Biddlebaum’s grotesqueness, such as isolation, nervousness, fearfulness and doubtfulness and then describes the internal one, such as an attempt to escape himself, his nature and to hide his emotions after facing an aggressive world.

Wing Biddlebaum stayed true to his truth, but his main task turned to isolating himself from people, keeping his personality and thoughts in secret, to keep it with him and in any case do not share it with anyone. The burden of truth with fullness of his hidden experience of life, makes it special, but as a result, passion of Wing Biddlebaum, which is supposed to return him to himself, to attach him to the world and people finally became the cause of alienation. His unshared feelings and his truth became a prison for his personality. Wing Biddlebaum was stuck in his injury and his secret feelings, which turned to pathology and made him withdraw into himself, transforming him into a grotesque.

Image of Wing Biddlebaum is not devoid of irony and contradictions. Teaching people to think wide and begin to dream, he suffered from dreams of his own students. Trying to make the world better and raise a new generation, he act not severely, but gently, which caused misunderstanding and collapse of his life. He changed his name and stuck to the truth that he could live without communication, escape from the outside world and hide his emotions from people, turning to a frightened, prematurely aged man whose only friend is the young reporter George Willard, the only person to whom he dares to talk and to whom he is ready to bare his soul.

Wing Biddlebaum from the one side is a “small” average American, an inhabitant of the small provincial town, who follows isolated lifestyle. Like other people of Winesburg, he suffers from alienation. On the other side, Wing Biddlebaum is a colorful grotesque character, who stands out in a crowd.

2. ALICE HINDMAN

Unsuccessful love and subsequent mental disorder are the main causes of Alice Hindman’s grotesqueness. The case of Alice Hindman is directly connected with her tragic biography and love affair at the age of sixteen years old, when she met a young man, Ned Currie and fell in love with him, but they were not meant to be happy together. Although the young couple made plans for their future, unexpected departure of Ned Currie ruined not only their plans, but also life of Alice Hindman as his will to protect and take care of his girlfriend vanished after his settling in Cleveland. He disappeared at all after some time. Alice was indulged in a waiting of her lover and at the age of twenty seven remained to be devoted to her beloved man even when she understood that there was no hope for his returning. The failure of her attempt to build new relationships with Will Hurley, a drug clerk from Winesburg confirms her inability to socialize, to build a family and finally to reintegrate into society, turning Alice into grotesque.

Living in dreams and an escape from reality is another problem for Alice, which turns her to a grotesque. The

moment of parting with her boyfriend is the turning point for her change. Dreams of reunion with her lover and plans for a happy future started to be waymarks, according to which the heroine decided to build her life. She turned her life to serving him, or more precisely, serving his image in the mind, indulging her fantasies of love and self-sacrifice. Gradually her feeling of loneliness increased and the sense of reality began to return, colliding with world, which drove her to despair and finally led to her breakdown.

Her mind became intensely active and when, weary from the long hours of standing behind the counter in the store, she went home and crawled into bed, she could not sleep. With staring eyes she looked into the darkness. Her imagination, like a child awakened from long sleep, played about the room. Deep within her there was something that would not be cheated by fantasies and that demanded some definite answer from life (53).

Grotesqueness of Alice Hindman lies in her truth of passion. According to Adli Odeh, Alice Hindman is “a non-aggressive grotesque” and her story reminds “sentimental melodrama” that can be hardly disagreed (56). Her blind faith in love and happiness prevent her from building relationships with other men as she considers herself to be Ned Currie’s wife even though they are not married.

Apart from the most obvious representation of her grotesqueness, that is, pathological devotion, there is also another one, namely workaholism. Being in the process of painful anticipation, Alice find release in her work, convincing herself that hard work will provide her and her lover with a comfortable life, which can be found in the novel:

Sometimes on rainy afternoons in the store she got out her bank book and, letting it lie open before her, spent hours dreaming impossible dreams of saving money enough so that the interest would support both herself and her future husband. “Ned always liked to travel about,” she thought. “I’ll give him the chance (51-52).

However, work and attempts to find new lover did not help the heroine escape from depression and resulted in a breakdown when under pressure of loneliness, she left her house without clothes.

The focus of the novel is on the psychological state of Alice Hindman, which reveals her grotesque features, the source of which is the so-called truth. This truth destroyed her life and prevented her mind from perceiving cruel reality and understanding that her plans for marriage and living with Ned Currie were getting to break down. The grotesqueness of Alice Hindman is similar to that of Wing Biddlebaum as the source of their grotesqueness originates from their early tragic experience. Both of them suffer from alienation and separation from society, but unlike Wing Biddlebaum, Alice can finally understand her mistake. The end of short story shows that Alice Hindman makes a conclusion that “Many people must live and die

alone, even in Winesburg” (54). In such way, she deconstructs her old truth, thus can be defined as double grotesque character as she understands that the truth of love, to which she has stuck is false. However, instead of relieving herself of the burden of grotesqueness, after refusing her romantic fantasies Alice sticks to new truth, believing that she must die alone.

3. JOE WELLING

Joe Welling is another grotesque character of *Winesburg, Ohio*, who can be characterized as a unique one, because he is completely different from the two previous characters and other ones in the novel. Unlike Alice Hindman or Wing Bidlbaum, roots of his grotesqueness lie not in outside factors, such as difficult life circumstances, bullying or unsuccessful love, but are provoked by inner state of mind. In such way, his grotesque features are caused by inborn personality.

Grotesqueness of Joe Welling lies in his certainty in the importance of his advice and ideas as he believes that surrounding people are interested in his ideas or require his advice. Joe Welling is an agent of Standard Oil, who was born in a decent family as his father “had been a man of some dignity in the community, a lawyer, and a member of the state legislature at Columbus.” (45) However, Joe is known in the town as a source of annoying philosophical discussions.

Contradictive personality is one of the representations of his grotesqueness. The author describes Joe Welling as “small of body and in his character unlike anyone else in town. He was like a tiny little volcano that lies silent for days and then suddenly spouts fire.” (45). On the other side, he was “silent, excessively polite, intent upon his business.” (45). His sudden change of mood and behavior is the base of Joe’s contradictory and dualistic nature: usually he is calm and polite, but when inspiration visits him, Joe Welling’s behavior suddenly changes in kind of aggressive one: he becomes excited, noisy and annoying, disturbing other people with his ideas. Such contradiction between two of his psychological states makes him an oddish person and a grotesque character.

The grotesqueness of Joe Welling in the full sense is manifested in form of inspiration and discussion of his ideas. Three cases of his inspiration are described in the short story “A man of ideas”, which illustrate a grotesqueness nature of the character. One of his inspirations happened when Joe Welling came into the drug store, “brushing the screen door violently aside”(45) and “with a strange absorbed light in his eyes he pounced upon” men discussing horse racing, starting to express his idea why water level in the river rose up “with the air of Pheidippides bringing news of the victory of the Greeks in the struggle at Marathon”(45). Performance of his

sudden enlightenment ended as unexpectedly as it began and he suddenly turned into his ordinary state of a silent and polite man, a Standard Oil agent. Such case of Joe’s inspiration illustrates his grotesqueness and incredible ability to cause a stir and to make a big deal out of something unimportant. However, even being considered as an oddish person, Joe Welling can not only live a normal life, but also gains the respect of townspeople by his initiative to organize the baseball club. Finding a way to release the energy, Joe does not lose his grotesqueness, but finds a way to become part of society.

Joe Welling is a grotesque character of another kind. He is not similar to the previous grotesques and other characters in *Winesburg, Ohio*. Unlike Alice Hindman’s or Wing Bidlbaum’s grotesque features, which caused the breaking of their links with society, Joe’s grotesqueness does not lead to alienation or loneliness. He, on the contrary, finds social contacts with other people for discussing the problem he is interested in. Grotesqueness of Joe Welling is contradictory. On the one side, his unexpected inspirations push people away, that is why he had reputation of being an odd and annoying person. On the other side, his grotesqueness had positive effect on his life as people of Winesburg respected him because of the success of his baseball team in plays with other towns. It was his grotesqueness, that made him good coach and helped team of Winesburg to win.

CONCLUSION

Wing Biddlebaum, Alice Hindman, Joe Welling are different characters with unique features and stories, but like other characters of Sherwood Anderson, they share the same features, which make them grotesques as all of them have their own “truth”, which they believe in. All of the grotesques in one way or another are dreamers, who did not reconcile with harsh reality, but made an attempt to escape into world of fantasies. The grotesques are not necessarily tragic characters and do not have to be isolated from society, but they are different from ordinary people as they have their own unique understanding of life, which lies in their own “truth” and following it they can live tragic or happy life, but not a common one as they do not follow society’s patterns, trying to find their own way. They want to be heard and understood, and that is why they try to reach George Willard in an attempt to open their thoughts and feelings with the hope that he could find right words for describing their ideas and share them with others. Despite the fact that all these bright and somewhat unusual people are doomed to lead a dull life in their provincial Winesburg, which is Anderson’s model of the American province, and, more broadly, the model of human existence as a whole, they also have chance to be successful and happy.

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