

**SHERWOOD ANDERSON'S "THE BOOK OF THE  
GROTESQUE"— REWRITING THE STORY IN THE  
MARGIN**

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*Sherwood Anderson*

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**O**ld age. The physical body fails and man gets ready for the next stage. The heart flutters and he looks at Nature around him to see how it renews itself and how the cycles follow an eternal pattern.

Outside, the trees stand in their majesty through the seasons. They are either thick and lush with leaves and birds' nests or they look sad and desolate – reminders of a springtime once had. Dark and hard against the softness of the winter's snow. They look dead and bring to mind human beings approaching the last phase of their lives. Yet, their life force has merely withdrawn underground, and it stays at the level of their roots, hidden, buried deep beneath the earth, and it keeps feeding the dead-looking trunk and branches inconspicuously, waiting for the next season to come, to flourish into green leaves and blossom once again. It all just lies secretly underground, seemingly dying or dead (to the senses), yet alive, full of vitality and vigour beneath the surface.

Thus the old man, in the winter of his life, wanted to contemplate the eternal life cycles outside his window, because something inside him was altogether young<sup>i</sup> - it was like a baby, a youth, or a young woman dressed as a knight. He carried something charged with life force buried deep within him, like a pregnant woman carries a child in the secrecy of her womb, or a tree holds the germ of spring in the

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secrecy of its roots – it was the promise of renewal buried deep within the old man, as in the pregnant woman and the tree.

Strange indeed that it was a young woman dressed as a knight that dwelt inside the old man... He seemed to carry within him someone of the opposite sex ... perhaps what he had spent half his life searching for, and that was within him all along! And this maiden was clad as a knight! She combined the image or archetype of the fair maiden, the virgin, with that of a knight ...Perhaps she had to undergo many fights, many battles, against the dragons of daily existence to defend her unmarred beauty. She had to protect herself from being wounded and devoured by the dragon of physical decrepitude and mental grotesqueness.

In the twilight of his days and in the twilight of his consciousness, the old man starts reviewing his life in a way hitherto unknown to him, because in the twilight of rationality, another capacity lurks and takes over, just as in the twilight of life, death gives a different meaning to one's existence and shows it in a hue that one has never – or hardly ever – been conscious of. One stands on the threshold between two dimensions and can see in either direction.

It is into this misty zone that the old man wanders – the world of dreams, of visions, of myth – a realm so often sensed by us as being interwoven with our common daily living, but usually only encountered at night during sleep.

So, the old writer, who thought he knew people so intimately, sees a procession of all those beings he had known unfold before his eyes under a new light, led by the young woman inside him. The promise of youth, life, and love within him, his elixir of eternal life makes him see how all the people he had known had become grotesque, distorted out of shape and ludicrous.

The explanation of the grotesqueness of people takes us to a primeval time, the mythic times of the beginning of the world and to the state of consciousness permeating existence before the Fall.

Everything then was beautiful, everything of value, and so were all the truths that were all about. Nothing was excluded in favour of anything else. There were no distinctions, no split, no separation and duality, no conflict between good and evil; everything encompassed everything else, even its seemingly opposites, holistically: "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 of abandon."<sup>ii</sup> It was the Garden of Eden, when all was a promise, all possible. When Adam and Eve ate of the fruit of the tree of knowledge, they knew good as distinct from evil. Reason, the seat

of knowledge, took them to see things as separate, to grab the truths, taking them out of their context, breaking the whole pattern of life, creating a rupture in the woven fabric of reality. Suddenly seeing themselves as naked, they created the separation and the conflict between them and the environment, and between good and evil, "snatching" one or two of the truths, and losing their sense of oneness with all, their holistic communion with the universe and reality. They became grotesque, distant from their original Edenic state.

The same thing happened to the people the writer had known. They became untrue, false, and grotesque, by following or identifying with one or a few truths, tearing them out of their woven fabric. Doing that is just as false as to affirm that only the night is real and not the day, or the other way around, or that only one aspect of life is real or valid, denying its opposite, and anything else...

The young thing, or the woman within the old writer saved him from becoming grotesque, because youth and love take in, embrace all life and do not permit aging, fossilization, and stagnation. Youth has vigour and moves on, women are prone to feel and sense things intensely and, on the contrary, old age tends to stay, to become hardened, to keep to its truths, to stagnate.

Learned people, in their turn, also tend to cling to their own little truths, and to develop contempt for the others. Common people are seen as less grotesque, as they tend to be less conceited and more tolerant and compassionate towards other people's truths.

The old man never published his Book of the Grotesque, because what is left unsaid is more powerful and less grotesque than what is said. Words tend to distort reality and render just one side of it. When we read a story, what lies hidden between the lines is as important as what is actually written – if not more – to the full understanding of it. The old man did not want to become a grotesque, so his book was left unpublished, his words unread...

Reality can only be grasped through piercing the meshes of the rational mind. Silence, symbol, myth are the only ways of conveying existence in its whole, its totality. Ritual, contemplation, mysticism are the means to experience it. The hero of this saga will have to be like the young maiden-knight, to subdue the dragon of illusion.

And as for me, I had better refrain from overindulging in words, lest I become a grotesque myself...

"My life has been the poem I would have writ,  
but I could not both live and utter it."

Henry David Thoreau<sup>iii</sup>

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#### ABSTRACT

This essay is an attempt at rewriting Sherwood Anderson's somewhat enigmatic short story from a mythological and Jungian perspective. It is an expression of the thoughts inspired by the story, and a possible interpretation of the author's original words.

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<sup>i</sup> Sherwood Anderson, *The Book of the Grotesque*. 2.

<sup>ii</sup> *Id. Ibid.*, 4.

<sup>iii</sup> Henry David Thoreau, *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers*, 223.

