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## Thoughtful Books and Thoughtful Lives: Androgyny and Gender Dynamics in the Works of Sherwood Anderson

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Thoughtful Books and Thoughtful Lives: Androgyny and Gender Dynamics in the Works of  
Sherwood Anderson

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirement  
for the degree of Bachelor of Arts in English from  
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by

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Accepted for Honors

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## Introduction

The first two decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century were times of major change in America. The industrial tide that began at the end of the previous century sparked major urban migration and expansion, extensive developments in technology and corporate production, and a vast growth of factories that turned small communities into bustling business centers and fundamentally changed the economic foundations of the American town. Nowhere did this industrial shift take place more fully or visibly than in Chicago, which grew in population from approximately 300,000 in 1870 to over 1.5 million by the turn of the century. America's "Second City" quickly transformed into one of the largest industrial centers in the world, and writers like Carl Sandburg, Upton Sinclair and Theodore Dreiser depicted this transformation vividly for the American public. Chicago became a literary center during the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, in part because of artists like Sandburg, Sinclair, Edgar Lee Masters and Waldo Frank, and in part because of important new publications like Harriet Monroe's *Poetry* magazine and Margaret Anderson's *The Little Review*, which gave new experimental platforms to the nation's burgeoning modernism.

Sherwood Anderson found his earliest literary success against this cultural backdrop. Best known as a short story writer, as the author of the landmark 1919 short story cycle *Winesburg, Ohio*, and as an early advocate for Ernest Hemingway and William Faulkner, Anderson achieved critical acclaim in his lifetime and remains a significant figure in early American modernism. Gertrude Stein wrote that he was one of only four American writers with "essential intelligence" – placing him among the likes of James Fenimore Cooper, William Dean Howells, and Mark Twain (Prentice-Hall, 86). Hemingway called Anderson "a very great writer"

(Prentice-Hall, 85). Faulkner called him “a giant” and claimed that he wrote “not even for mere truth, but for purity, the exactitude of purity. (Prentice-Hall, 167-70).

Anderson’s position in the modernist community was unique. He started writing professionally when he was 37 years old after a long career in advertising and manufacturing, making him notably older than many of his contemporaries – young aspiring writers like Waldo Frank, Paul Rosenfeld and F. Scott Fitzgerald. Unlike many other writers of his day, Anderson avoided overt political commentary in his writing. His depictions of small town America focused more on the internal lives of people than on their broader social circumstances, which aligned *Winesburg* closer to Masters’ *Spoon River Anthology* than to what Anderson considered the more journalistic style of Sinclair Lewis’s *Main Street*. When Upton Sinclair encouraged Anderson to write more politically-charged material, he rejected the idea, stating that “There is something terrible to me in the thought of the art of writing being bent and twisted to serve the end of propaganda” (*Letters to Bab*, 32).

While apolitical, Anderson’s work still deals with the major social and economic changes of early 20<sup>th</sup> century America – changes that he saw vividly taking place throughout his early life. He was born the third of seven children to Irwin and Emma Anderson and grew up in the small town of Clyde, Ohio. Irwin had trained as a harness-maker, but by the time Sherwood was born he had abandoned his trade due to lack of business and worked primarily as a sign painter, among other odd jobs. More often than not, Anderson’s father was unemployed. At times he would vanish for extended periods and not return home at all, making Emma the core foundation of the family. She took in washing and found what work she could to support her children, but she died young at the age of 42. Anderson would later attribute her death to overwork and exhaustion, and subsequently despised his father as a lazy, selfish man.

Anderson dropped out of school at a young age and began working odd jobs around town, earning the nickname “Jobby” from his neighbors. When a bicycle factory opened up in Clyde several years later – the first factory in town – Anderson took up work on the assembly line. The job was dull and difficult, but it was a more stable form of employment. After his mother’s death, Anderson moved to Chicago seeking better employment opportunities, but ended up moving crates in a warehouse.

A brief tour with the National Guard in the Spanish-American War brought Anderson out of the city and eventually back to school at Springfield, Ohio’s Wittenberg Academy, where he began to discover a talent and passion for writing. He returned to Chicago, this time as an advertising copywriter, and quickly advanced, eventually moving to Elyria, Ohio, with his first wife Cornelia, where he became owner of a small paint factory and president of his own manufacturing and mail-order company. The company ran successfully for several years, but Anderson gradually became frustrated with his chosen career path, finding business increasingly arduous and unfulfilling. At night, after work, he began to write in his room. He completed his first two novels writing this way, *Windy McPherson’s Son* (1916) and *Marching Men* (1917), both of which deal with the emptiness he found working as a factory hand and a businessman. Then on Thanksgiving Day of 1912, Anderson walked out of his office, leaving a cryptic message for his wife, and disappeared for three days before turning up in a drug store in Cleveland, unsure of who he was or how he had arrived there. After a brief hospitalization, he recovered with a new determination to leave his career in business and pursue writing. The Anderson Manufacturing Company soon dissolved, and he returned to Chicago for a third time, this time as an aspiring writer.

This long and complicated history with American industrialism resonates through all of Anderson's major works. He found factory labor dehumanizing and business unfulfilling after years of experience in both, but he also understood that the change to an urban, industrial American landscape was inevitable. Subsequently, his writing primarily deals with how the roles and behavior of American men and women need to change to better fit their new environment. He believed 19<sup>th</sup> century conventions of love, sex, marriage and gender identity were no longer relevant guidelines for Americans to live by because their external circumstances had changed so drastically, and in his writing he sets about questioning how modern men and women might redefine themselves to live more fulfilling lives. Anderson searches in all his writing for "the thing that makes the mature life of men and women in the modern world possible," as he puts it in *Winesburg*, but he never settles on what exactly that "thing" is (136).

Anderson's work is a series of questions and ideas, constantly drawing attention to the shortcomings of 19<sup>th</sup> century gender conventions and offering potentially preferable alternatives, but never committing to any single solution. As some critics have observed, Anderson can fall victim in his writing to the same gender binary he argues against, which can lead to contradictory and at times confused ideas. His awareness of this failing, his occasional return to some aspects of preindustrial gender roles, keeps Anderson from being too definite in his writing. He acknowledges his attachment to outdated gender norms and therefore focuses on raising questions, believing himself unqualified to claim any absolute answers. In one of the *Winesburg* tales, a story about a woman named Louise Bentley, Anderson addresses his aims directly: "Before such women as Louise can be understood and their lives made livable, much will have to be done. Thoughtful books will have to be written and thoughtful lives lived by people about them" (44).

Anderson's intention was to write some of these "thoughtful books," not treatises or manifestos. His opinions on gender evolved over the course of his career, and because he did not ever commit to a definite solution, summarizing a cohesive gender model in his writing is impossible. However, understanding Anderson's questioning style can help clarify the ideas he found most compelling – that a rigid binary view of gender no longer makes sense in modern America, and that a more androgynous understanding of gender identity might be the best alternative to such a binary. Ann Douglas claims that Anderson "pioneered in the ambiguities of racial and gender identity that impelled Toomer, Crane, Hemingway, and many other modern writers" (217). Read through this lens of ambiguous gender identity, and understood as a series of questions, Anderson's work is an important exploration of American gender identity and its connection to mass culture.

### **The Modern Problems of Men and Women**

For Anderson, gender dynamics were inescapably tied to the rise of American industrialism and the proliferation of mass media – the two primary forces of change in America going into the 20<sup>th</sup> century. He believed that these shifts in American culture had inevitable impacts on the way men behaved and important subsequent effects on women as well.

To understand the problems men face in Anderson's writing, it is first necessary to understand the relationship he saw between masculinity and craftsmanship:

Basically, I do believe that the robbing of man of his craft, his touch with tools and materials by modern industry does tend to make him spiritually impotent. I believe that spiritual impotence eventually leads to a physical impotence. This belief is basic in me. The darkness is a darkness of the soul. (*Letters*, 377)

Craft – the act of physical creation – was central to Anderson’s idea of maleness. By replacing manual labor with machinery, industrialism effectively removed the act of creation from the work men did, and Anderson believed they became emasculated as a result.

Some of Anderson’s male characters respond to this emasculating effect of industrialism with defeat and despair. In *Dark Laughter* (1925), protagonist Bruce Dudley works with a man on an assembly line who knows his wife is having an affair with another man while he is at work but never says or does anything to stop it. He races home every day after work, but at the same time he hopes he will not catch her. In *Kit Brandon* (1936), the titular protagonist befriends a thin, sickly man in the factory where she works. He is dying of tuberculosis, and in private with Kit he rages at the industrial system that has made him physically inept:

They had talked of Heaven and he didn’t want Heaven. He wanted to be strong – maybe a baseball player or a prizefighter, not to be always tired and coughing...he stopped talking to curse for a time...sometimes having hemorrhages, he had had several, blood that should have been the blood of a strong young man coming up, out of his body through his throat. (69)

There is a hopelessness in this passage, a feeling that something strong and brave and masculine has been lost to industrialism. But Anderson warns that many men’s response to this loss of traditional masculine qualities is as harmful as the factory work itself. In his 1922 memoir *A Storyteller’s Story*, he describes the effect of industrialism as he observed it while working in the Clyde bicycle factory:

The men seemed everlastingly anxious to assert their manhood, to make it clear to their fellows that they were potent men able to do great deeds in the realms of the flesh and all day I stood beside a little stand-like bench, on which the frame of the bicycle was stuck upside down, tightening nuts and screws and listening to the men, the while I looked from their faces out to the window to the factory walls and the rubbish heap...There were days I worked in that place when I became physically ill and other days when I cursed all the gods of my age that had made men – who in another age might have been farmers, shepherds or craftsmen – these futile fellows, ever more and more loudly proclaiming their potency as they felt the age of impotency asserting itself in their bodies. (199-200)



Anderson believed that men channeled the emasculation of factory work into a pent-up sexual aggression – desperate to prove their manliness as they felt it slipping from them – and that this aggression created new barriers between men and women that did not exist in the pre-industrial world.

Anderson associates this aggressive form of masculinity with industrialization, but he also argues that factory workers are not the only men to embrace it. The rise of mass media, which is closely connected to industrialism for Anderson, induces the same effect on his male characters. He argues that most modern newspapers, magazines, and popular books encourage men to seek “greatness” and material wealth, and that as a result men are no longer satisfied with the humble work of farmers and craftsmen. Like industrialism, mass media leads to men overcompensating, asserting their masculinity through empty boasting, physical displays of strength, and sexual conquest.

Many of the men in Anderson’s stories accept this aggressive form of masculinity as the only way to be a man. Mike McCarthy of *Windy McPherson’s Son* is such a man, boasting to all who will listen of his sexual prowess. Ed Handby, a bartender in *Winesburg, Ohio*, is another. Ed falls in love with a local girl named Belle Carpenter, but even with her he is unable to express himself with anything other than a display of physical strength:

His body ached with physical longing and with his body he expressed himself. Taking the milliner into his arms and holding her tightly in spite of her struggles, he kissed her until she became helpless. Then he brought her back to town and let her out of the buggy. "When I get hold of you again I'll not let you go. You can't play with me," he declared as he turned to drive away. Then, jumping out of the buggy, he gripped her shoulders with his strong hands. "I'll keep you for good the next time," he said. "You might as well make up your mind to that. It's you and me for it and I'm going to have you before I get through." (100)

Belle is in love with Ed as well, but he still feels the need to assert his masculine dominance over her. He stumbles with words and resists emotional openness, preferring to express himself

through aggression – a quality he associates with true maleness. Even his name, Handby, suggests the physical nature of his identity.

For Anderson, this form of maleness – a boastful, sexually aggressive identity – is clearly problematic. Early on in *Winesburg* George Willard, the young newspaper writer who functions as the book's protagonist, tries to realize his own manhood in the same way Ed Handby does – by proving his sexual potency. In “Nobody Knows,” George receives a note from Louise Trunion, a local girl with a reputation for promiscuity, reading “I’m yours if you want me” (27). He goes to her house that night, and the two go for a walk. Having never had sex before, George compensates for his lack of confidence by assuming the behavior he associates with real men – aggression and boldness:

A flood of words burst from George Willard. He remembered the look that had lurked in the girl's eyes when they had met on the streets and thought of the note she had written. Doubt left him. The whispered tales concerning her that had gone about town gave him confidence. He became wholly the male, bold and aggressive. In his heart there was no sympathy for her. "Ah, come on, it'll be all right. There won't be anyone know anything. How can they know?" he urged. (28)

Like Ed, George embraces aggressive behavior in lieu of emotional intimacy. The two have sex, and George believes that he has crossed a threshold into manhood, but the rest of the story suggests that this is not the case. After Louise returns home, George goes to the drugstore to buy a cigar, another act – like sex – of performative masculinity. George plays the role of a man in the story, but he does not really change. The version of maleness he chases is empty and untrue, so at his core he remains a boy.

In the short story “I Want to Know Why,” a man recounts his experience going to the horseraces when he was a boy and seeing his favorite trainer, Jerry Tillford, go to a brothel. The narrator sees the horses as “lovely and clean and full of spunk and honest,” and he assumes the same of the men who train them, but when he sees Tillford sitting with prostitutes and boasting

of his professional accomplishments he realizes that men are ugly, dishonest, and nothing like horses at all (*Certain Things Last*, 11). Horses are a frequent contrast to the corruption of men in Anderson, as Walter Rideout notes:

To Anderson the writer his life as a swipe would also furnish a major symbol or symbol-cluster centered on horses and their racing, a symbol of grace, courage, cleanness, and fidelity to oppose what he saw as the ugliness, noise, dirt, and spiritual corruption of industrialism, a symbol of the life-encouraging to set against that which, because of its inhuman rigidity, denied vitality and destroyed it. (*Vol. 1*, 61)

The title of Anderson's second short story collection, *Horses and Men* (1923), suggests this same dichotomy. While the narrator of "I Want to Know Why" realizes the ugliness of men like Tillford, he ends the story unsure of what to do in response, thus the questioning title.

The other way men often fail in Anderson's writing is by embracing materialistic ambition. Men of power – bankers, factory owners, businessmen – define modern masculinity through greed, ambition, and a desire for power. They try to replace the fulfillment of creation and craftsmanship with fame and financial success, but for Anderson these too are empty pursuits. The "myth of greatness," as he calls it in *Poor White* (1920), is a lie created by industrialism and perpetuated by mass media:

Instead, the giant, Industry, awoke. Boys, who in the schools had read of Lincoln, walking for miles through the forest to borrow his first book, and of Garfield, the towpath lad who became president, began to read in the newspapers and magazines of men who by developing their faculty for getting and keeping money had become suddenly and overwhelmingly rich. Hired writers called these men great, and there was no maturity of mind in the people with which to combat the force of the statement, often repeated. Like children the people believed what they were told. (*Poor White*, 55)

This passage shows the connection Anderson draws between materialism and mass media. He sees modern publications and advertising as insincere writing, used mainly to deceive and corrupt the minds of the public. Anderson asserts that writing can fulfill men's natural desire for

craftsmanship, but the “hired writers” he describes here are only writing for the money, and they are writing lies.

*Poor White* is largely about the corruption of American men by the “myth of greatness.” The protagonist, Hugh McVey, is a simple but imaginative man from a poor background who finds great success as an inventor of machinery. Hugh does not speak much, but he frequently dreams, a symbol in Anderson’s writing of what he calls in *Perhaps Women* (1931) the “imaginative world.” Hugh’s attachment to dreams and imagination grant him creative potential that could deliver him from the empty pursuits of materialism and financial success, but his imagination is quickly coopted by the bankers and businessmen of the town and put to work making them money. Hugh is tricked into signing a contract with Steve Hunter, an aspiring young man who doesn’t realize that “the men he had already begun to think of as great and to try to imitate were like the strange and gigantic protuberances that sometimes grow on the side of unhealthy trees” (41). Hugh’s creative potential is corrupted by the business pursuits of men like Steve, and he ends the book feeling trapped and unfulfilled. He marries the daughter of the town banker because he believes it is what he as a man is supposed to do, but conforming to conventional male behavior does not fulfill him any more than the money he makes. When the novel ends, he still has not found a concrete solution.

In *Dark Laughter*, the difference between ambitious and imaginative men is shown in the love triangle between Bruce Dudley, Aline Grey, and her husband Fred. Bruce works for a newspaper in Chicago until he gets frustrated with the hollowness of everything he writes. He considers becoming an artist of some kind, but even that is too definite, so he spends his days thinking and daydreaming, staying clear of any material ambition. Fred Grey, on the other hand, owns the factory Bruce later works in. He spends his time talking to advertising men about

national campaigns and corporate expansion, believing such things will bring him happiness. In the end, Aline leaves Fred to run away with Bruce, the father of her unborn child, representing the bankrupt philosophy of men who buy in to the new mass culture of materialism.

In *Winesburg*, this modern male material ambition manifests in Jesse Bentley, an old farmer who becomes obsessed with expanding his wealth and land, even considering abandoning farming altogether to start manufacturing farm equipment instead. At the beginning of “Godliness,” the four-part story that follows the life of Jesse and his daughter Louise, Anderson writes a kind of manifesto explaining the dilemma of men like Jesse and the circumstances that have made them so common:

It will perhaps be difficult for the men and women of a later day to understand Jesse Bentley. In the last fifty years a vast change has taken place in the lives of our people. A revolution has in fact taken place. The coming of industrialism, attended by all the roar and rattle of affairs, the shrill cries of millions of new voices that have come among us from over seas, the going and coming of trains, the growth of cities, the building of the interurban car lines that weave in and out of towns and past farmhouses, and now in these later days the coming of the automobiles has worked a tremendous change in the lives and in the habits of thought of our people of Mid-America. Books, badly imagined and written though they may be in the hurry of our times, are in every household, magazines circulate by the millions of copies, newspapers are everywhere. In our day, a farmer standing by the stove in the store in his village has his mind filled to overflowing with the words of other men. The newspapers and the magazines have pumped him full. Much of the old brutal ignorance that had in it also a kind of beautiful childlike innocence is gone forever. The farmer by the stove is brother to the men of the cities, and if you listen you will find him talking as glibly and as senselessly as the best city man of us all. (34)

The contrast Anderson outlines here involves both class and time – the small town farmer, untouched by mass media and large-scale material ambition, and the city man, racing to become a cog in the new American industrial machine. These two archetypes are divided socially between the rural and the urban, but also temporally, between preindustrial and postindustrial America. But now, as evidenced by Jesse Bentley, these divisions have broken down.

Industrialization brings the city to the town, and with it, all the corruption of materialism and mass media. In the process, the “kind of beautiful childlike innocence” of rural life is lost.

Jesse’s blind ambition molds him into a hard, brutal man. When his wife dies after giving birth to their daughter, the town blames him for working her too hard, even during her pregnancy. That daughter, Louise Bentley, lives a bleak childhood because her father rejects her, having wished for a boy to perpetuate the empire he is building. Because Jesse associates his material ambition with maleness, a daughter is of no use to him or his aspirations. He compares himself to Abraham and other men of the Old Testament, believing himself to be another such man chosen by God to take dominion over the Earth, but he needs a son to continue his legacy. Louise eventually moves to town and marries a local banker – a manifestation of the only masculinity she has experienced in her life – and Jesse turns all his attention to his new son-in-law instead, urging him to take advantage of the new postindustrial opportunities to acquire wealth and power:

The beginning of the most materialistic age in the history of the world, when wars would be fought without patriotism, when men would forget God and only pay attention to moral standards, when the will to power would replace the will to serve and beauty would be well-nigh forgotten in the terrible headlong rush of mankind toward the acquiring of possessions, was telling its story to Jesse the man of God as it was to the men about him. The greedy thing in him wanted to make money faster than it could be made by tilling the land. More than once he went into Winesburg to talk with his son-in-law John Hardy about it. “You are a banker and you will have chances I never had,” he said and his eyes shone. “I am thinking about it all the time. Big things are going to be done in the country and there will be more money to be made than I ever dreamed of. You get into it. I wish I were younger and had your chance.” (40)

This fixation is what makes Jesse Bentley a “grotesque,” Anderson’s word in *Winesburg* for people who make individual “truths” definite and live their lives by them. Just like George Willard’s nervous desire to lose his virginity and Ed Handby’s sexual aggression, the blind ambition of men like Steve Hunter and Jesse Bentley is linked in Anderson’s work to an

emasculated and ultimately false definition of manhood. Men who succumb to these falsehoods cannot escape their feelings of emasculation and insufficiency, nor can they achieve any real emotional intimacy. These corrupted definitions of masculinity, be they focused on physical strength or material wealth, do not satisfy the men who pursue them, and they directly affect the women who get caught up in their lives.

The women in Anderson's writing often suffer directly because of these shortcomings in modern men. Male obsession with sex, for instance, inhibits many men from responding to women on the emotional level that would foster relationships of mutual understanding. This can be seen clearly in the story of Jesse's daughter Louise, which Anderson describes as "a story of misunderstanding" (43). Louise spends her early childhood on her father's farm outside of town, "a silent, moody child, wanting love more than anything else in the world and not getting it" (44). At age fifteen, Jesse sends her into Winesburg to live in the house of Albert Hardy, a local businessman, so that she can go to school. She finds herself drawn to Albert's son John, believing that "in him might be found the quality she had all her life been seeking in people" (46). Louise desperately wants the love she never received from her father, but she does not understand how to get it. Then one night she accidentally overhears an encounter in the parlor between one of John's sisters and a young man:

For an hour Louise sat on the floor in the darkness and listened. Without words Mary Hardy, with the aid of the man who had come to spend the evening with her, brought to the country girl a knowledge of men and women. Putting her head down until she was curled into a little ball she lay perfectly still. It seemed to her that by some strange impulse of the gods, a great gift had been brought to Mary Hardy and she could not understand the older woman's determined protest. (49)

This encounter mirrors the relationship between Ed Handby and Belle Carpenter – a man misinterpreting a woman's desire for emotional intimacy as a desire for sex. Because Louise's only prior experience with men is with a father who rejected her, she mistakes this sexual

experience for the emotional connection she has been looking for. She writes a note to John afterwards, telling him what she believes she wants, but because of her misunderstanding, and because John is a modern man, their relationship is doomed from the start:

Louise Bentley took John Hardy to be her lover. That was not what she wanted but it was so the young man had interpreted her approach to him, and so anxious was she to achieve something else that she made no resistance. When after a few months they were both afraid that she was about to become a mother, they went one evening to the county seat and were married...All during the first year Louise tried to make her husband understand the vague and intangible hunger that had led to the writing of the note and that was still unsatisfied. Again and again she crept into his arms and tried to talk of it, but always without success. Filled with his own notions of love between men and women, he did not listen but began to kiss her upon the lips. That confused her so that in the end she did not want to be kissed. She did not know what she wanted. (49)

The substitution of sex for emotional intimacy is one of the main barriers between men and women in Anderson's fiction, and it is a direct result of the false definitions of masculinity encouraged by industrialism and mass media. This imbalance only exacerbates gender inequality by perpetuating a binary of male dominance and female submission. Appropriately, Louise Bentley's chapter in the "Godliness" saga is titled "Surrender."

One of Anderson's most famous short stories, "Death in the Woods," deals directly with the subjugation of women by aggressive, dominant men. In it, an old woman lives outside of a small town with her husband and adult son. The narrator, who lived in the town as a boy, describes how as a girl the old woman worked for a German farmer who tried several times to rape her. Unable to escape on her own, the woman runs off with a farmhand who she has only known for a day, and who himself turns out to be a brute and a horse thief after she marries him. Their son grows up no better than his father, and the woman lives out an exhausting life cooking, cleaning, and taking care of the animals. One snowy day, walking home from the butcher shop in town, she decides to take a shortcut through the woods, worried that otherwise she will not get home in time to feed the farm animals and get dinner ready for her husband and son.



She quickly becomes tired however, worn down from the weight of her pack, so she sits down in a clearing to rest, falls asleep, and freezes to death. A man from town stumbles across her body some hours later and a group of people come to see what has happened, the young narrator among them. Telling the story as an adult, he reflects that the woman's grim death was the natural end to a life of servitude: "The woman who died was one destined to feed animal life. Anyway, that is all she ever did... On the night when she died she was hurrying homeward, bearing on her body food for animal life" (159). Despite this claim, the narrator remains confused by the story. He tells it to figure out why it had such a profound effect on him as a boy, but he still seems unsure when the story is over.

"Death in the Woods" paints a vivid picture of patriarchal oppression and aggressive masculinity. While the main problem for Anderson's men is emasculation, the main problem his women face is powerlessness in the face of patriarchy. The critical responses to this theme of gender inequality in Anderson's writing are contentious however. Some feminist critics have denounced Anderson's version of female victimhood for actually supporting a status quo of gender binary and inequality. Joyce Ladenson argues that Anderson's work is "muddied by a heavy-handed, male-oriented bias... The male is omnipotent; his needs must be met, and his vision clarified. The better the woman can help him renew himself, the more admirable she is in the novel" (91). In "Death in the Woods" for instance, the woman's story is told with great sympathy, but it is told and interpreted by a man. Claire Colquitt argues that by making the woman's dead body an object for the narrator and the other men of the town to observe, Anderson robs her of agency in her own story. In *Winesburg*, George Willard's coming-of-age is built around a series of interactions with various women, all of whom awake in him some important realization, but most of whom remain stuck in powerless circumstances. Ladenson

argues that it is necessary for women in Anderson's fiction to be victimized so that they can help men in this way – men who will eventually, theoretically, become their saviors.

If women have no power to emancipate themselves and must wait for men to make things better for them, the power imbalance still persists. Patriarchy and gender inequality were core tenets of American social code long before industrialization, as were male strength, female servitude, and a clear gender binary. If women only exist in Anderson's work to help men escape emasculation, as Ladenson argues, his writing is not a rejection of 19<sup>th</sup> century gender conventions at all, but rather a call for new expressions of male strength. Marilyn Judith Atlas also argues this point, writing that Anderson "allowed neither Kate Swift nor any of the other women in Winesburg the escape that he hinted was possible for George Willard" (*Critical Essays*, 250).

Other critics too argue that Anderson only uses female characters to support, teach, heal or enlighten his male characters, always in a subservient way. William Etter, for instance, argues that the women of Winesburg only exist to help the men they meet:

Because women in the text only serve as the negative pole of the "incitement to discourse" at the core of the text's dynamics of repression and expression, we should not be surprised to realize that the tales purporting to be "concerning" female characters in Winesburg, Ohio are not about women at all but examinations into their impact on: the development of male desires ("Mother"), the psychosocial dynamics involved with their being objects of male desire ("Nobody Knows"), their use as a vehicle for allowing unfulfilled male desires to come to the fore and be narrated ("Tandy"), their role as subject of consideration in the burgeoning male artist's struggle to understand his world ("The Teacher"), or the misguided adolescent's developing sense of his own masculinity ("An Awakening"). (Brill, 95)

Etter's reading clearly outlines the male as subject and female as object in Anderson's fiction; that by having women help men escape their insecurities and redefine themselves, Anderson perpetuates a patriarchal power dynamic. Still other critics assert that because the men in Anderson's fiction are often cruel and aggressive, he glorifies female victimhood by using

women to teach them and creates a kind of female martyr stereotype. Nancy Bunge argues that “although Anderson recommends that women continue trying to make contact with men, he offers them little motivation. They can expect to find disappointment and even malice” (*Critical Essays*, 245). However, all of these arguments assume that Anderson believed female subjugation was a necessary part of restoring healthy gender dynamics. Anderson’s fiction should instead be read more as depictions of what is wrong with gender relations and tentative – never definitive – suggestions for how to fix them.

### **How Things Are, and How They Could Be**

It is true that women are the primary agents of revelation and change in Anderson’s fiction. As Bunge argues, comparing Anderson to other writers of the time, “Because men are more completely assimilated into the competitive, materialistic society Dreiser, Anderson, and Lewis find offensive, those characters who fight against stagnation are frequently women” (46). An important difference between Anderson and Sinclair Lewis, however, is the level of analysis when writing about gender. Lewis’s *Main Street*, another book about small town Middle America published a year after *Winesburg*, presents the patriarchal oppression of women in a relatively direct way. The protagonist, Carol Milford, is an educated woman from the city who works as a librarian. She marries a doctor from the small town of Gopher Prairie, moves there with him, and slowly becomes frustrated with the dullness of small town life. She hates having to ask her husband for money and feeling like a servant, that she has no meaningful work to do, and that the other women in town have nothing better to do than gossip. Towards the end of the book Carol runs away to Washington D.C. where she befriends a group of feminist activists, returning to Gopher Prairie at the end with a dedication to become a positive force for change.

*Main Street* comments on the problems of American gender roles in a very broad and direct way. In many ways, the novel is a treatise on what Lewis thinks must be done to fix them. When read the same way, *Winesburg* is less progressive – its women do not run away to Washington, nor do they talk about feminism. Some of them are trapped and never escape, but that is not because Anderson believes they should be. His hesitation to propose concrete solutions to social problems means that he rarely writes about what needs to be done. He mostly writes about what is wrong, not how to fix it. Critics such as Bunge and Atlas accuse Anderson of using women as martyrs in his stories to prop up the male protagonists, but he never endorses their suffering as a positive thing.

Kate Swift, one of the primary female characters in *Winesburg, Ohio*, reflects Anderson's aim to sympathetically and accurately depict the oppression of women under conventional gender roles. Kate is unmarried and works as a schoolteacher. In her youth she lived a more adventurous life, but now she walks the streets at night, lonely. One day she approaches George Willard at work in the Winesburg newspaper office and tries to give him advice about his writing:

The school teacher tried to bring home to the mind of the boy some conception of the difficulties he would have to face as a writer. "You will have to know life," she declared, and her voice trembled with earnestness. She took hold of George Willard's shoulders and turned him about so that she could look into his eyes. A passer-by might have thought them about to embrace. "If you are to become a writer you'll have to stop fooling with words," she explained. "It would be better to give up the notion of writing until you are better prepared. Now it's time to be living. I don't want to frighten you, but I would like to make you understand the import of what you think of attempting. You must not become a mere peddler of words. The thing to learn is to know what people are thinking about, not what they say." (97)

Kate understands the danger of mass media writing, and she urges George to avoid that kind of work. As his former teacher, she sees a promise in him that she does not want to be corrupted. George interprets this intimate appeal as a sexual invitation, and the two share a moment of taut

sexual tension. In the adjacent, associated story, local pastor Curtis Hartman discovers that he can see into Kate's bedroom through a hole in the church steeple window. He spies on her lying naked in bed and later berates himself for giving into his voyeurism, but he returns one more night, determined not to look and thereby prove his resolve. He ends up smashing the window so that it must be repaired and praising Kate for testing his faith and bringing him closer to God.

A reading of Anderson's women as martyrs interprets both of these scenes the same way. Belinda Bruner argues that Kate's "readiness to teach" defines her character, and that Anderson uses her to enlighten the two men – George consensually, and Hartman without her even knowing. Bruner also argues that Kate's sexuality is a central part of her role as a teacher, since the sexual implication to George is what opens him up to her words, and her physical beauty is what resolves Hartman's spiritual crisis. In both of these ways, Bruner argues, Kate's feminine sexuality is objectified to facilitate the emotional or spiritual growth of men, while she herself gains nothing.

This reading parallels the views of Atlas and Bunge. The "problem" is male insecurity, the "solution" is the enlightenment of men, and the method is female objectification and subservience. This is, however, an incomplete understanding of Kate's relationship to both men. In the case of George, the sexual nature of her communication comes from a misunderstanding between them. George misinterprets Kate's emotional intimacy for sexual desire, and she, momentarily caught off-guard by her own loneliness, does not immediately rebuff him:

As he turned to go she spoke his name softly and with an impulsive movement took hold of his hand. Because the reporter was rapidly becoming a man something of his man's appeal, combined with the winsomeness of the boy, stirred the heart of the lonely woman. A passionate desire to have him understand the import of life, to learn to interpret it truly and honestly, swept over her. Leaning forward, her lips brushed his cheek. At the same moment he for the first time became aware of the marked beauty of her features. They were both embarrassed, and to relieve her feeling she became harsh and domineering.

“What’s the use? It will be ten years before you begin to understand what I mean when I talk to you,” she cried passionately. (97)

Kate’s sexuality and physicality are not assets to George’s learning, but distractions from them. Like Tom Hardy and Ed Handby, he confuses emotional and sexual intimacy. Kate, wanting to be close to someone as well, does the same. Bruner argues that Hartman also benefits from his objectification of Kate, but this is not the case either. When he smashes the window at the end of the story, he has not come to terms with his sexual desires or his emotions any more than he was at the beginning of the story. Like most of *Winesburg’s* characters, Hartman is a grotesque. His singular truth, the sacredness of sex, remains an obsession through the end of the story, and he remains stuck in a passionless marriage. This does not make Kate a martyr, nor does it make her objectification a positive tool or solution in any way. She becomes an unwitting victim of male misunderstanding and sexual desire, not because Anderson believes this is what should happen, but because he believes it is an important problem to illustrate.

This same principle can be applied to much of Anderson’s writing. The forced subordination of women in support of male actualization that some critics observe can also be read as his depiction of the plight of women, and a sympathy for their lack of power. Atlas argues that Anderson “needed to make women simpler than they are and when angry, or frustrated, or afraid, he easily moved into traditional, and safe, categories” (*Critical Essays*, 254). From this perspective, Anderson is a writer who accepts a patriarchal status quo, celebrates the superior discursive and creative potential of men, and believes women should be subordinate. But this is a reductive reading of Anderson’s work, and it ignores his attempts in his fiction and nonfiction to address the power imbalance of American gender dynamics.

There is a distinction to be made in the male behavior Anderson condones. Etter argues that “discourse” is the natural method of masculine expression and growth in Anderson’s fiction

– that men need to explain things to understand them and change. He cites numerous instances in *Winesburg* where men talk to women – who all listen quietly – and he argues that these moments are instances of male growth. However, in most of these cases, the men do not learn anything at all. Their discourse is just another performative quality they associate with their false definition of masculinity.

At multiple times in *Winesburg*, George launches into verbosity toward women. He does it to Louise Trunnion before his first sexual experience, and again in “An Awakening” during his date with Belle Carpenter. In both cases, George takes on the external qualities of men whom he believes express true masculinity. But George does not reflect Anderson’s model of real manhood until “Sophistication,” the cycle’s penultimate story, when he goes out walking with Helen White, the banker’s daughter:

It was so they went down the hill. In the darkness they played like two splendid young things in a young world. Once, running swiftly forward, Helen tripped George and he fell. He squirmed and shouted. Shaking with laughter, he rolled down the hill. Helen ran after him. For just a moment she stopped in the darkness. There was no way of knowing what woman’s thoughts went through her mind but, when the bottom of the hill was reached and she came up to the boy, she took his arm and walked beside him in dignified silence. For some reason they could not have explained they had both got from their silent evening together the thing needed. Man or boy, woman or girl, they had for a moment taken hold of the thing that makes the mature life of men and women in the modern world possible. (150)

The silence of this scene is so important that Anderson repeats it multiple times. In this moment, a rare instance of true understanding between men and women in the book, and a coming-of-age experience for both characters, neither says anything. This is because the discourse that Etter argues is essential for Anderson’s men is just another form of hollow posturing. “Talking glibly” as Jesse Bentley and Ed Handby do is not Anderson’s masculine ideal, but rather another symptom of false masculinity that his fiction and nonfiction seek to expose. As Sally Adair Rigsbee writes, “despite their youth and inexperience, [George and Helen] momentarily share a

relationship that is trusting and reciprocal, for in [them], Anderson creates characters who are free of sexual role expectations” (241).

Arguments that Anderson accepts 19<sup>th</sup> century gender conventions rely on the assumption that he endorses the submissiveness of his female characters and the dominance of his male characters. Such an assumption does not sufficiently recognize that Anderson depicts aggression and boastfulness as corrupt, falsely masculine qualities, that he acknowledges his own inevitable heritage of 19<sup>th</sup> century gender conventions, or that his writing is meant to depict problems, not definite solutions. If Anderson were endorsing more traditional gender behavior, the characters exhibiting such behavior in his stories would find successful relationships, but the vast majority of Anderson’s male-female relationships end poorly. As David T. Humphries argues:

In *Winesburg*, the repeated failure of individual fantasies calls attention to the underlying collective belief in the continued functioning of gender relations within a framework defined by male dominance and the regulating power of marriage and conventional language. This repeated failure reveals the radical falsity of this collective fantasy and opens up possibilities for imagining a more meaningful community into existence. In other words, the quality of community that is supposedly lost is in fact only emerging through these representations of failed language and failed sexual norms. (60)

Humphries challenges the idea that industrialism and mass media alone create problems between men and women in Anderson’s work, arguing that nothing in *Winesburg* supports the idea that preindustrial gender roles were ideal either. Since *Winesburg* itself is a pre-industrial town, most of the gender conflict cannot be attributed to the emasculation of factory labor. Jesse Bentley is corrupted by a capitalist drive for wealth and physical power, and the city remains an alluring escape for several of the book’s young men, but most of the relationships in *Winesburg* are majorly untouched by the effects of industrialization. Anderson commentators who see his female characters as endorsements of a 19<sup>th</sup> century gender status quo often argue that he shows a strong nostalgia for rural America that includes traditional gender roles, but this does not



account for the numerous problems faced by the citizens of Winesburg, or the grim fate of the woman in “Death in the Woods.” This discrepancy suggests that for Anderson, relationships between men and women were problematic before industrialism took root in America, and that the rise of factories and mass media have only exacerbated the problem.

Anderson constantly challenges traditional gender conventions like marriage, sex, virginity and love, perhaps nowhere more so than in his most controversial novel, *Many Marriages* (1923). The protagonist, John Webster, owns a washing machine factory in a small Midwestern town, but one day he becomes frustrated with the monotony of his life and the stiffness of his marriage to his wife, Mary. He begins to slip into frequent daydreams, imagining that he could be “married” to every person he meets, just by sharing a brief emotional connection with them. This idea becomes so overpowering that he eventually decides to abandon his factory and his family to begin a new life elsewhere with his secretary, Natalie.

Throughout the novel, Anderson tries to redefine some of the traditional language of gender identity – marriage, love, virginity, sex. Webster’s imagination of his many possible “marriages” contrasts sharply with his stale, unloving relationship with Mary. He compares Natalie to the Virgin Mary, but the narrator also clarifies in this process of redefining terms that she is not a virgin in the sexual sense – rather, her perspective on sex and love is what makes her “pure,” a perspective that Webster believes could facilitate healthier relationships between men and women:

Men and women tried to go within one another’s bodies, were at times almost insanely anxious to do it. That was called making love. He wondered if a time might come when men and women did that quite freely. It was difficult to try to think one’s way through such a tangle of thoughts. (15-6)

Anderson tries to separate the language of “making love” from the act of physical sex, and by doing so, to redefine the former and destigmatize the latter. In the novel’s most infamous scene,

Anderson uses this language to describe Webster's feelings when urging his seventeen year old daughter to abandon traditional ideas of sex and love:

His voice had grown soft and reminiscent and he took his hand from his daughter's leg and touched her cheeks and then her hair. He was frankly making love to her now and she had somewhat fallen under his influence. He reached down and taking one of her hands held it tightly. (102)

Before this moment, Webster waits in his room, naked, for his wife and daughter to come to him. He knows they will because he has been disappearing into his room like this every night for weeks, where he stares at his naked body in an attempt to understand it as a simple, natural thing, without all of the cultural connotations of sex and masculinity. This goal is poorly articulated by Webster, however, as he does not fully understand what he is trying to do or how to do it. He simply understands that what he has been lead to believe about sex and marriage is wrong, and he wants the opportunity to share this knowledge with his daughter Jane. Eventually, the two women do confront him, at which point he tries for roughly half of the novel to explain what he thinks he has learned.

Because Webster's language is so vague and questioning, the scene fails dramatically, dissolving into a vague and overextended set of incomplete thoughts. At times it reads like a father spurning his wife and becoming sexually attracted to his teenage daughter. The novel was almost universally panned as baffling and obscene and is commonly judged as one of Anderson's weakest books. But while Anderson fails to execute this important, central scene successfully, *Many Marriages* remains a fascinating attempt at breaking down common language around sex, love and marriage. For Anderson, language can easily become a trap when it defines behavior and convention. The indefinite nature of his writing here is in large part meant to avoid this trap. By having Webster explain his new perspective on these things to his daughter, Anderson

attempts to remove all sexual connotations from phrases like “making love” and to redefine them apart from the power imbalance inherent to late 19<sup>th</sup> century gender roles.

This attempt is complicated, however, by the fact that most of the book’s female characters are relatively passive. Throughout the novel, Mary is characterized as someone with no hope or desire to change. The two married originally because once, in their youth, they accidentally saw each other naked. Mutually ashamed, they decide marriage is the only ethical course of action, but their relationship quickly becomes cold and loveless, with both merely going through the motions of a conventional husband and wife. Webster overcomes this trap of convention over the course of the book, but he does not give Mary the chance. Whatever she has lost, as Webster sees it, cannot be regained. After John leaves, she kills herself with poison while Jane sits in the next room, pondering her father’s advice and doing nothing to save her mother’s life.

Natalie too is a very passive party to the events of the novel. She almost never speaks, but rather acts as a receptor for John’s realizations. This parallels Etter’s claim that Anderson’s women exist mainly to receive male discourse and is further supported by the fact that roughly half of the novel is spent on the single scene where John explains his realizations to Mary and Jane. While ideas like free love, emotional openness and less adherence to a gender binary in marriage should in theory be beneficial for women, *Many Marriages* shows a man learning these things, explaining them, and benefitting from them while his wife dies, his mistress watches and his daughter is left parentless. This all seems to endorse Bunge’s argument for a pattern of female subjugation and male dominance in Anderson’s work.

However, the opening of the novel suggests another way to consider its treatment of gender and the role of women:

There was a man named Webster lived in a town of twenty-five thousand in the state of Wisconsin. He had a wife named Mary and a daughter named Jane and he was himself a fairly prosperous manufacturer of washing machines. When the thing happened of which I am about to write he was about thirty-seven or eight years old and his one child, the daughter, was seventeen. Of the details of his life up to the time a certain revolution happened within him it will be unnecessary to speak. He was however a rather quiet man inclined to have dreams which he tried to crush out of himself in order that he function as a washing machine manufacturer; and no doubt, in odd moments, when he was on a train going some place or perhaps on Sunday afternoons in the summer when he went alone to the deserted office of the factory and sat several hours looking out at a window and along a railroad track, he gave way to dreams. (3)

This introduction is structured like the beginning of a fairy tale. The ordinary names of the story's central characters – John, Mary, Jane – make them appear like American stock characters, and Webster's own age is not mentioned. Benjamin Spencer looks at the full scope of Anderson's career as an attempt at capturing in prose the mythical quality that governs many American narratives. Spencer argues that the "myth of American loneliness," his phrase for the emotional distance between Anderson's characters, is at the root of his fiction, and that this mythical quality is why Anderson often writes more about what he sees as the spirit of American experience than literal stories.

Spencer's point invites an alternative reading of *Many Marriages*. If the story is not direct realism, and the characters are symbols for what Anderson perceives to be the American experience, the events of the novel should not be interpreted in merely literal terms. Spencer argues that *Many Marriages* represents a breakdown in Anderson's mythopoetic style, so successful in *Winesburg, Ohio*. For him, the literal story in *Many Marriages* becomes secondary to the "mythic" aspect of Anderson's perceived America:

The earlier mythopoeic imagination has become bifurcated into myth and poetry; the validity of the myth is not felt, and the poetry is an act of will rather than of imagination. In this bifurcation and desiccation one may no doubt find much of the explanation for Anderson's decline in his later years... In probing for the "essence" [of American life] he ran the romantic risk of neglecting the existential substance of American experience, and

hence one may feel, as Lionel Trilling has asserted, a deficiency of the sensory and concrete in his work. (16-7)

Read this way, Mary Webster becomes a symbol of the sexual anxiety and restrictive gender conventions of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and her death becomes symbolic of a move to freer, healthier relationships between men and women. Even though Webster escapes the town with Natalie, he remains uncertain of his future. He loves Natalie at the moment, but his new belief in “many marriages” means that she likely will not be a full answer to his questions, nor will he be to hers. When they leave town, he wonders what will end up happening to them both. The real hope lies in Jane, who has the opportunity to move past outdated gender conventions because she has seen their tragic effects on her parents’ marriage and become more thoughtful after hearing her father’s advice. When Webster leaves, he urges Katherine, the family servant, to look after Jane in his absence. Katherine, like Natalie, shares Webster’s more open view on gender roles, and the image of her and Jane sitting together in the empty house suggests a hopeful future for the two women. But in true Anderson fashion, he refrains from showing exactly what that future will hold.

In *Dark Laughter*, Anderson’s next novel after *Many Marriages* and his only bestseller, he tells much the same story, but this time with the woman making the escape. Like John Webster, Fred Grey owns a factory in a small town. Unlike Webster, he fully accepts the American myth of material success, and spends most of his time figuring out how to expand his company. His wife Aline is not interested in such things. She is an artist, and aware of the corrupting effects of mass media, having witnessed a pair of fellow painters give up pure art to create overpriced portraits of the rich and powerful. Disillusioned with her husband’s work, she becomes interested in her gardener, Bruce Dudley, who previously worked in her husband’s factory.

Bruce too understands the corrupting effects of mass culture. Previously he lived in Chicago where he worked as a newspaper writer with his wife, Bernice, but he began to feel the work they did was hollow and meaningless, meant only to arouse readers and make money. He becomes particularly frustrated when Bernice begins writing a short story about a man who falls in love with a department store manikin – a story that reinforces corrupt gender conventions. The story is like the newspaper work – meant only to sell. After he leaves the city, Bruce admires the African American workers he encounters in town for living lives free from mass culture – an aspect of the novel appropriately noted as problematic and primitivistic by Jean Toomer and other critics.

When Bruce and Aline meet, there is an instant attraction between the two, based on their shared knowledge that something in the modern American lifestyle is fundamentally wrong. One day, when Fred is out, Bruce and Aline have sex and Aline becomes pregnant with his child – something that had never happened with Fred despite their many attempts. After deceiving Fred for some time about the baby's father, Aline eventually tells him the truth and leaves town with Bruce. Fred Grey and Beatrice remain stuck in their pursuit of success, and Bruce and Aline's future – like that of Webster and Natalie – is open but unclear. Like Jane in *Many Marriages*, the unborn child represents the potential for a better future, if the next generation rejects mass culture and false ideas of gender and identity.

Children more often are the most hopeful characters in Anderson's writing because he believes that they are the only ones detached enough from gender convention and mass culture to escape their traps. Elizabeth Willard puts her hopes in George, John Webster in Jane, Bruce and Aline in their unborn baby. In "Tandy," one of the *Winesburg* tales, a stranger urges a young girl to be stronger than the men and women of his generation: "'There is a woman coming,' he said,

and his voice was now sharp and earnest. I have missed her, you see. She did not come in my time. You may be that woman”” (79). Joyce Ladenson argues that this reliance on children in Anderson’s work to solve the problems of the present still perpetuates 19<sup>th</sup> century gender roles because it makes motherhood the only option for women to make a better future. However, her argument suggests that all maternity in Anderson is written in a positive light, and that women in his fiction and nonfiction are unable to escape oppression outside of motherhood, neither of which are accurate.

Bruce and Aline’s relationship is hopeful because it is equitable. They do not enter a traditional marriage dynamic or assume 19<sup>th</sup> century gender roles to relate to one another. This is an exception to most male/female relationships in Anderson, which generally rob the involved parties – especially the women – of independence and emotional fulfillment. *Poor White*, for instance, follows the story of two primary characters – the quiet inventor Hugh McVey, and Clara Butterworth, daughter of the town banker in Bidwell – both of whom seem likely throughout most of the novel to escape the traps of mass culture and material ambition. Hugh’s inventions come from a strong creative potential and a tendency to focus more on dreams than more practical matters like money and success. Clara leaves Bidwell to attend college in Columbus, where she befriends Kate Chancellor, a lesbian who wants to become a doctor. Kate warns Clara that modern men are too fixated on sex to give her what she wants emotionally, and that instead she should try to achieve independence from men. Clara takes this advice to heart and rejects multiple suitors in the city who only want her to become a housewife and a mother to their children.

However, in the end, both Clara and Hugh fail to escape gender expectations. Clara returns home to Bidwell with Kate’s advice in mind, but she soon begins feeling lonely and

unfulfilled. As a woman, there is no work for her to do, no path that offers any real future, other than marrying and starting her family, which her father urges her to do – even attempting to select a husband for her, who turns out to be a con man. Recognizing something in Hugh that is different from the other men in town, Clara asks him to marry her, and he agrees, believing marriage will give him the emotional fulfillment he has been searching for his whole life. The marriage is not a happy one, however. Clara and Hugh struggle to communicate because they keep trying to fit into traditional gender roles of husband and wife. Hugh loses sight of his creative drive and becomes increasingly overwhelmed by the business side of his work.

Eventually Clara becomes pregnant, but there is no hope in this ending:

For perhaps ten minutes Clara and Hugh stood by the fence. The disease of thinking that was making Hugh useless for the work of his age had swept away many old things within him and he was not self-conscious in the presence of his woman...For some reason, perhaps to announce a shift in crews, the factories of Bidwell that were engaged in night work set up a great whistling and screaming. The sound ran up the hillside and rang in the ears of Hugh as, with his arm about Clara's shoulders, he went up the steps and in at the farmhouse door. (371)

This noise, “shrill and intense,” is described as “greetings perhaps to an unborn Hugh McVey” (371). If this child is heralded by the aggressive sounds of factory work, there is little hope attached to its future. Despite the pregnancy, *Poor White* has one of the grimmest endings of all of Anderson's novels.

Other times in Anderson, women find success by avoiding motherhood entirely, as is the case with Kit Brandon, the titular protagonist of Anderson's final novel. Raised in an Appalachian mountain family, Kit flees her home as a young woman because she becomes frightened of her father's aggressive nature and possible sexual advances, and she winds up moving from town to town finding work in the textile mills. This initial transition alone establishes Kit as an active agent against oppressive gender norms because while most of the



mill girls are sent to work by their fathers, Kit flees her father and seeks her own financial independence. As she herself realizes, “my fight in life is going to be with men, not with other women” (158).

Kit eventually falls in with a local rum-running gang after marrying the son of its leader and becomes one of the organization’s best drivers. Her husband, a large, muscular, stupid man, is incapable of bringing her any real emotional satisfaction. Instead, she finds purpose in her work – driving cars and running from the law. In many ways the novel is a standard crime narrative, detailing the ins and outs of the bootlegging trade. But by being a woman at the center of the action and becoming the best driver in the gang, Kit challenges the male power structure. Her professional success suggests that women may be better off finding independence than aligning with men at all, and the fact that she can only find this independence working outside the law emphasizes how countercultural her behavior is.

Kit is contrasted throughout the novel with Tom Halsey, her father-in-law and head of the rum-running business. Tom approves of Kit’s marriage to his son, Gordon, because he believes she will bear strong children and secure the longevity of his success. Like Jesse Bentley, Tom is obsessed with the idea of greatness. He compares himself to industry leaders like Carnegie and Rockefeller, and he wants his legacy to last beyond his death. Kit, however, has no interest in being a part of this legacy, and she refuses to sleep with Gordon after their marriage. When Tom learns about this, she urges him to use her instead as a driver in his operation, and he agrees. By rejecting the pressure of motherhood, Kit finds fulfillment and independence in her work. Her car is also a major symbol for modernity in the book. Kit’s skill as a driver emphasizes that she is comfortable living in a modern, mechanical world, but she only achieves this comfort by rejecting traditional gender behavior.

Kit's friend Agnes, a fellow mill worker and labor rights activist, is another strong female character. Agnes speaks out loudly in the novel for the improvement of rights for workers and women, and Kit admires her strength and determination, but she also recognizes that an empowered woman like Agnes cannot find emotional fulfillment with modern men – men who, for Anderson, have been weakened and defeated by factory work:

Agnes was a big vital woman – woman enough, Kit afterward thought, but not the kind most men would fall for. She was too big, too strong and vital. She thought too much... It might be that Agnes needed and even wanted gentling by life, by intimacy with some man, but where among the mill men was she to find one to do it to her? (78-9)

This passage might be read as an endorsement of female passivity – a claim that Agnes would be better off being quieter and more demure in subordination to a man. But read in the context of Anderson's assessment of men in the book – an assessment that characterizes them as weak, overly boastful, and emotionally hindered – this is clearly not the case. Anderson is not advocating for a return to 19<sup>th</sup> century standards of male dominance and female subordination, but rather a new dynamic where there is more equality between men and women. For Anderson, Agnes is empowered in the way modern women should be, but because the men around her cannot give her what she needs, she is constantly fighting and struggling to be heard.

There is a hopefulness throughout *Kit Brandon* for a new, improved unity and understanding between men and women, if only women can find independence and men can overcome their patterns of aggression and material ambition. As Kit says early on, “Men can be beasts and so can women, too” (23), but she also understands “The thing most essentially wanted by all men and women, always, everywhere. ‘Give me some basis of self-respect. Let me stand on my own feet’” (81-2).

### Androgyny as a Possible Solution

In all of Anderson's writing on gender relations, he hesitates to offer any single concrete solution for what he sees as the modern divisions between men and women. He does however make many comments about the confluence of masculine and feminine behavior – what he sometimes refers to as “mannish-women” and “womanish-men.” The characters who escape the traps of the grotesque and manage to live outside the harmful conventions of late 19<sup>th</sup> century gender expectations often do so by embracing traits generally attributed to the opposite sex. In this way, without ever claiming it as an answer, Anderson suggests that a more androgynous view of gender might help men and women live more fulfilling lives.

This possibility is suggested in the beginning of *Winesburg, Ohio* when the narrator describes the old man who writes “The Book of the Grotesques:”

Perfectly still he lay and his body was old and not of much use any more, but something inside him was altogether young. He was like a pregnant woman, only that the thing inside him was not a baby but a youth. No, it wasn't a youth, it was a woman, young and wearing a coat of mail like a knight. It is absurd, you see, to try to tell what was inside of the old writer as he lay on his high bed and listened to the fluttering of his heart. The thing to get at is what the writer, or the young thing within the writer, was thinking about...it was the young thing inside him that saved the old man. (5-7)

The old writer is “like a pregnant woman,” a parallel Anderson uses often in his work for the act of artistic creation – his modern alternative to manual craftsmanship. Anderson writes that “there is a woman hidden away in every artist. Like the woman he becomes pregnant. He gives birth” (*Letters*, 428). He complicates this image with the old writer by changing the baby – a symbol of future hope – to a youth, and the youth to a woman. Not only that, but a woman in armor, dressed like a knight – a symbol of traditionally masculine strength. This “young thing,” the woman in chain mail, is what saves the writer from succumbing to grotesquerie. The mannish-

woman inside the writer, then, is what helps him escape the danger of convention – this armored, battle-ready, androgynous figure.

Embracing androgyny as the old writer does helps a number of Anderson's characters escape the trap of gender convention. Sally Adair Rigsbee argues that most of the instances of male grotesquerie in *Winesburg* directly result from a rejection of femininity: "In *Winesburg, Ohio* communication is blocked because of the devaluation of the feminine qualities of vulnerability and tenderness even though the artist's creativity springs from deep feelings of vitality which Anderson associates with the feminine" (233). Rigsbee argues that Anderson's suggested solution to aggressive masculinity is an increased femininity among men – that breaking down some of the culturally accepted differences between men and women may help facilitate better communication and understanding:

Each male's grotesqueness is indicated by the gap between his intense need of the feminine and his inability to establish relationships with real women... Because the qualities of the feminine are regarded as weaknesses, the most precious human experiences—vulnerability, intimacy, and tenderness—are repressed by those who fear their own deepest mysteries. As a result, marriages fail, and family and community life in *Winesburg* suffers. (236-7)

The only way for men to escape the false masculinity of sexual aggression and material ambition, Rigsbee argues, is to embrace more traditionally feminine behavior.

This need for femininity can be seen clearly in George Willard's relationships with his mother and father and the effect each has on him. His father urges him to find a solid line of work, make money, and become an important man – the same kind of male posturing and material ambition that defines Jesse Bentley and many of Anderson's male characters:

"I tell you what, George, you've got to wake up," he said sharply. "Will Henderson has spoken to me three times concerning the matter. He says you go along for hours not hearing when you are spoken to and acting like a gawky girl. What ails you?" Tom Willard laughed good-naturedly. "Well, I guess you'll get over it," he said. "I told Will that. You're not a fool and you're not a woman. You're Tom Willard's son and you'll wake

up. I'm not afraid. What you say clears things up. If being a newspaper man had put the notion of becoming a writer into your mind that's all right. Only I guess you'll have to wake up to do that too, eh?" (19)

Tom clearly outlines here the difference in accepted behavior for men and women. Financial and political ambition are for men, while dreams and emotions are for women. Because George ventures into this latter realm, Tom calls his manhood into question and tries to correct what he sees as a misstep.

George's mother, on the other hand, wants more than anything for her son to reject Tom's material values. In her youth, Elizabeth Willard had affairs with various young men who stayed at her father's hotel, and never felt ashamed, rejecting the conventional behavior expected of her as a woman. Eventually though, she bows to convention and marries Tom, a decision she regrets for the rest of her life. Having given up her own fight against gender convention, Elizabeth holds onto hope that her son will succeed where she could not:

George Willard had a habit of talking aloud to himself and to hear him doing so had always given his mother a peculiar pleasure. The habit in him, she felt, strengthened the secret bond that existed between them. A thousand times she had whispered to herself of the matter. "He is groping about, trying to find himself," she thought. "He is not a dull clod, all words and smartness. Within him there is a secret something that is striving to grow. It is the thing I let be killed in myself." (18-9)

Elizabeth wants her son to reject the boastful masculine behavior of his father, but she also wants him to embrace a more feminine perspective on life by succeeding where she failed – trusting emotion rather than convention. As Rigsbee argues, "The 'something' which Elizabeth Willard is seeking is a more humane life in which her sexuality, her need for intimacy, her creativity, and her spirituality, can be fully realized, harmonized, and expressed" (238).

In "Tandy," the stranger's final appeal to the young girl he calls Tandy involves more androgynous language: "'Be Tandy, little one,' he plead. 'Dare to be strong and courageous. That is the road. Venture anything. Be brave enough to dare to be loved. Be something more than

man or woman. Be Tandy” (79). The characteristics that the stranger asks of Tandy – strength and bravery – are traditionally masculine traits, and his plea invokes the female knight image from “The Book of the Grotesques.” The stranger then seems to be appealing to the strength of women to do what men have been unable to do and strive for a new, more fluid understanding of gender, by which men and women might love and coexist more harmoniously.

One of Anderson’s most famous stories, “The Man who became a Woman” (1923), explores the idea of androgynous gender behavior in its protagonist, Herman Dudley. Dudley begins the story by describing his friendship with a man named Tom Means when he was a young racehorse swipe:

So we would set off, going, not into the town to try to get in with some of the town girls, who might have taken up with us because we were strangers and race track fellows, but out into the country. Sometimes we got into a hilly country and there was a moon. The leaves were falling off the trees and lay in the road so that we kicked them up with the dust as we went along. To tell the truth I suppose I got to love Tom Means, who was five years older than me, although I wouldn’t have dared say so, then, Americans are shy and timid about saying things like that and a man here don’t dare own up he loves another man, I’ve found out, and they are afraid to admit such feelings to themselves even. I guess they’re afraid it may be taken to mean something it don’t need to at all. (*Certain Things Last*, 62)

Dudley is quick to deny any homosexual inclination between himself and Tom, and his allusions later in the story to his wife Jessie and Tom’s wife support his claim. He is not condemning homosexuality as much as he is defending more open, vulnerable relationships between men. There is a mentor/mentee dynamic between the two, as Dudley describes how on their walks Tom would talk and he would mainly just listen, but there is also a simple emotional fulfillment that both men know they could not get by pursuing strictly sexual relationships with the girls in town.

When Tom leaves Dudley’s circuit, he feels very isolated and begins succumbing to flights of fancy and fits of dreaming:

There were always a lot of other men and boys who hadn't any horses in the races that day and they would be standing or sitting about in front of the stalls and talking. I would listen for a time to their talk and then their voices would seem to go far away. The things I was looking at would go far away too. Perhaps there would be a tree, not more than a hundred yards away, and it would just come out of the ground and float away like a thistle. It would get smaller and smaller, away off there in the sky, and then suddenly—bang, it would be back where it belonged, in the ground, and I would begin hearing the voices of the men talking again. (68)

Anderson endorses this habit of dreaming. He uses similar language with George Willard – although his father discourages dreaming – as well as with John Webster, Hugh McVey and Bruce Dudley. In many cases, dreaming is associated with a liberation from gender convention. By showing that Tom's relationship with Dudley results in this kind of dreaming, Anderson emphasizes the positive impact of their friendship.

Dudley also describes himself as shy and unassertive when it comes to women. Though girls from the various towns that his race circuit travels through come to the stables to flirt with the swipes, he never gets up the courage to ask one of them out. Even if he did, he says that “she would have had to knock me over with a club before it got any further” (68). Though he is not homosexual, Dudley strays from the culture's masculine model of sexual aggression, and his relationship with Tom, which serves as a substitute for these sexual relationships, helps cement this counter-cultural behavior. Like the narrator of “I Want to Know Why,” Dudley prefers the company of horses to that of most men.

All of these factors – the open love for another man, the tendency to dream, and the absence of a forceful heterosexual identity – bring Dudley to the story's climax, which also gives it its title. One night, feeling very alone, Dudley leaves the racetrack and goes for a drink in the town nearby, where he has a strange experience seeing his reflection in the bar mirror:

The point is that the face I saw in the looking-glass back of that bar, when I looked up from my glass of whisky that evening, wasn't my own face at all but the face of a

woman. It was a girl's face, that's what I mean. That's what it was. It was a girl's face, and a lonesome and scared girl too. She was just a kid at that. (77-8)

Within the story, this passage is ambiguous. Dudley says that he thought everyone in the bar was looking at him, but he realizes retrospectively that it was all in his head. In that case, his dissociation from the face he sees in the mirror represents an insecurity regarding his own masculinity, which he tries to blame on the fact that at that point he had never been with a woman. He has been scared and alone up until this moment, so the image of a scared girl would appear to be a manifestation of his own interiority and nothing more.

But then a few more things happen. First, a fight breaks out in the bar with a large man, who lashes out after being mocked by the other patrons. Before doing so however, he tells Dudley, who is sitting next to him at the bar, to hold his young son. This may be because Dudley refuses to join the others in mocking the man, but it also suggests that the big man recognizes a protective, maternal capacity in Dudley just by looking at him. Later, after falling asleep naked in the stable, Dudley is accosted by two drunk men who mistake him for a woman. He says in the narration that he believes it may all have been a practical joke and that the men knew he was a man the whole time, but he is uncertain. Regardless, he clearly appears feminine enough to at least unconsciously encourage the prank.

Dudley is quite shaken by the entire experience. Frightened by the men, he runs all the way to the racetrack and jumps the fence into a nearby field which used to hold a slaughterhouse. The field is filled with animal skeletons, and in his flight, Dudley falls through the ribcage of a dead horse. Suddenly, after getting up, he seems to have recovered something: "It burned all that silly nonsense about being a girl right out of me" (90). Walter Rideout argues that the fall into the horse's ribcage – the horse being a common symbol in Anderson's writing for purity amidst the corrupting influence of mass culture – is a kind of second birth for Dudley. He emerges from



his androgynous experience a different man, neither the woman he mistook himself for, nor the false image of a man he thought he was supposed to be. Though Dudley claims that his lack of experience with women plays a major role in his loneliness and his feminine experience, no women are involved in his transition to manhood. He has not adopted any of the sexual aggression or boastful posturing that Anderson associates with traditional masculinity, so his return to maleness is conflated with his feminine experience, rather than with these traits of false masculine identity.

Dudley emerges from his 'second birth' empathetic to the female experience ("I've often wondered if women generally are lonelier than men") and liberated from his prior feeling of masculine insufficiency (76). What he says about his current marriage to his wife Jessie sounds happy and productive, not at all like the failed marriages of *Winesburg*. In this androgynous experience, Dudley finds confidence in a more feminine form of masculinity and subsequently establishes a real emotional connection with a woman later in life.

In *Dark Laughter* Anderson gives more detail of what an androgynous marriage might look like through the relationship of Sponge Martin, one of Bruce's coworkers, and his wife. Sponge tells Bruce how a couple times a year he and his wife get whiskey and sandwiches and go fishing out on the river:

They built a fire of driftwood and sat around, having put out catfish lines...It was a long walk and neither Sponge nor his wife was very young but they were both tough, wiry little people and they had the corn whiskey to cheer them on the way...Being out to make a night of it they gathered wood to start a fire as soon as they had got to their favorite fishing place. Then everything was all right. Sponge had told Bruce dozens of times that his wife didn't mind anything. "She's as tough as a fox terrier," he said. (9-10)

Throughout this passage, and in later sections when Sponge discusses his wife, the two are described the same way, as if they were interchangeable. He works in the factory and she in the home, but they are on equal footing. It is also significant that everything about these trips, from

the fishing to the whiskey drinking, to the falling asleep on a pile of sawdust, is traditionally masculine. This is the kind of trip traditionally taken by friends, brothers, fathers and sons, or solitary men, as in a Hemingway story, but Sponge takes it with his wife. He tells Bruce that “When she is a little lit up she acts like a kid and makes me feel like a kid too” (32). As with the old writer, it is the “young thing” that saves Sponge and his wife, and like the old writer, they find it through androgynous behavior. Theirs is one of the only happy and successful marriages in all of Anderson’s fiction, and they achieve it by ignoring the traditional gender roles of husband and wife.

Kit Brandon is another strong example of androgyny in Anderson’s work. Kit is described as beautiful and is pursued romantically by multiple men throughout the novel, and she has a self-admitted desire for clothing and expensive living – behavior traditionally attributed to women. In this way she appears externally to exemplify the female as object of the male gaze, but her behavior in the story complicates her identity. Kit marries to advance her own station, and while married she refuses to become submissive to her husband, denying him sex and generally avoiding him. As noted earlier, she rejects motherhood and eventually works her way to becoming the best driver in Tom Halsey’s organization. By choosing work, especially mechanical work with so much danger involved, Kit enters into a traditionally male realm and adopts traditionally male behavior. At the end of the novel, Kit has a brief encounter with a man named Joel, who tells Kit himself that he, like most men, is not emotionally equipped to give women what they need. She leaves him determined to “get into some sort of work that did not so separate her from others,” and in this mission she feels “warm and alive” – not because she has found a man to make her happy, but because in abandoning traditional feminine behavior and

adopting some qualities of maleness, Kit has discovered a way to live fully as an androgynous, independent woman.

Kit's friend Agnes is even more overtly masculine than Kit. The narrator says that "In the woman worker Agnes, in the field with the others, there was something perhaps half man" (83). Although her large, physical, imposing nature is off-putting to men, to Kit she is a symbol of feminine strength. The narrator suggests that though Agnes might internally desire a more intimate connection with a man, there is no man strong enough to contend with her. Later in the novel, Kit redefines the kind of strength that men need:

She was thinking of Gordon, behind his newspaper in the room with the three men, of his sitting there and waiting, wanting, she thought, to be self-possessed, to create an impression of strength. How many men in the world always wanting to seem to be what they cannot be, never getting the idea that strength is in acceptance of limitations, not in stretching them! What a splendid big game hunter Gordon would have made! How much false hair grows on the breasts of some men? (210)

Over a decade earlier, Anderson thanks Bab Finley, a close friend he corresponded with throughout his life, for teaching him this exact language, telling her that "once you said to me that by accepting certain limitations I had destroyed the limitations. It is a thought that has helped me over many rough places" (*Letters to Bab*, 129). If this is the kind of strength that men need in order to give women like Agnes what they need emotionally, Anderson is once again calling for a breakdown of the traditional gender binary, with women adopting more masculine traits and men more feminine, and in doing so coming closer together towards a more androgynous model of gender.

A number of Anderson critics read his androgynous characters in a similar way. Rigsbee posits that "The deep, intimate communion which the women of Winesburg are seeking can occur only when traditional role expectations and conventional morality are transcended... femininity is the crucial issue in the lives of all of the male grotesques" (236). Martin Bidney

agrees, arguing that many of Anderson's male characters are grotesque because they reject femininity and refuse to adjust their stilted view of maleness. Duane Simolke posits that George Willard's escape from Winesburg and the grotesque lifestyle of its inhabitants is only possible because he learns how to transcend gender roles. These arguments are supported by readings of Anderson's broader work – by characters like Kit, Agnes and Dudley, and by the rejection of traditional gender conventions in books like *Many Marriages* and *Dark Laughter*.

Mark Whalan rejects these views, however, claiming that Anderson does not endorse androgyny but rather argues against it. Whalan asserts that Anderson frequently associates androgyny with homosexuality, that he outwardly condemns homosexual behavior in his writing, and thus that he warns against androgynous behavior as dangerous for both men and women. Whalan bases much of his argument on excerpts from Anderson's *Memoirs*, particularly stories from his time as an advertising writer in Chicago. In one instance, a "fairy," or openly gay man with a rather flamboyant feminine persona, makes a pass at Anderson because he does not ridicule him as the other men around him are doing. Anderson says that he felt "a strange unhealth in myself...even a kind of pity," and that it was "as though I looked down through the door into a kind of dark pit" (*Memoirs* 340). In another episode, Anderson describes how he and a colleague would call each other feminine names because they saw their advertising work as a kind of prostitution. When doing so in public, they would sometimes be ridiculed as fairies, which gave them "a kind of satisfaction" (*Memoirs* 415).

It is important to note that Anderson's *Memoirs* were left unfinished and unrevised at his death, and that they were edited and published posthumously. It is also important that what had been written was done in fits and starts over the course of many years. They are therefore, at best, incomplete accounts of Anderson's life and opinions. That being said, the sections Whalan

discusses certainly raise questions about Anderson's actual opinions on gender and sexuality. Primarily, what exactly was Anderson's opinion on homosexuality, and to what extent did he conflate it with androgynous gender behavior? Whalan argues:

[Anderson] wrote suggestively of the homoeroticism of male friendships, yet simultaneously disavowed any homosexual subtext to the nature of such a relationship... This simultaneous encouragement and disavowal of same-sex desire was important to Anderson as a way of escaping the constricting regulation of "homosexual panic"; yet it did not indicate his view of gender as multiple, labile, or polymorphous. Instead, it served to shore up his definitions of masculinity and femininity as complementary opposites... (45)

It is true that when Anderson describes male homosocial behavior, both in fiction and nonfiction, he often goes out of his way to distinguish it from homosexuality, but this is less in protest against the latter and more in support of the former. Anderson is responding primarily to the anti-queer mentality of his day by asserting that emotionally vulnerable relationships between men should be encouraged without being tied to the stigma of homosexuality. He does not advocate for or against homosexuality, and the only reason he brings it up at all when discussing male friendship is for clarification. In these homosocial relationships, Anderson still advocates for greater emotional capacity within and between men which, as previously discussed, also means an increased femininity.

Whalan disagrees, arguing from the *Memoirs* that Anderson shows anxiety throughout his career regarding his own sexuality, and that this anxiety leads him to condemn homosexual behavior. He posits that Anderson conflates homosexuality with femininity, and that he therefore actually rejects men taking on more traditionally feminine traits: "Typically, Anderson's recourse from his 'homosexual panic' was to link patriarchal masculinity to working practice" (43). In part, this is certainly true. Anderson's association of physical craft – and subsequently writing and art – with masculinity, is evident throughout his work, as previously discussed. But

Whalan's claim is an oversimplification. Anderson repeatedly rejects the characteristics of "patriarchal masculinity" – sexual aggression, physical dominance, material ambition, a lack of emotional availability – and condemns the factory workers, business owners and grotesques who hold onto them. If "working practice" means artistic creation, the only men in Anderson's fiction to embrace such a practice are the artists – George Willard being the prime example. And George too rejects this patriarchal masculinity. His time with Helen White helps him come to a greater empathy for both genders and a greater emotional vulnerability. This is an opposition to patriarchy, not its endorsement.

Whalan argues that Anderson condemns homosexuality, conflates it with femininity, and therefore opposes androgynous behavior in men. He uses the character of Wing Biddlebaum, subject of the *Winesburg* story "Hands," as evidence. Originally a school teacher, Wing loses his job because his physical touching of students – his way of trying to "carry a dream into the young minds" – is mistaken for molestation (12). The town accuses him of homosexuality, and he flees to Winesburg, where he lives on the outskirts of town working as a field hand. Whalan argues that the placement of "Hands" at the beginning of *Winesburg* establishes the extreme boundary of divergent gender behavior, because masculinity must be defined against the negative space of homosexuality as well as against that of femininity:

Wing's house, outside of Winesburg's society and geography, marks him as both liminal and visible: moreover, it is sited on the edge of a ravine, which indicates his proximity to social and cultural oblivion...this situation of liminality *and* visibility is evident in the first paragraph of "Hands," as Wing is observed and taunted by a group of young workers as they pass on their way home from work. Wing, therefore, clearly has a regulatory function that is significant to George's growth into "manhood," a regulation clear in the conflation of geography and sexuality. Wing's geographic marginalization effectively marks the boundary of the geography of desire within which George can operate if he is to remain within the hegemonic territory of heterosexuality. (46-7)

The main problem with Whalan's argument here is that he conflates two things that are quite different: what Anderson believes should be acceptable male behavior, and what American culture believes is acceptable behavior. The story of Wing Biddlebaum is a tragedy specifically because he is innocent of the crime of which he is accused. In a world where relationships like that between Tom and Dudley are accepted, Wing would not have been dealt such a fate. Like Anderson's female characters who suffer at the hands of men, Wing is an example of how the world is, not how it should be. It is also worth noting that while the field hands do mock Wing as Whalan points out, George does not. He is intrigued by the man, and does not condemn him as the others do. As the moral compass of the book, George accepting Wing also condemns the field workers.

But again, Wing is not in fact a homosexual character, merely one condemned for association with the lifestyle. So the question remains, does Anderson condemn homosexuality? Part of the answer lies outside of the unfinished *Memoirs* and in Anderson's third novel, *Poor White*, in the character of Kate Chancellor.

Clara Butterworth meets Kate Chancellor and her brother in Book III of *Poor White* when she goes to college in Columbus. The two siblings live together in the city, and over time Clara begins spending more time with them, especially with Kate:

Kate had brought Clara to the apartment where the two lived, and the three had become friends. Clara had learned something there that she did not yet understand and never did get clearly into her consciousness. The truth was that the brother was like a woman and Kate Chancellor, who wore skirts and had the body of a woman, was in her nature a man. Kate and Clara spent many evenings together later and talked of many things not usually touched on by girl students. (169)

Anderson makes it clear that Kate is gay. Maleness in women and femaleness in men is not the same thing as homosexuality for Anderson, but Kate describes her own sexual attraction to women and lack of attraction to men. Kate's brother also subverts traditional gender expectations

– a feminine man who has a craft (chemist) and pursues artistic creation (music) – but not enough is said about him to assess his sexuality. Kate however, in a relatively small number of pages, illustrates a lot about Anderson’s view of gender convention and androgyny. She is not described as “half-male” as Agnes is in *Kit Brandon*, but rather as fully male in nature. More importantly, Anderson endorses her and her lifestyle. She is one of the best-spoken best-educated and least-confused characters in the novel, and she teaches Clara a lot about the negative aspects of 19<sup>th</sup> century gender roles and how to operate outside of them, much as John Webster attempts in his speech to Jane in *Many Marriages*. In her assessment of men and women, Kate echoes a lot of Anderson’s own warnings against sexual aggression and power imbalance:

Kate walked up and down before Clara and swore like a man. “Oh, hell,” she exclaimed, “men are such fools and I suppose women are as bad. They are both too much one thing. I fall in between. I’ve got my problem too, but I’m not going to talk about it. I know what I’m going to do. I’m going to find some kind of work and do it.” She began to talk of the stupidity of men in their approach to women. “Men hate such women as myself,” she said. “They can’t use us, they think. What fools! They should watch and study us. Many of us spend our lives loving other women, but we have skill. Being part women, we know how to approach women. We are not blundering and crude. Men want a certain thing from you. It is delicate and easy to kill. Love is the most sensitive thing in the world. It’s like an orchid. Men try to pluck orchids with ice tongs, the fools.” (171-2)

This is some of the most direct language Anderson uses when discussing androgyny, and he does so with the only character in the novel who fully understands the problems men and women face. Kate celebrates her own androgyny and calls for a similar model for men, which would allow them to actually connect with women emotionally. This androgyny is directly tied to Kate’s homosexuality, but Anderson endorses her values, and her focus on work – a trait traditionally reserved for men.

Kate also, in her androgyny, actively rejects the gender status quo of the day, and with it, the patriarchal structures that hold it in place.



Kate was a bold, vigorous thinker and was striving to grope her way through her own problem in life and many times, as they walked along the street or sat together in the evening, she forgot her companion and talked of herself and the difficulties of her position in life. "It's absurd the way things are arranged," she said. "Because my body is made in a certain way I'm supposed to accept certain rules for living. The rules were not made for me. Men manufactured them as they manufacture can-openers, on the wholesale plan." She looked at Clara and laughed. "Try to imagine me in a little lace cap, such as your aunt wears about the house, and spending my days knitting baby stockings," she said. (169)

Anderson makes a distinction here that is similar to the one he makes with Wing Biddlebaum, between behavior that could make men and women's lives more fulfilling, and the behavior that society accepts. Kate is a sympathetic character, and Anderson endorses her pursuit of work and independence, but gender conventions make it difficult for her, as a woman, to exist in this traditionally male realm. Her ideal behavior as a gay, androgynous woman is not acceptable in an America that still clings to 19<sup>th</sup> century gender norms. Again, Anderson supports the character and rejects the social customs that hold her back.

None of this accounts for the apparently negative references to the "fairies" in Chicago that Whalan points out in a few of Anderson's letters and select sections of the *Memoirs*. The obvious difference is that everyone discussed in this way in the letters and *Memoirs* is a gay man, while Kate Chancellor is a woman. This is significant for the same reason that heterosexual relationships in Anderson's work frequently fail – men and women in his stories have different understandings of sex and love, which leads to miscommunication and confusion. The gay men Anderson describes in his memoirs are actively seeking sex, while Kate Chancellor tells Clara directly that she is not interested in her sexually, only in her friendship. Their relationship is like Tom and Dudley's – a mutually beneficial, emotionally gratifying homosocial connection. It wouldn't matter if either man were gay if the behavior remains the same, but the men in Chicago are problematic for Anderson because they are actively seeking sex without any sense of

emotional connection. Their femininity – all external and presentational – is not the femininity Anderson promotes in men, which is internal – emotional vulnerability, self-actualization, humility. The Chicago men, in Anderson’s eyes, do not embody these traits. They are not androgynous. It is not homosexuality Anderson has a problem with, or even male homosexuality specifically. It is male sexuality manifested in a traditionally masculine, aggressive way. The *Winesburg* narrator sums this up succinctly in “Sophistication” when, writing of George Willard, he describes what should be the emotional needs of the young American man:

With all his heart he wants to come close to some other human, touch someone with his hands, be touched by the hand of another. If he prefers that the other be a woman, that is because he believes that a woman will be gentle, that she will understand. He wants, most of all, understanding.” (131)

### **Men and Women in Art**

Despite Anderson’s condemnation of gender convention and thematic exploration of androgyny, his writing often contains examples of more conventional gender behavior in men and women. Many of these examples occur as part of Anderson’s analyses of traditional gender roles and gendered behavior, much of which, as previously discussed, seeks to undermine such binaries. These male/female differences can also be read as Anderson condemning harmful masculine behavior and endorsing feminine qualities, as he sees them. In *Perhaps Women*, for instance, Anderson argues that women are more qualified for factory work because they do not have the same emasculated anxiety in response to machines that men do.

Some critics, however, argue that these distinctions reflect Anderson’s inability to fully abandon a binary view of gender. Marilyn Judith Atlas and Claire Colquitt both argue that by presenting women as powerless and victimized by men, Anderson perpetuates a dynamic of oppressed women and oppressive men. Mark Whalan states that Anderson’s “frequent insistence

on an absolute differentiation between men and women relied on binaries such as activity/passivity, or culture/nature, which feminist criticism has long identified with patriarchal culture” (38). Anderson’s distinctions between men and women do become particularly problematic when he discusses art and artistry – specifically when he suggests, as he does at different times throughout his career, that men are more naturally disposed to produce creative work than women.

Anderson suggests this superior male propensity to artistic creation at many points in both his fiction and nonfiction, and the claim is closely related to his view of writing – and art in general – as craftsmanship. For Anderson, the physical craft that gave men purpose and fulfillment in the pre-industrial age is blocked by machinery and factory labor, but writing and artistry present a new, modern expression of craft. Walter Rideout and Kim Townsend discuss this “art as craft” view extensively in their respective biographies of Anderson, as does Liesl Olson in her account of Chicago’s “Robin’s Egg” literary renaissance. In *A Storyteller’s Story*, Anderson posits the importance of creation to human experience:

...in the end I was to understand that when you take from man the cunning of the hand, the opportunity to constantly create new forms in materials, you make him impotent. His maleness slips from him and he can no longer give himself in love, either to work or to women... Women who choose childlessness for themselves choose also impotence – perhaps to be the better companions for the men of a factory... To live is to create constantly new forms: with the body in living children; in new and more beautiful forms carved out of materials; in the creation of a world of the fancy... (195)

Here Anderson outlines the gendered terms for his creative ideal – men creating through physical craft or art (“creation of a world of fancy”), and women creating through childbirth. Anderson uses pregnancy repeatedly in his fiction as a symbol of artistic creation in characters like the old writer in *Winesburg* and John Webster in *Many Marriages*. In a 1924 letter to Bab Finley, he relates his post-publication “depression” to how a new mother feels, stating that all artists are

“half-woman” (*Letters to Bab*, 200). This statement itself suggests that all artists Anderson is describing are men. In another letter to Bab the following year he describes his longtime friend Anita Loos, stating that “There are two things in her. She would like to be an artist or a woman. She doesn’t quite achieve either” (217). This assessment of Loos does not necessarily mean that she could not be both an artist and a woman, but Anderson discusses them here as two distinct, unrelated identities.

Even Anderson’s strong, androgynous female characters generally avoid the production of creative work – Kate Chancellor and Kit Brandon find fulfillment in work, respectively embracing medicine and machinery, but not art. Helen White is not an artist, nor is Natalie in *Many Marriages*. John Webster’s daughter Jane is not an artist either. Aline from *Dark Laughter* has a history as a painter, but she gives up that pursuit after she marries Fred, and there is no indication that her relationship with Bruce will revive her artistic interest in any meaningful way. These female characters all achieve a fuller life and find more fulfilling emotional connections because of their androgynous behaviors, but they do not have the artistic potential of male characters like Bruce and George Willard.

Because Anderson’s male characters are usually the more artistically inclined, they are more often than not the ones telling the stories. William Etter argues that this tendency to male perspective creates a power imbalance and objectifies women in Anderson’s fiction, making men the observers and women the observed. *Kit Brandon* and “Death in the Woods,” for instance, are both narrated by male characters who see or hear a woman’s story and retell it. Joyce Ladenson argues similarly that Anderson’s work is “muddied by a heavy-handed, male-oriented bias, whose stress on regeneration is achieved through the manipulation of half-realized female pawns” (91). By clearly demarcating the creative potential of men and women, both insist,

Anderson makes women tools to facilitate male betterment, but does not allow them to reach the same kind of improvement themselves.

There are numerous instances in Anderson's writing, however, that contradict and complicate these claims. Most of Anderson's statements about the maleness of art occur in *A Storyteller's Story*, sections of the unfinished *Memoirs*, and letters predating 1930. These could make a case that Anderson believed strongly in artistry being predominantly male at the peak of his career, but not that he kept these opinions through his later life and eventual marriage to Eleanor Copenhaver, a women's labor activist for the YWCA. Even during his earlier career, Anderson's relationships with women complicate his apparent gendered view of art. He encouraged his second wife, Tennessee Mitchell, to pursue art and used pictures of her sculptures as the introduction of his short story collection *The Triumph of the Egg* (1921). In a 1917 letter to Bab, Anderson praises his friend's writing ability for possessing "power and directness" and encourages her to keep writing, that someday "if you want to you will write a powerful book" (88).

Anderson also had close relationships with female writers and poets throughout his career whom he held in high regard, and he admired the editorial work of Margaret Anderson and Harriet Monroe, who were central figures in the Chicago literary renaissance. Both were good friends of Anderson's, and he held their publications in great esteem and applauded their contributions to the development of a distinctly American literature. Anderson's friendship with Gertrude Stein lasted until the end of his life, and there were few writers whose work he respected or was influenced by more than hers. In a piece written for a 1922 issue of *The New Republic*, Anderson praises Stein's literary contributions extensively:

She is making new, strange and to my ears sweet combinations of words. As an American writer I admire her because she, in her person, represents something sweet and

healthy in our American life, and because I have a kind of undying faith that what she is up to in her word kitchen in Paris is of more importance to writers of English than the work of many of our more easily understood and more widely accepted word artists.  
(171)

This tribute celebrates Stein as both an important writer and an androgynous figure – openly gay, physically strong, and always sporting a short, masculine haircut. Throughout the article Anderson compares her artistry to a kitchen, praising her because she “cares for the handmade goodies and...scorns the factory-made foods.” By relating the traditionally feminine activity of cooking and kitchen work with the art of writing, Anderson suggests that Stein’s femininity is an aid to her artistic ventures, rather than a hindrance. He even invokes the distinction between handmade and factory-made goods that he so frequently discusses in relation to masculinity and craft.

It is also worth repeating that while Anderson argues that creation is the way to a more fulfilling life, and that childbirth is the natural feminine expression of creation, almost none of his strongest female characters have children. Kate Chancellor, like Gertrude Stein, is gay and disinterested in men. Kit Brandon refuses to have children with her husband and reluctantly accepts a single life because no man can give her what she needs. Helen White, in rejecting the patronizing suitor her parents have selected for her and returning to college, also rejects a domestic life. Her emotional connection with George Willard in “Sophistication” helps her understand what men and women need from one another, but like George, she leaves their encounter cautious of traditional institutions like marriage.

The women of Anderson’s fiction who do have children seldom find fulfillment or happy endings. Jesse Bentley’s wife Katherine dies after giving birth to Louise because she has been worked near to death by her husband’s harsh domestic authoritarianism. Helen White’s mother pushes an unwanted relationship and does not understand the real emotional needs of her

daughter. Elizabeth Willard loves her son, but her ultimate plea to him is not to become silenced in life the way she allowed herself to be – to hold onto dreams and indefinite things, the things of art. Mary Webster gets no closer to emotional fulfillment by becoming a mother, but out of the three women of *Many Marriages* who escape grotesquerie – Jane, Natalie, and Katherine – none have children. The woman in “Death in the Woods” works herself to death for her husband and son, but they do not respect her or help her reach any emotional fulfillment, and in the end she dies alone. In *Poor White*, Clara Butterworth finally accepts her domestic role when she becomes pregnant with Hugh’s child, but that acceptance is more tragic than happy. Neither Hugh nor Clara seem satisfied by their future life, and Clara’s maternal reaction is more tepid acceptance than joy. Even Aline in *Dark Laughter*, who is ultimately liberated from her stale marriage by becoming pregnant with Bruce’s child, leaves the story without having completed the act of creation. Her emotional victory is in finding a man who gives her what she needs, not in the promise of motherhood.

These examples complicate any broad definitions of Anderson’s gendered view of art. When he discusses childbirth as the ultimate expression of female creativity, he uses the same nostalgic language as he does for masculine craftsmanship. The latter is obsolete in the modern world, as Anderson states repeatedly, so men must find fulfillment elsewhere, and he believes that the nature of female creative expression also needs to change. But in art, the potential new escape for men, he precludes women, while still writing numerous instances of unfulfilling or claustrophobic childrearing. He contradicts himself. To a degree, this can only be understood as inconsistency from a man whose writings on gender and art span genres and decades.

Anderson’s ideas about modern gender behavior are inconsistent because he is not trying to assemble a definitive claim about gender roles. His ideas are paradoxical because in all he wrote,

he remains more interested in questions than answers. It is difficult, therefore, to argue that Anderson always rejected gender binaries and 19<sup>th</sup> century conventions, but it is equally difficult to make any absolute claims about his opinions on gender and art.

### **“Perhaps”**

As noted earlier, when Anderson introduces Louise Bentley in *Winesburg, Ohio*, he does so with a caveat – before women like her can live fulfilling lives, “thoughtful books” must be written to illustrate the problems of modern gender roles. Looking at Anderson’s career as an attempt to write these kinds of “thoughtful books” is closer to his intention than a claim that he insists on any one solution to the problems between men and women. He is more interested in asking questions and presenting problems than in claiming to solve them. This is why the old writer does not publish “The Book of the Grotesques,” and also why the citizens of Winesburg who believe in individual, absolute truths become grotesque.

This indefinite quality of Anderson’s stories is reflected in many of his characters. More often than not, his narrators do not fully understand the stories they are telling. Dudley recounts his experience in “The Man Who Became a Woman” to try to understand what exactly happened to him, and why he remembers it so vividly, but he is still confused at the end. This is also true of the narrators of “I Want to Know Why,” “Death in the Woods,” and many of Anderson’s other short stories. In *Many Marriages*, John Webster talks in circles for half of the novel trying to explain to Jane how to live and love better, but he leaves uncertain of his future and unconvinced that he ever made his point. What he finds with Natalie is a solution that may or may not last. The hope at the end of the book is not that he has found the answer, but that Jane, being younger



than he and therefore growing up in a different world, might be better equipped to escape the trap of convention.

George Willard's future is hopeful when he leaves Winesburg because "he did not think of anything very big or dramatic...he thought of little things" (138). His mind is filled with dreams, like John Webster and Hugh McVey, and dreams are indefinite. By dreaming, George has a chance to avoid the traps of convention to which so many of his neighbors have succumbed:

The young man's mind was carried away by his growing passion for dreams. One looking at him would not have thought him particularly sharp. With the recollection of little things occupying his mind he closed his eyes and leaned back in the car seat. He stayed that way for a long time and when he aroused himself and again looked out of the car window the town of Winesburg had disappeared and his life there had become but a background on which to paint the dreams of his manhood. (138)

The focus on dreams that Wing Biddlebaum, Elizabeth Willard, Helen White and Kate Swift all encourage in George saves him from becoming a grotesque because it stops him from seeking or accepting absolute answers. His future is yet to be painted, and the only things he can be certain of are "little things." If Anderson claimed he had found definite solutions to the gender problems of his day, then in his terms, he too would become a grotesque.

Some critics argue that while Anderson does not make definite claims about gender, he still analyzes men and women within 19<sup>th</sup> century gender ideas that restrict the potential of women. Joyce Ladenson argues that while Anderson's work reflects "a desire for sexual reconciliation and a departure from socialized gender appropriateness," he still articulates a "simplified female principle" (91-2). Marilyn Judith Atlas asserts that "while Anderson could be sympathetic to women, he could also unrealistically limit not only his presentation of them, but his understanding of what they needed" (253). Indeed, as evidenced by his masculine model of art, Anderson's view of gender is affected by the same conventions he argues against. However,

throughout his writing, Anderson remains aware of this bias and frequently qualifies his own work because of it. His intention in writing “thoughtful books” is to help future generations that are less connected to gender conventions find solutions, because Anderson’s own cultural inheritance restricts him from fully doing so.

In “Tandy,” the stranger who gives Tandy her name claims that the kind of woman needed to break gender convention does not even exist yet:

“There is a woman coming,” he said, and his voice was now sharp and earnest. “I have missed her, you see. She did not come in my time. You may be the woman. It would be like fate to let me stand in her presence once, on such an evening as this, when I have destroyed myself with drink and she is as yet only a child.” (79)

The kind of woman the stranger describes is a woman who can only exist in the future, when more “thoughtful books” have been written and social customs have changed. He cannot imagine exactly what she will do or be like, only that she must break free of the conventions of his time. Anderson does not claim to fully envision or write the kinds of women, or men, or social shifts that he believes are necessary to make women’s lives “livable.”

In *Perhaps Women* Anderson repeatedly warns against the subjectivity of his own writing. The title itself is noncommittal, and in the introduction Anderson almost apologizes for the book’s inadequacy:

This little book will have to be put out as it is...The whole thing is nothing but an impression, a sketch. I know that. I have kept it by me for a year now. I have tried to give it better form but that now seems impossible to me. I put it out hoping that it may arouse thought and discussion. (7)

*Perhaps Women* is the closest Anderson ever came to publishing a social treatise, but his introduction warns that his ideas are incomplete. The book itself reads as if Anderson is trying to figure things out as he is writing it, and the ideas he puts forth evolve from one section to the next. In “It is a Woman’s Age” he suggests again that the “imaginative world” is inherently

masculine, and that creation in that realm is a male act, but later he ponders if American men have given up this facet of themselves. Near the end of the book he states that “I think it is time now for women to come into power in the western world, to take over the power, the control of life” (139). In the titular section “Perhaps Women,” Anderson again comments on the inadequacy of his work to spark change:

I, a man, can go blunderingly into blundering other lives. I can fail in the eyes of others, as I will fail in this book, trying as I am here to say the unsayable. I can fail because you who read fail also. Your whole life is a story of failure. As for myself, all of my success as a writer has been in telling the story of failure. I have told that story and told it well because I know failure. (126-7)

According to Anderson, a book like *Perhaps Women* is doomed to fail because the act of writing it is a definite thing. He claims that all men and women of his day, and all writers as well, have failed and will continue to fail to fully escape gender convention because they are all stuck in the past. He asks the reader to “be sympathetic if you can but do not spare me, the American artist. We also have failed” (97).

In the prior section he discusses how his future wife Eleanor chastised him when they first knew each other because he did not write about modern problems: “Writers, she said, men like myself, who should at least be trying to tell the story of my own time, were still in the Victorian age,” and he acknowledges that she may well be right (114). If she is, and writers like Anderson cannot escape the inherent biases of outdated values, any definite attempt to solve the “sex problem” is doomed to fail. Reading Anderson’s fiction as attempts at “thoughtful books” for people like Tandy and Jane Webster is more accurate to his intention, and it more accurately reflects the ways he tried to compensate for the limitations of his own cultural inheritance.

## Conclusion

After Anderson's most influential period in the 1920s, he gradually became a less central figure in the development of modern American literature, but he continued to find success as a writer. He built a farmhouse called Ripshin in Marion, Virginia with the royalties from *Dark Laughter* and for a few years occupied himself primarily as editor of the two town newspapers – one of which, the *Smyth County News*, still publishes in the area. He wrote local news stories about the people in town, continued to publish short stories, and wrote *Kit Brandon* – a well-executed culmination of his studies of gender roles and experimentation with the novel form that has never received the critical attention it deserves.

In his hometown of Clyde, Ohio, at the local library, there is a small room dedicated to Anderson – a full collection of his published works, photographs from his childhood, and a collection of articles about his career. The room shows Anderson as a success story, as a writer who brought his small town to the world through his stories. In the Smyth County library in Marion there is a similar room, but the Anderson it shows is different than the one in Clyde. The walls are lined with pictures of an old man laughing with other townsfolk and resting on the steps of Rosemont, his final wife Eleanor's family estate. There are clippings from the newspapers he ran and the stories he wrote as "Buck Fever," a made-up mountain man Anderson used as a pseudonym, even though everyone in town knew who was really writing the stories.

The fact that Anderson's final home remembers him this way, as a member of the community rather than a national icon, is appropriate for a writer whose main focus was always on getting to the root of what people thought and felt. When he travelled with Eleanor to labor strikes and protests, he did not write articles about American workers, but about the individual people he met. Anderson's work does not function as social commentary in the way Upton

Sinclair urged him to write because painting people with such broad social strokes would have dehumanized them in Anderson's eyes. His intention was to create a greater empathy between people by making them aware of the problems he saw, not to solve the problems. As he wrote in an unpublished letter to a fan in 1941, "It gives me intense pleasure to think that any work of mine would give you a feeling of knowing a little better the people about you" (Newberry).

However, Anderson's exploratory approach to writing makes his work at times vague and even contradictory. After Anderson's death, Lionel Trilling characterized the majority of his work as adolescent and pessimistic. Jean Toomer greatly admired Anderson as a writer, but noted problematic, primitivistic views of African Americans in his work. Marilyn Judith Atlas describes the convoluted nature of his gender discussions as an unwillingness to follow through with the implications of his own social ideas. Mark Whalan argues that Anderson does not fully understand what he believes about social behavior, and that his work subsequently contradicts itself. Susan Sonntag is more blunt, describing *Winesburg, Ohio* as "bad to the point of being laughable, but not bad to the point of being enjoyable," because it is "too dogged and pretentious." Ernest Hemingway famously parodied Anderson's indefinite, dream-like style in *The Torrents of Spring* (1926).

Nevertheless, many commentators celebrate the searching method of Anderson's prose and its probing, questioning way of addressing social problems. In his lifetime Anderson was heralded by such figures as H.L. Mencken and Waldo Frank as a Whitmanesque chronicler of modern American life. William Faulkner wrote retrospectively that Anderson was not only one of the biggest influences on his own work, but on American literature as a whole. F. Scott Fitzgerald wrote that even *Many Marriages*, the most panned of Anderson's books, was a "stupendous achievement" (*Critical Essays*, 44). In their extensive discussions of Anderson's

work, Ray Lewis White, Charles Modlin, David D. Anderson and Walter Rideout have described Anderson as a significant recorder of early 20<sup>th</sup> century Middle America.

For Anderson, issues of gender identity are inseparable from the rising tide of urbanization, industrialization, and mass media of early 20<sup>th</sup> century America. His writing always addresses “the thing that makes the mature life of men and women in the modern world possible,” but by refusing to be definite in his conclusions, he left a legacy of complex and occasionally contradictory gender analysis. In a 1925 letter to Bab Finley, Anderson writes, “I think really that sex is all and nothing. I have for a long time now been trying to get up into consciousness what I feel about it” (*Letters to Bab*, 225). His writing is a record of this struggle to figure things out, but it avoids concrete conclusions.

Anderson’s America is a rapidly changing landscape, and his most important characters struggle perpetually to change with it, often failing, occasionally finding moments of hope. Most of his men insist on holding onto an outdated model of masculinity that restricts their emotional capacity, and most of his women remain trapped in oppressive institutions. Characters who succeed in achieving a more androgynous identity either exist on the fringes of society, like Kit Brandon, Wing Biddlebaum, and Kate Chancellor, or have an undetermined future ahead of them, like George Willard, Helen White, and Tandy. Anderson’s aim was to write “thoughtful books,” depictions of the miscommunications between modern Americans, to help future readers find more definite answers. The Sherwood Anderson rooms in Clyde and Marion show the beginning and end of a career dedicated to exploring the inner lives of men and women. The dozens of boxes of letters and manuscripts in Chicago’s Newberry library illustrate the decades of hard, thoughtful work that spanned the time in between.

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