

The Concept of Psychological Flux and Themes of Alienation in the Writings of Sherwood Anderson

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Abstract:

This article explores the themes of communication, identity, and alienation in the works of American author Sherwood Anderson, with a foundation in the psychological frameworks of Erich Fromm and Viktor Frankl. Anderson's narratives depict the lives of individuals in small-town America, where the inability to express their inner thoughts and emotions leads to a profound sense of alienation and existential vacuum. Through intricate storytelling and nuanced details, Anderson reveals the tragedy of everyday life, portraying a world where conventional tragic events are absent, yet a pervasive spiritual emptiness prevails. This exploration of the "tragic without tragedy" anticipates the works of future American writers and underscores the urgent need for meaningful human connection in the face of a complex and often alienating world. Sherwood Anderson's narratives serve as a compelling mirror reflecting the struggles of ordinary people to find meaning and authenticity in their lives, making his work a foundational contribution to American literature.

Keywords: alienation, conflict, creativity, tragic, grotesque, crisis, soul.

Erich Fromm, while developing his framework of human needs, emphasized the paramount importance of the need for communication and interpersonal connections [7]. Simultaneously, he asserted that individuals possess a profound desire to comprehend themselves, embarking on a quest for identity. However, Fromm argued that when an individual feels "abandoned" in the complex and often perplexing world of people, objects, and phenomena, they may struggle to adequately realize themselves and determine their role within the surrounding reality.

Fromm contended that society, in its interactions with individuals, can serve various functions. It can either facilitate the unveiling of an individual's personal abilities or, in an alternate scenario, diminish and level them. In the latter case, an individual may lose touch with their true self, leading to depersonalization. Their relationships with others may become functional and materialistic in nature. This situation gives rise to the issue of alienation, a topic first explored by Karl Marx in his "Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844." Alienation has since remained a central concern for philosophers, psychologists, and literary critics for over a century.

In the early 1960s, American sociologist and literary critic S. Finkelstein described alienation as a psychological phenomenon, defining it as an internal conflict, a disliking of something seemingly external to an individual yet intricately connected to them. He portrayed it as a barrier constructed by a person, which, instead of providing protection, actually depletes them [6, p. 153]. The issue of human solitude in the face of hostile societal forces, the tragedy of failed mutual understanding, and the pervasive sense of alienation became central themes in American literature during the 20th century.

Prominent American authors such as Yu. O'Neill, E. Hemingway, D. Dos Passos, and F.S. Fitzgerald drew attention to the negative consequences of material progress and prosperity in a "jazz" America. They highlighted how these developments led to homogenization and the suppression of individual personality.

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In his works, American novelist Sherwood Anderson depicted the transformation of American provincial life from a state of "innocence" and patriarchy to an era of "civilization" and standardization in lifestyle and thinking. According to Anderson, key signs of this era included the advent of the industrial age with its bustling activities, the cacophonous cries of millions of people immigrating from overseas, the expansion of cities, the establishment of intercity tram lines, and the proliferation of automobiles. These changes wrought profound alterations in the lives and mentalities of Middle America's inhabitants. The once-prevailing naturalness and harmony in human relationships were supplanted by discord and mutual alienation [1, p. 55].

"The experience of alienation generates anxiety," said E. Fromm in his descriptions. To be alienated is to feel severed from the world, rendering one incapable of harnessing their human faculties. This condition leads to helplessness, a state where active influence over the world, its elements, and its inhabitants becomes unattainable. Consequently, the world can encroach upon one's rights with no means of defense. Therefore, alienation becomes a wellspring of inner anxiety, further compounded by feelings of shame and guilt [8, p. 34].

The proliferation of the philosophy of success contributes to a shift in consciousness, often resulting in the abandonment of one's true calling, a hardening of the soul, and a betrayal of one's destiny. This transformation is exacerbated by the widespread adoption of puritanical morality, characterized by restrained communication, severity, and an intolerance of human emotions.

Much of the above insights can be elucidated through Anderson's four-part story "Piety," which serves as a foundational exploration of the socio-psychological origins depicted in his work "Winesburg, Ohio" (1919). In this story, the writer meticulously traces a sequence of cause-and-effect relationships, beginning with the sacrifice of the truly human spirit to greed and ambitious pursuits. The prevailing spirit of the times and the prevailing societal mood profoundly shape people's behavior. As Erich Fromm pointed out, "Possession orientation is a characteristic feature of Western industrial society," where the primary purpose of life centers around the pursuit of wealth, fame, and power [7, p. 25].

Although the stories contained within the collection "Winesburg, Ohio" may seem unrelated, they are bound together by the recurring presence of young reporter George Willard and a shared sense of place, community, mood, and an atmosphere characterized by anxiety, mutual understanding, and discontentment with life. As American critic E. Fassel suggests, Sherwood Anderson writes about the disunity and disconnect among individuals and the emotions and behaviors stemming from such disunity [11, p. 40]. Nevertheless, it's worth noting that the book's mood evolves, and its progression serves as the internal narrative thread of "Winesburg, Ohio," creating a cohesive artistic whole.

In his novel "Poor White" (1920), the author vividly depicts a similar atmosphere, stating, "All people reside behind a self-erected wall of misunderstanding, and many among them silently pass away unnoticed, concealed behind these very walls. Presently, as in the past, individuals, set apart by the peculiarities of their nature, find themselves engrossed in various pursuits... The voice of their life emanates from beyond that wall" [10, p. 227]. Nearly every story within the narrative delves into a crisis of the human psyche, a psychological nadir in the lives of ordinary individuals. Anderson's characters grapple with inner turmoil, bearing the weight of their discontent. Yet, few of them possess a clear sense of their desires, even if they believe they do. The quest for "identity" and the meaning of existence often proves elusive.

The absence of meaning gives rise to a state within individuals, one that Austrian psychologist and psychotherapist Viktor Frankl termed the "existential vacuum." According to Frankl, mental equilibrium necessitates "a certain level of tension arising between a person, on one hand, and an

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objective meaning localized in the outside world, which they are destined to fulfill, on the other hand..." [5, p. 11]. However, the characters in Anderson's tales, adrift in the external world, generally fail to comprehend themselves, and they remain misunderstood by others. This phenomenon of "double misunderstanding" creates an atmosphere of tragic hopelessness that permeates the stories of the American writer.

"Winesburg, Ohio" serves as a chronicle of people whose affliction lies in their inability to convey their thoughts and emotions to the world, as aptly noted by the eminent American literary critic M. Cowley. The severe ailment of non-communication has rendered them emotionally scarred individuals [3, p. 114]. Nonetheless, deep within the souls of most of Anderson's characters, something genuine, "essential, and beautiful" resides, although, due to circumstances, it seldom finds an outlet. Life in the American provinces is far from a spiritual phenomenon. Outwardly, Anderson's characters appear awkward, comical, and at times even physically unattractive. Paradoxically, however, "a poet is concealed within every individual," and this perspective of the writer finds embodiment even in the "grotesque" denizens of Winesburg.

For instance, Wash Williams ("Respectable People"), the telegraph operator in Winesburg, was deemed the town's most unsightly individual. His frame was wide, his neck slender, and his legs feeble. He presented an unclean appearance, with even the whites of his eyes appearing soiled [1, p. 90]. However, it later becomes apparent that in his youth, Wash "was renowned as the state's first telegraph operator, and despite being dispatched to the remote Winesburg, he still took pride in his proficiency." Many years ago, he underwent a personal tragedy that shattered him, transforming him into a "misshapen, uniformed monster." Unexpectedly, a transformation occurs: "suddenly, it appeared to the young reporter as though a prominent fellow with jet-black hair and lively black eyes sat beside him on the sleepers. There was something beautiful in the voice of the grotesque Wash Williams as he recounted the story of his animosity. In the darkness, seated on the sleepers, the Winesburg telegraph operator transformed into a poet" [2, p. 93].

Likewise, in "Death," Doctor Reefy perceives that Elizabeth Willard, a middle-aged, ailing woman who sought his assistance early on (and with whom he experienced a sense of spiritual affinity for the first time), "is growing younger, straightening up, and gaining strength... Her movements exuded an effortless grace, and their rhythm intoxicated the doctor... it seemed to him that he was embracing not an exhausted woman of forty-one but a lovely, innocent girl who had somehow miraculously shed the weariness of her body" [1, pp. 164-165].

In this context, I would like to once again refer to Viktor Frankl: "We must always bear in mind the following: infatuation blinds us, while true love allows us to see. Love opens our eyes to the spiritual essence of another person, revealing the true nature of their uniqueness and the hidden potential within them. Love enables us to perceive the personality of another individual as an entirely unique world, thereby expanding our own world" [5, pp. 260-261]. In Anderson's stories, spiritual unrealism, the failure to express one's life intentions, and ultimately, the inability to love render the characters absurd and transform them into grotesque figures. "Something within each of them seeks expression," as one monograph on the writer's work suggests, "but the inability to break through a certain obstacle in the hero's life turns their internal energy against them, rendering them grotesque individuals, though deserving of understanding, but rarely able to attain it" [9, p. 73].

The first vignette in the Winesburg cycle is titled "The Book of the Grotesque." The narrator recounts that once, "when the world was still young," there existed a single Truth encompassing numerous thoughts. Truths were scattered throughout the world, and they were all beautiful [1, p. 24]. However, with time, the Truth disintegrated, and each individual picked up a fragment, using it

as a shield to isolate themselves from others. In each person, as noted by M. Koreneva, a kind of "psychological flux" develops, which ultimately overwhelms its bearer and acts as their embodiment [4, p. 1]. Confronted by a harsh and incomprehensible world, Anderson's "grotesques" appeared to become frozen in a single position, immersing themselves in a particular state, memory, or emotion, which gradually dried up and distorted the poetic essence that represented their core.

In the story "Hands," there is a substitution of a person (especially a spiritually gifted one) with a function, and a whole being is reduced to a mere part. According to Fromm, the essence of human history "lies in people's quest to discover themselves, to fulfill the needs that arise from the disintegration of previous, initially integral connections (in Anderson's case, the shattered Truth)," [2, p. 255]. However, the societal structures that have evolved over time have hindered the full realization of human potential. Throughout human history, the intellectual, volitional, and emotional aspects of human beings have not received adequate avenues for self-expression. Society has not facilitated the fulfillment of profound needs; instead, it has constrained them or channeled them in misguided directions. In Anderson's narrative, society places the hero in a position where his entire purpose, even his source of fame, is tied to manual labor in the fields. A gifted individual is likened to an intriguing object or an exotic animal, a fact conveyed with a bitter irony: "Winesburg was proud of Biddlebaum's hands, just as it was proud of the new stone house of banker White or Tony Tip, Wesley Moir's bay trotter, who won the 2.15-mile race..." [1, p. 26].

The hands in Anderson's story embody an associative series of meanings, indicating that the hero has lost the status of a full-fledged personality. Initially, the movements of the hands express the creative gorenje of the teacher, the subtlety of his nature, the need for love and unity with others. But human misunderstanding leads to the fact that the hands are given a shameful function. As a result, the hands cease to be the embodiment of the spiritual life of the character. They now have a mundane utilitarian purpose: they "participate" in the mechanically monotonous, albeit useful process of picking strawberries. And finally, the third and final phase: Bidlebaum's hands fumble on the floor and pick up bread crumbs — a process devoid of any expediency and functional justification, besides expressing complete loneliness and spiritual depression of the hero.

But the final image seems to split. The logical hopelessness of the context "explodes" from within, is "obscured" by an emotional and plastic mise en scene associated with pleading, hope. The tragic content of the story goes beyond the hopeless, contributing to the "enlightenment of the spirit." Like the fingers of former teacher Wing Bidlebaum, the reader's perception moves "from light to shadow and back."

The specifics of Sh 's stories . Anderson — in their "coding". To grope for the "code", to penetrate beyond the layer of "appearances" means to reach the most intimate in the creative laboratory of the artist. The structural core that organizes the entire narrative is not an event, but a detail that contains a psychological subtext, causing diverse associations that determine the tone of the novel. In the story "Paper Balls" are the knuckles of Dr. Rifi's fingers, resembling gnarled apples. The range of values that the apple joints contain is still limited. An unsightly, even ugly appearance does not detract from or distort the essence of a person in any way. With paper balls — more difficult. What's it? A parody of communication or a welcome way out of loneliness? A form separated from the content (spiritual life) or a part of the inner world of a person? The pieces of paper are filled out during the doctor's trips to the sick (a necessary and basic thing in the life of the hero of the story) and at the same time out of boredom. We do not know what exactly Dr. Rifi writes on them, and how his fixed thoughts "come out" into life (most likely, they do not come out in any way). We only know that these papers, crumpled and forgotten, are in the doctor's pockets.

With them, he, being in a good mood, throws himself at an old friend. So, the particles of the spiritual world (or intellectual life) of a person are doomed to such a "low-prestige" existence?

The key image of the story is ambivalent and should be perceived in the same way as the prayer-dinner in the previous novel. On the one hand, it is an expression of hopelessness, loneliness, closure of the character on himself. On the other hand, the story ends with the information that during the winter the doctor read to his wife everything that he had written on pieces of paper. What had not found a way out into the world before became the property of another person. But only for a very short time: in the fall, Dr. Rifi got married, and in the spring his wife died.

It is no coincidence that the central character of the entire book of short stories is an aspiring reporter named George Willard. By virtue of his profession, he is inherently communicative. He serves as a conduit, absorbing the lives of his fellow townspeople (although not yet creatively processing them) and potentially conveying their spiritual energy. As Mayakovsky wrote, "The street writhes without language," and in the vast expanses of America, Winesburg itself writhes in the throes of a lack of language. The inhabitants of Winesburg were deprived not so much of material wealth as of spiritual richness, particularly the ability to express themselves. Driven by impulses of profound despair, they turn to young George, perhaps unexpectedly even to themselves, hoping that he will articulate their suffering to the world. He becomes their voice, giving a name to their inexpressible torment, which, in contrast to the prevailing chaos of meaninglessness, will reveal the hidden meaning they seek [4. p. 15].

However, at present, George is a completely helpless, naive, somewhat self-satisfied, and self-confident young man who is just beginning to explore the art of writing. He lives with his father and mother, who have inherited a dilapidated hotel ("Mother"). Elizabeth Willard despises her husband Tom, a broad-shouldered, elegant man "with a quick military gait and a black mustache" who is known for his quick temper. To Tom Willard, the house and its mistress seem "like something dying, doomed." He sometimes feels as though the house and the woman are pursuing him. This grotesque of separation and mutual alienation is expressed through familial discord.

In the story "Mother," we encounter another expressive symbol frequently used by Anderson: a room, a house, a hotel, an enclosed space that captivates and oppresses an individual. Even the "big brick house" purchased by banker Hardy for his wife Louise ("Piety") transforms into a cage where she and her son suffocate. "Everything in this world is cluttered with walls," the narrator observes in "The Man in the Case" (from the collection "Horses and Men"). However, in some cases, the enclosed space provides protection and serves as a shelter from the outside world, enabling one to observe the world without being noticed. For example, Elmer Cowley ("The Weirdo") sits "on a box in a roughly constructed wooden shed" and watches what transpires in the editorial office of "The Winesburg Eagle" through a dirty window. Curtis Hartman ("The Strength of God") peeks through a window in the bell tower at a partially undressed teacher. Dr. Percival ("The Thinker") refuses to leave his room even when asked for help. Such is his fear of a world where "everyone...is Christ, and everyone is crucified" [1. p. 46]. Enoch Robinson ("Loneliness") consciously isolates himself within a room, creating his own microcosm of fantasy, which is more agreeable to him than the real world.

A confined space does not always refer to a house, room, or barn. Similarly, a street, a block, or even an entire city, such as Winesburg, can be perceived in the same way. The window in Elizabeth Willard's room overlooks the main street of the town. Mother and son witness daily fights between Abner Groff and pharmacist Sylvester West's cat. "Abner went into a perfect frenzy. The enemy was already gone, and he was still throwing broken bottles, sticks, and even tools of his craft... Meanwhile, the gray cat was holed up in an alley behind broken glass and garbage, over which a

black swarm of flies buzzed. One day, watching Abner's long and fruitless fit of rage alone, Elizabeth covered her face with her narrow white palms and began to cry... This scene reminded her of her own life with amazing clarity" [1. pp. 34-35].

This excerpt from the story "Mother" is highly indicative of Anderson's artistic method in creating socio-psychological narratives. It underscores the importance of shifting the reader's attention to seemingly insignificant, secondary details and everyday scenes. Through these details, the entire lives of the characters are unveiled, and the atmosphere of hopelessness in American provincial life is conveyed. The approach to selecting artistic material and its nuanced details (such as the cat) evokes associations with the short prose of authors like Ernest Hemingway, who often builds entire stories around such vignettes, without explicitly drawing parallels between a character's life and the situation of a hunted cat. In Anderson's story, readers come to understand why "Winesburg is a lifelong cross and a tombstone beneath which their souls are buried" for the writer's characters, while for George Willard, "parting with Winesburg is seen as the first step toward spiritual emancipation, a path unknown to those turned into grotesques by life" [4. p. 14].

In Anderson's works, the existence of money is emblematic but lacks functional significance, as it might in traditional novels or Chekhovian dramas. The famous gun fails to fire in this case. In Anderson's stories, the notorious gun remains silent, and the consciousness that money exists but cannot help either Elizabeth or her son intensifies the heroine's mental crisis. However, it is the exploration of a character's mental state that forms the core of Anderson's storytelling. The inner state, mood, and worldview are "given" to various individuals, whose specific properties and characters may vary, but they all share common states of mental life, making this the central subject of artistic exploration. The titles of the stories themselves, such as "Piety," "Loneliness," "Awakening," "Death," and "Epiphany," convey the themes they explore.

Anderson delves into the theme of the spiritual distress of the average American, redefining the concept of tragedy. At the heart of his works lies the tragedy of everyday life, a tragedy without a conventional tragic resolution. It is not caused by dramatic events that distort a person's life, but rather by the spiritual emptiness of daily existence. This is something that often goes unnoticed, remaining encoded and manifesting itself in the background of the narrative. Metaphorically, it's like the woman thrown off a horse (depicted in the picture), hidden by an elder tree, whose presence is intuited by an old man anxiously looking around as he drives a cart ("Loneliness"). Unfortunately, not every reader of Anderson can "look behind the elder tree" and feel that artistic essence, which serves as "the beginning of everything." The ability to convey the "tragic without tragedy" within the uneventful flow of time, creating a sense of distress, anxiety, and anguish in ordinary everyday situations, will become a hallmark of the artistic talent of writers like F. Scott Fitzgerald, Ernest Hemingway, John Steinbeck, and others.

Erich Fromm argued that man is the only animal for whom his own existence is a problem, a problem that needs to be resolved in the company of fellow beings. Sherwood Anderson was among the first in American literature to express the urgent need for spiritual communication among people and the tragic impossibility of its realization. Familiar gestures, ordinary words that are commonly used, not only lose their communicative function but can also take on altered meanings in the perception of others. For example, Elizabeth Willard searches in vain for meaning "in the noise of words coming from her companions on adventures... what would become a true word for her" [1. p. 162]. Elmer Cowley ("The Weirdo") manages to communicate (although without any reaction) only with the half-witted old man Mook, and Wing Biddlebaum, through his gestures expressing attention and love for children, nearly faces dire consequences.

In Anderson's stories, the best and most attractive aspects of his characters often remain unrealized and unable to find an outlet. The creative essence of their souls, their inner beauty, goes unnoticed and gradually fades away. The idea of the destruction and degradation of beauty in the modern world, as well as the inevitable fate of spiritually gifted and extraordinary individuals, will resound in the works of future American writers such as F. Scott Fitzgerald, William Faulkner, Tennessee Williams, John Updike, and many others.

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