Sherwood Anderson and the Industrial Corruption of Midwestern Individualism

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Abstract

Sherwood Anderson's literary Midwest reflects many of the idealistic characteristics resulting from the region's frontier, agrarian origin. The most prominent of these characteristics is the region's emphasis on and appreciation of human particularity. His novels *Winesburg, Ohio* and *Poor White* document the region's unique relationship with individual particularity and how this particularity clashed with a new industrial lifestyle. The two novels reflect the Midwest's unique understanding of individuality and offer an explanation for why the region's response to an industrial cultural overhaul was so damaging for the Midwest's identity, as the traditional identity was supplanted by an industrial one.

Sherwood Anderson and the Industrial Corruption of Midwestern Individualism

The literature of the Midwest boasts several titanic names in the American literary canon: Ernest Hemingway, Willa Cather, Sinclair Lewis, F. Scott Fitzgerald, among others. Each of these authors offer insights into aspects of a fundamental Midwest too large and too varied to be fully represented by a singular written work. Nevertheless, enough has been written about the region by critics and authors alike to identify certain characteristics that have come to significantly define the literary Midwest. Sherwood Anderson's works narrate and characterize his own ideal Midwest, highlighting how the cultural and historical development of the region build towards a culture that prizes the experiences and intricacies of the individual. *Winesburg, Ohio* is a powerful expression of the ways in which the individual is valued in Anderson's ideal Midwest. His following novel, *Poor White*, illustrates how industrialism was particularly destructive to the Midwest's conception of the individual. An examination of *Winesburg, Ohio* and *Poor* White provides an explanation for and an illustration of the particularly destructive nature of industrialism's impact on the Midwestern version of individuality and the consequences suffered by the individual Midwesterner.

Pioneer Identity and the Ideal Midwest

Making sense of Anderson's focus on Midwestern particularity demands an understanding of the region itself. The Midwest is a heavily mythologized region, its place in the broader American mythos defined by pastoral and agricultural imagery and an assumption of simple, small-scale lifestyles that mirror the community structures they take place in. The idealized small-town ethos and time-honored, almost antiquated presentation of the region is a common one in the American consciousness. This is, of course, a generalized perception of a sprawling region with a great deal more depth and diversity than it is often given credit for, but

the mythologized Midwest is built atop a set of real consistencies. Karl Wood mentions the "hundreds of similar towns across the American Midwest" that pride themselves on their "pioneer heritage," a common past that results in a characteristic image of "farming families braving the dangers of the wilderness to stamp out a town and establish 'civilization' in the middle of a primeval forest" (90). The truth of the American Midwest is far more complex than the stereotypical understanding allows, but has definite roots in a small-town, agricultural lifestyle. Thus, the following attempt at cobbling together a cohesive vision of the region is, like Anderson's understanding of his native Ohio, an idealized one. I focus on characterizing the idealized, pre-modern Midwest as it existed in Anderson's day: the late nineteenth to early twentieth century. An explanation of the agrarian origin and development of the region is necessary to understand why a love of detail, particularity, individuality, and small-scale truth become so central to the region's identity, and by extension, to Anderson's own Midwest. It is also essential to understand why industrialism and the forces of modernity were so destructive to the identities of so many Midwestern communities.

Because constant change and evolution is such a prevalent part of the Midwest's history, a singular identity for the region is extremely difficult to determine. A landscape caught between two coasts with seemingly overwhelming cultural, ideological, commercial, and historical influence, the Midwest is impossible to divorce from its coastal pressures, but undeniably unique in its cultural presentation. Frederick Jackson Turner's influential essay "The Significance of The Frontier in American History" details the Midwest's position as at one point, the edge of the American expansion westward, emphasizing the responsibility of the region in contributing to "American social development," forced to define itself in the context of America's "perennial rebirth" (32). The Midwest discovered itself to be a new American appendage— the subject of

Turner's "rebirth"— growing into social, cultural, and economic stability with limited contact with more entrenched American traditions. This unsteady sense of identity in the American body coupled with the whirlwind of change brought on by the events of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century introduced an overarching sense of disconnection from the comfort of tradition and the necessity of relying on oneself to create stability amid chaos.

When the Midwest was "settled" as an American region, it was an extension of the America that had already established itself as "American" on the East Coast, especially New England. As a result, the Midwest has always been defined largely by how it contrasts with coastal metropolises. Jason Stacy elaborates:

> the Midwestern town became the inheritor of values of a mythological founding generation and, ultimately, a battleground for the characteristics and actualization of those values. While the New England village memorialized timeless stability in the second half of the nineteenth century, the Midwestern town became the center of conflict about the future of the country itself. (37)

Especially in comparison to the relative stability of New England urban structure, the premodern Midwestern town was trapped between its New English influences and the fundamental differences in lifestyle and values necessitated by the region's geography and purpose in the context of America.

In the late nineteenth century, as industrial culture was coming rapidly to the Midwest from the East, New England became the go-to point of comparison for people in small Midwestern towns like Anderson's Clyde, Ohio, the inspiration for Winesburg (Ichinose 164). Anderson himself often discusses the Midwest in terms of how it was different from New England, usually indicating what the Midwest offers that New England cannot match. To

Anderson, the Midwest is fundamentally different from New England, but connected nonetheless. Thus, an essential part of the Midwestern identity is less concerned with its own unique qualities than it is with how these qualities contrast with those represented by New England. In Anderson's era, the agrarian Midwest was often seen as antithetical to the more industrial New England, a point of pride for the Midwest that informs much of Anderson's characterization of the region.

Because it was established after New England and because it was understood as somewhat incompatible with the experience of the rest of America at the time, the Midwest is a bit more difficult to define than the more well-established American regions, leading many of those unfamiliar with the Midwest to characterize it as either synonymous with emptiness and placelessness, or the blank slate on which the nation's quaintest, most idealistic qualities are imprinted. Yet these wholly stereotypical understandings are counterproductive in forming an accurate picture of the region. Andy Oler explains the impact of this phenomenon, suggesting that "The Midwest holds two conflicting positions in the American cultural imagination, both of which rob the region of cultural distinctiveness. Often, it is the 'heartland,' standing in for all of American culture. Alternately, the Midwest is 'flyover country,' part of the great undifferentiated mass between the coasts" (13). In both cases, the Midwest is homogenized and denied the opportunity to define itself within the broader context of the nation.

Lisa Long diagnoses the "flyover" label as a denigrating term hatched in well-established coastal metropolises, suggesting that "The Midwest is often perceived by Coastal residents as merely a 'flyover,' an empty and culturally vacuous expanse of land- insignificant, flat and nigh invisible" (110). To allege cultural vacuity is to mark the Midwest as fundamentally separate from the rest of America, disconnecting it from the weight of American traditions that

so many other locales use to define their identities. This cultural alienation is matched by the Midwest's physical isolation from more well-established American cultural bastions such as New York, forcing its residents to engage in a greater degree of regional self-definition than that required of Coastal residents.

The latter misconception—the portrayal of the Midwest as the "heartland"—also works against the region's subjectivity. In much the same way that the lifelong rural Midwesterner can embrace a mythologized conception of the urban territory as a bustling garden of skyscrapers and businesspeople, the urban inhabitant often has a mythologized understanding of the Midwest as a collection of cornfields and identically wholesome small towns. Lisa Long suggests that "the Midwest's vaunted agrarian values and collective earnestness make it the 'heartland,' the most American of places," the result being that the Midwest's "heterogeneity and distinctiveness have been erased in the interest of maintaining its national, symbolic function" (107). But in marking the entire region as a symbolic stand-in for a distilled collection of American tendencies, the Midwest loses its complexity of cultural identity. It is no longer a region filled with real people living authentic lives, becoming instead a fictionalized, idealized place where real stories and real individuals are ignored in favor of loose images of pastoral simplicity and communal wholesomeness.

What is mistaken for cultural homogeneity is far more accurately described as *consistency* in the geographical conditions of the regions. In reality, the Midwest is just as human and distinctive as any other American region. Geographically, the Midwest is uniquely suited among the American regions to achieve agricultural success. The population developed accordingly, with notable consistency in its community structures. These structures were largely centered around agricultural systems that, out of necessity, tended to look similar across the

entire Midwest. As a result, the region's broad range of cultures and ethnicities find themselves situated among comparable geographic surroundings. Because the Midwest has historically experienced such relatively similar terrain features and settlement patterns, the identity of the region remains markedly consistent in the general sense. David Pichaske argues that "the weight of historical evidence suggests that the Midwest supports some cultural values while being subtly unsuited to others because, while landscape and society engage in reciprocal interaction, geography is more powerful and ultimately proves inexorable" (22). Yet, even in an area as vast and varied as the Midwest, there are cultural values that remain consistent throughout the region, most of which are derived directly from agrarianism. Even as the Midwest developed into a more industrial region, the agrarian ideals it originally defined itself by proved to have significant staying power.

However, to conflate the unifying aspects of Midwestern identity with cultural homogeneity would be a mistake. Of the stereotypical Midwestern identity, Sonya Salamon suggests:

> our farmer, his family, and his community symbolize for many the all-American ideals of family values, individualism, self-reliance, industry, and democracy. Yet the Midwest is actually an ethnic mosaic of farming communities, a product of rapid settlement during the middle and late nineteenth century by immigrants from northern and western Europe and by native-born farmers following the frontier west. (2)

Because these "all-American ideals" are so widely shared across the various cultures of the region, Picashke finds support for his assertion that the geographical realities of the Midwest have as much influence in forming the region's identity as the disparate cultural realities that

exist within them. The result is a region largely defined by its ideals and the fact that they are so widely and consistently shared across the region.

Conceived and fostered in relative isolation from well-established American cultural infrastructure, these agrarian Midwestern communities thrived on necessary and pragmatic habits and community structures to facilitate the development of their culture and economy. Of these original Midwesterners, David Picashke writes, “Without any authority other than their practical reason and a belief in individual human dignity, they set up self-governing communities which functioned well in the decades before industrialism changed the premises on which the society was based” (15). Here, the region’s self-reliant, individualistic, simply structured roots are expressed. The Midwestern identity provided the basis for a region in which “a native character would begin to emerge, a character more self-reliant and more naturally noble than any that could be formed in tired and corrupt Europe, and new institutions would spring from the new social compact among free and classless men” (Picashke 14). The Midwest was largely free from the social and economic complications and corruptions of the urban environment, but also functioned without access to its full breadth of infrastructure and social stability, a reality that required a different set of behaviors and values that could exist in the Midwest but not in the more established urban American East. Just as the speed of the industrial East was reflected in the region’s generalized identity, the Midwestern identity reflected the slower, simpler, more organic way of life necessitated by its smaller scale agrarian infrastructure.

Because the Midwest in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries was still in the early stages of defining itself regionally, these early Midwestern structures had little room to accommodate the confrontational, the overcomplicated, and the abstract without adopting the same perceived corruptions associated with urbanity, resulting in a characteristic “anti-

intellectualism and a distrust of ‘impractical,’ abstract thinking” (Picashke 15). Anderson himself characterized the “age of reason” and its associated attitudes as exhibiting a “dreadful kind of egotism,” arguing that the intellectual attempt to classify the world by trusting oneself to determine what is “reasonable” is a misguided, irresponsible instance of overestimating the scale of human intellect (*Many Marriages* 120). Michael Rosen describes the traditional Midwestern perspective as producing “an apprehensible, organized world in which honest perception, rewarded attention, and clear thinking are acknowledged” (99). The emphasis on perception and attention reinforces the central importance of immediate experience and the care for physical specifics—in nature, in craftsmanship, in physical spaces themselves—which characterized the Midwestern perspective.

Admittedly, this is a generalized understanding of a region too vast to be effectively reduced to a single description, but the ideal American Midwest has remained remarkably consistent from its inception as the edge of the frontier pushing west in the mid-nineteenth century to its modern iteration. In its history and its literature, the Midwest has always been guided by a specific set of tendencies and principles that emerged from real places populated by real people and their real experiences. These underlying regional habits were largely directed by the region’s geography and would shape much of the social, cultural, spiritual, and intellectual development of the region.

Much of the Midwest remains a loose confederation of farming towns, small and far apart, somewhat immune to the urban tendencies so prevalent across the rest of America and concentrated especially on the Coasts. Because of this agricultural ethos, much of the self-defined Midwestern identity is inextricably linked with the land itself. William Barillas suggests that “The Midwest is the nation’s middlescape, its ‘heartland,’ a regional label that associates

geographical centrality with a defining role in national identity and emotional responses to place" (4). Here, "place" becomes essential in defining the Midwestern identity. A region historically dependent on its own geography for sustenance, the Midwestern attachment to land and physical location is wholly unlike anything rooted in coastal urbanity. Barillas' "emotional responses to place" are the responses that result from Midwesterners using their immediate physical surroundings to help create a cohesive corporate identity (4). Essentially, Midwestern Americans, just like their peers in coastal metropolises, must define themselves and their culture with attention to geographical place. The Midwest is, even now, simply much more dependent on its land than more urban coastal areas.

The Roots of Midwestern Individualism and the "Attention Epistemology"

Each Midwesterner has his or her own connection to their place of origin with his or her own understanding of how that setting contributes to their personal and regional identity. And so, there is a resultant brand of Midwestern individualism that is rooted in the necessity of participating directly and impactfully in rural social and economic structures. Without sufficient agricultural success, the economy was likely to fail. Without sufficient and responsible social participation, the culture and community would not develop. There was not enough preexisting social and economic infrastructure for these communities to withstand a lack of significant individual engagement. Because the rural structures of the Midwest were so dependent on the individuals living within them, the Midwest became an extremely self-reliant place. Systems of small rural villages far enough apart to necessitate the ability to operate independently came to define the agrarian Midwest, making this type of self-reliance a defining characteristic of the region.

Similarly, because these towns were forced to be independent, there also grew a determined attitude of reliance on the community. Because they were isolated, these towns became insular. Because their survival depended on their ability to keep themselves running commercially, structurally, and socially, the Midwestern emphasis on community strength and togetherness grew out of the same kind of need that inspired the region's reputation for individualistic self-reliance. Daniel Jaster suggests that "low population densities and rare access to rapid transportation meant that family, neighborhoods, schools, and churches were the primary social institutions," arguing that such conditions created a strong emphasis on "localism," a reliance on local institutions to determine the direction of the community (36). A culture arose in which each individual played an important role in maintaining not just the physical survival of the whole, but the cultural, spiritual, social, and ideological survival of the community as well. Thus, each individual person held an intrinsic value to their community. This intrinsic value led to a collective, communal appreciation for the individual and their specific role in their community. Each person, with their idiosyncrasies and abilities, helped the community achieve a more concrete identity by providing personal reference points by which a community achieved a greater level of self-definition.

Coupled with the social value of self-reliance was the spiritual value assigned to particularity. The Midwest did not have the economic systems, physical infrastructure, or population that allowed urban environments to function autonomously. Fewer people, fewer readily available resources, and a limited capacity to use these resources meant that smaller, more isolated Midwestern communities had to rely much more heavily on the labor of individuals providing a specific service within the community. The roles necessary to keep the community functioning could not be filled easily, requiring a heavy reliance on the individual to

perform effectively in their defined position. Thus, the roles took on a more personal presence within the Midwestern town structure as individuals and their personalities became linked with their functions within the community. Personal craftmanship and artisan work was extremely important to these communities, as the work had an emotional connection to both the creator and the user. This relational aspect also offered a conscientious alternative to the more corporate, standardized, and capitalistic tendencies of urban life that had become antithetical to the Midwestern way of life (Jäger 1037). Such a premium on meaningful, personal work further contributed to the intrinsic value of the individual within the community.

Beyond commerce and production, the uniqueness inherent to each individual became a source of social, intellectual, and even spiritual value for communities with limited contact with the cultural hubs of America. As such, Midwestern communities found themselves with a greater tendency to recognize and appreciate the details and idiosyncrasies of their community members than often seen in more densely populated urban environments. Commonly, this appreciation manifested in a strong expression of communal pride and neighborliness. Individuals, in their particularity, added to the richness and depth of Midwestern life and were in most cases, respected accordingly. Because they played a role that was clearly defined and clearly observed in their community, they held an intrinsic value because their very existence helped to define the social and cultural realities of their community. These communities recognized the service provided by those that lived among them—the depth and detail provided by those existing as individuals in a community that defined itself largely by its constituent parts—and viewed each individual as possessing an intrinsic dignity.

The Midwest, then, can be said to have forged a sacramental relationship with both its human and natural surroundings such that spiritual and intellectual value is derived from

diligently experiencing and understanding the people and places that defined the Midwestern existence. Both humanity and the natural world became sources of spiritual, intellectual, and cultural understanding for members of the community. Mark Bueschel defines this specifically Midwestern brand of sacramentalism as an:

> emphasis on the inextricable interfusion of the physical and the spiritual, on particularity and the mystery to be found in the particular, on "presence," on intrinsic value, relational communion with the natural and human other, on entering into limitation in order to find freedom, on submitting to one's given, natural place in Creation, and on a commitment to gradual, "organic," concretely experiential process. (17)

Bueschel argues that this spiritual connection with nature is derived from the Christian tradition, indicating that a sacramental understanding of the natural world should be seen "relationally" and "lovingly," in which the participants are "stewards of the Earth and of one another" (16). Communing with the natural world—the life-giving sustainer of Midwestern life—provides similar edification in the spiritual and intellectual arenas because it is a simultaneous communion with the life-giving spiritual Sustainer of all life.

Because a sacramental lifestyle prioritizes one's relationship with their surroundings, a truly effective sacramental lifestyle must recognize and exemplify that any relationship, if it is to be meaningful and successful, requires time, patience, and conscious, specific effort. Truly loving, understanding, and consciously relating to one's environment requires knowing the truth of its constituent parts. This kind of truth comes from appreciating these parts in their most unadulterated, organic state. In the Midwest, this looked like caring for and appreciating the aspects of life that must be physically experienced to be understood—nature, artisanship, agriculture, a person's tangible contributions—as well as the more intangible offerings. These

intangible elements were generally more relational, centering on the benefits of paying attention to and understanding the details of things other than oneself. Bueschel explains this by citing Sallie McFague's term "attention epistemology," which she defines as "listening, paying attention to another, in itself, for itself. It's the opposite of means-ends thinking, thinking of everything as useful, necessary, pleasurable to *oneself*... An attention epistemology assumes the *intrinsic* value of anything, everything that is not the self… the knowledge of *difference*" (50). Recognizing and valuing these differences simply because they are there to know them is a hallmark of the idealized Midwest, especially Sherwood Anderson's Midwest. Anderson advocated for a "slow culture" in which appropriate time is taken to appreciate the physical for its inherent worth and to interpret the experience that invariably stems from it (*A Story-Teller's Story* 80).

The literature of the Midwest confirms these consistencies, remaining one of the most powerful illustrative forces in explaining the way in which a sacramental understanding of community and of nature define the region. Midwestern literature has been characterized by an emphasis on realism. David Marion Holman explains the Midwestern tendency towards realism as a reflection of the region's elevation of the individual: the underlying assumption that even "unremarkable" aspects of life are worth describing. Such emphasis on "populist idealism" ensures that the value of the individual remains intact, allowing them to be represented and given meaning simply because their existence merits examination (51).

Sherwood Anderson and the Literary Midwest

Sherwood Anderson constructed his own literary Midwest under these understandings and conditions. He outlines many of the ideal qualities of his Midwest in his 1924 autobiography *A Story-Teller's Story*, almost all of which are directly related to his own experiences in the

region. *Winesburg, Ohio* is Anderson's ideal Midwest realized: a place where the region's common features converge in largely positive, productive ways. Anderson's following novel, *Poor White,* finds these regional characteristics under attack, rendered largely obsolete by a sudden shift towards modernity. The region's reliance on agrarianism was diminished in favor of industrial development. Labor standardization reduced the need for particularity in craftmanship, making individual roles in community much more expendable.

Anderson illustrates the injurious effect such standardization has on the interpersonal and cultural well-being of individual Midwestern communities, forcing a mass acclimation to new cultural values and practices, many of which were directly antithetical to the region's past understanding of itself. David Davis argues that "Mechanization… is antithetical to the pastoral image of America, so, when modernist writers portray mechanization, they figuratively represent a social revolution in America, a revolution much more prominent in the agricultural south and Midwest than in the relatively industrial northeast" (416). The result of this "social revolution" was a young regional culture rendered obsolete and forced to redefine itself. Leo Marx notices a similar trend, suggesting that mechanization represents a "counterforce" that has "stripped the old ideal of most, if not all, of its meaning" (362). Anderson chronicles the downfall of the "old ideal," his ideal Midwest, mourning its loss and attempting to foresee a way forward that could salvage as much of it as possible. To fully understand Anderson's efforts at documenting the rise and fall of the Midwest, it is essential to illustrate the ways in which Anderson's own ideal Midwest aligns itself with the more general version discussed above.

Anderson repeatedly affirms that the spiritual and emotional well-being of the Midwest can only be maintained by continuing to love the physical experience of and personal relation to the region. Citing the original American expansion into the Midwest, he remembers that "the

young farmers came first, glad of the rich free soil and the friendlier climate- strong young males that were to come in such numbers as to leave New England, with its small fields and its thinner, stonier soil" (*A Story-Teller's Story* 80*)*. Anderson argues that a region naturally suited to better host an agrarian culture than the coasts must by extension form its own cultural and moral tradition as well, eschewing the "insane fear of the flesh" he associates with New England in favor of a lifestyle befitting the rich organic surroundings of Midwest (80). This "fear of the flesh" takes the form of a "New England-derived…, anti-sacramental, anti-sensual" culture that lies in opposition to the "fecund…, spiritually significant, highly sexual, and sacramental" Midwestern sensibility (Bueschel 27). Anderson argues that a healthy culture must embrace this type of sacramental outlook, valuing the sensual, organic experiences offered by one's surroundings. In his novel *Poor White,* he claims that even though the Midwest was technically settled by New Englanders, whom he blames for giving "modern life a too material flavor," he applauds the Midwest for evolving on its own, creating "a land in which a less determinedly materialistic people may in their turn live in comfort" (11). This comfort is a direct result of the greater focus on the experiential and relational aspects of Midwestern life, in which the sensual, personal, and natural are prized above the mechanical.

To Anderson, a "comfortable" culture must exhibit a "sensual love of life, of surfaces, words with a rich flavor on the tongue, colors, the soft texture of the skin of women, the play of muscles through the bodies of men" (80). His praise of such a culture is rooted in a profound love of the physical world and the joy associated with experiencing it, arguing that the "hands of workmen" form the basis of a "true civilization" through their "love of surfaces" and "sensual love of materials" (80-81). These "surfaces" and "materials" are simply the physical objects that form the material basis of life. From the wood a carpenter uses to build a house to the ground in

which a farmer plants his crops, Anderson argues that conscientiously appreciating and experiencing these "materials" on a physical level produces an emotional, intellectual, and spiritual response that forms the basis of "true civilization." He underscores the necessity of appreciating the details of one's surroundings by actively taking time to care about them: caring enough about them to recognize and value their particularities.

Valuing human particularity becomes another way of loving one's materials. In the introduction to *Winesburg, Ohio,* an unnamed writer is said to have "known many people" in a "peculiarly intimate way that was different from the way in which you and I know people" (Anderson 8). Each of these individuals are framed as possessing one or more "beautiful" truths, or defining characteristics (8). Anderson suggests that knowing people in this "peculiarly intimate" way provides access to truths that are otherwise hidden within the individuals that manifest them. This type of relationship, when viewed sacramentally, mirrors the idea that a sacrificial focus on the "other" gives access to a spiritual satisfaction otherwise unattainable. Anderson emphasizes that this experience is only accessible to those willing to know and communicate with the "other" on an intimate personal level. In *Winesburg*, the "other" takes the form of Anderson's "grotesque" characters.

Midwestern Individualism at Work in *Winesburg, Ohio*

Winesburg, Ohio is a collection of loosely related character profiles of the town's "grotesques," who Anderson defines as people who cling too desperately to a single "truth" and become defined by it, their truth becoming a "falsehood" (9). More practically, these "grotesques" are characters afflicted with a specific dysfunction that disqualifies them from engaging effectively or acceptably with their community. Each profile examines an instance of human particularity—the kind that traditionally leads to a person being marginalized or even

ostracized entirely—and seeks to understand it. The grotesque characteristics are given attention, discussed, and ultimately valued for their presence in their community. Anderson ends his introductory chapter musing on what is fundamentally "understandable and lovable of all the grotesques," emphasizing that these people are not only capable of being understood, but that it is beneficial to do so.

Anderson focuses largely on human particularities that result in negative consequences for the bearer. The majority of the grotesques are so dysfunctional that they cannot engage meaningfully with the Winesburg community without outside assistance. It requires a conscientious effort to commune with the grotesque individual to even have a meaningful encounter with them, let alone develop a relationship intimate enough to uncover their core characteristics. For most grotesques, there is a communicative barrier that keeps them from being understood. There is simply no platform for them to express their truths in a functional public setting. Anderson's solution to this problem is George Willard, a character who actively enters the dysfunction of the grotesque characters to give them a voice.

For Anderson, this active engagement with dysfunction is an essential part of valuing human particularity. Echoing McFague's "attention epistemology," recognizing and appreciating the dysfunctional becomes necessary because the dysfunctional is an unavoidable aspect of human community. Thus, ignoring the people who are largely defined by their dysfunctional characteristics because they are difficult, inefficient, or confusing is antithetical to the sacramental model of Midwestern life proposed by Bueschel. In Winesburg, the grotesque characters exist at the periphery of the community, but they still exist as individuals, present and worthy of consideration. George Willard acts as a bridge between the dysfunctional grotesques and the more conventional Winesburg society, taking time and effort to form relationships with

the grotesques. What follows is a reciprocal, symbiotic relationship in which Willard's craft as a writer is given opportunities to develop, and his understanding of humanity is deepened through new, meaningful relationships. The grotesques receive the type of attention befitting a member of a caring community and a platform to express their stories and perspectives. When Willard shares his stories of them through the newspaper, the community itself achieves a new level of interpersonal depth. Because of this tendency to enter dysfunction, George Willard's presence in Winesburg becomes representative of this core Midwestern practice of intentionally valuing human particularity. A reporter and writer for the local newspaper, Willard is present in nearly every profile, simply having conversations with the grotesque characters and recording their stories.

"Hands" finds Willard at the home of Wing Biddlebaum, a former schoolteacher chased from his former hometown after false accusations of child abuse see him literally chased from his house. An anxiety-ridden outcast, Biddlebaum does not consider himself a proper part of the community. Willard is the first Winesburg resident to form "something like a friendship" with him (11). Through Willard, Biddlebaum is given a platform to express himself: to "put into words the ideas that had been accumulated by his mind during long years of silence" (13). His perspectives and dreams are given voice because Willard cared enough about the individual to approach and understand the man's particularities. In doing so, Willard uncovers a measure of what Anderson deems to be the "lovable" aspect of grotesqueness.

Biddlebaum's lovable, valuable particularity would remain hidden within the individual if he had not first been valued by George Willard. His years of silence would have likely continued indefinitely, his particularity unvalued and his participation in community no more than a distant dream. In "Paper Pills," Doctor Reefy represents many of the same qualities as

George Willard, his metaphorical appreciation of "twisted apples" as the sweetest, mirroring Willard's discovery of powerful truths from unconventional, unassuming sources (19). Unfortunately, Doctor Reefy is "forgotten by Winesburg" (18). He writes his valuable thoughts on small pieces of paper to no audience, leaving them in his pockets to become unreadable bits of potential beauty, made useless by the fact that nobody makes the effort to read them. Doctor Reefy represents the loss that occurs when a culture is inattentive to the peculiarities of its members, wisdom squandered by carelessness.

The one member of Winesburg that does pay attention to Doctor Reefy is Elizabeth Willard, George's mother. For Elizabeth, Reefy serves in the same capacity as George does for the rest of community. As Elizabeth meets Doctor Reefy more and more frequently, she "speaks a little more freely" and feels "strengthened and renewed against the dullness of her days" (183). This type of personal attention is mutually beneficial, as Doctor Reefy finds an audience for his wisdom and a sense of community and Elizabeth receives his wisdom, a deepened sense of community, and access to Reefy's intrinsic value derived from an attention epistemology.

When this kind of attention towards the dysfunctional is absent from the community, the effects are ruinous, especially for the dysfunctional individual. In "Loneliness," Enoch Robertson moves from Winesburg to New York City as a young man, living as a "city man" for fifteen years (135). His resident grotesquerie finds no caring audience in the city, as "he couldn't understand people, and he couldn't make people understand him," a flaw which, in the speed and sprawl of New York, finds no audience willing to take the time to make sense of it. Enoch's isolated life of fancy excludes him from community in New York, but upon returning to Winesburg, he finds George Willard "at a time when the younger man was in a mood to understand" (140). Willard is a curious and compassionate audience, receptive to Enoch's

strange story, hoping to reach a more conclusive understanding. Enoch addresses Willard in a poignant plea for the kind of personal interpretation afforded by an attention epistemology: "you'll understand if you try hard enough… I have looked at you when you went past me on the street and I think you can understand. It isn't hard. All you have to do is to believe what I say, just listen and believe, that's all there is to it" (142). Listening and believing in this manner requires a sacrifice of time but creates a depth of understanding and community that seeks to understand itself. Failing to listen and believe forces individuals like Enoch into further dysfunction and isolation.

Modernism and the Industrial Midwest

Sherwood Anderson's Midwest in *Winesburg, Ohio* is the version that existed on the precipice of the Modernist period before a whirlwind of foundational changes began to impact the Midwestern way of life. The advent of Midwestern industrialism, ideological shifts, demographic changes, and a vastly quicker pace of life forced the Midwestern identity to accommodate much more than it had historically been forced to do. It complicated matters, forcing Midwesterners to reckon with a new way of life and reorder their existence in response to overwhelming outside forces. Sarah Kosiba expands on this idea, adding that Midwestern authors were:

> consistently using their work to understand the shift that was taking place in both urban and rural societies. Modernization, industrialization, and the emergence of an increasingly global identity in the United States were changing the social and political lives of many Americans, and the literature of the Midwest reflects the perspectives of one regional area coming to terms with those changes. (7)

In the Midwest, this shift towards the values of modernism was particularly antithetical to the slow, agrarian way of life that had come to define the region. Agrarian tendencies and the values they upheld gave way to an impersonal industrialization centered on efficiency at all costs. The social values of urbanization began to crowd out the well-defined order of village life, further devaluing the individual as a community member, reframing their value as a function of their potential for labor. Sherwood Anderson bemoans this industrial trend, suggesting sardonically that, "surely individuality is ruinous to an age of standardization. It should at once and without mercy be crushed. Let us give all workers larger and larger salaries but let us crush out of them at once all flowering of individualities" (196). For Anderson, standardization seems to inaugurate the downfall of the entire Midwestern way of life. When efficiency is the prime directive of a society, individuality becomes nothing more than an inconvenience.

Anderson's place among the Midwestern modernists is early, which is notable because it qualifies him uniquely to comment on the shift to values of Modernism which replaced premodern conditions. Aaron Ritzenberg suggests that *Winesburg, Ohio* operates in the space between the modern and premodern, but seeks to highlight the sentimental aspects of premodernism. He suggests that Anderson recognizes the elements of the ideal Midwest which are still powerfully present through the voice of George Willard, emphasizing that "the artist must redeem human life from the pain of society's failures" (77). Willard represents more than simply the redemptive power of art, however. His artistic motive is an impressive realization of McFague's attention epistemology, the presence and impact of which is evidence of the premodern Midwest's continuing presence, which affirms that individuality and the love of it still has a place in a changing world. Even with this hope in mind, Anderson recognizes the precarious position of a distinct individuality in the Midwest.

Beyond threats to individuality, Anderson sees the encroaching industrialism as the introduction of speed to a culture that is necessarily slow. His autobiography depicts "speed, hurried workmanship, cheap automobiles for cheap men, cheap chairs in cheap houses, city apartment houses with shining bathroom floors, the Ford, the Twentieth Century Limited, the World War" as the usurpers of the patient, methodical Midwestern culture he loved so well (Anderson 81). To Anderson, speed is among the most destructive forces at work in the Midwest. It was the methodical, organic pace of the ideal Midwest that allowed its people to take the time necessary to develop an attention epistemology and a sacramental understanding of their surroundings. Anderson finds that the speed and distraction of the industrial world leads away from loving one's materials. Careful artisanship gives way to rushed, cheap construction. Careful relationships turn into distracted, transactional treatments of the individual. Individuality and particularity decay into standardized lifestyles and diluted expressions of culture.

Poor White and Industrial Corruption in the Midwest

Anderson's second novel, *Poor White,* is an examination of the consequences of introducing a fast, standardized, industrial lifestyle to a Midwestern culture that had previously prioritized the traditional regional values of particularity and community. While Winesburg represents many of the Midwest's most idyllic, emotionally benevolent community features, Anderson's Bidwell, Ohio is an example of how these tendencies have been buried under the weight of rapid cultural change. As the speed and dominance of industrial life invades the town, the same methodical, thoughtful interaction that for so long fostered social and emotional unity becomes actively detrimental to the economic well-being of the individual. Susan Hegemen expands on this idea, suggesting that Bidwell's new mechanical realities act as a "sign of the transformation in work that is taking place in the narrative, from agricultural and craft labor to an

alienated, proletarianized industrial labor" (120). Though labor is the primary means by which the shift from Anderson's idealized Midwest to the new, industrial Midwest is signaled, there is a different kind of work that is made largely obsolete in the name of economic and infrastructural development: the emotional, artistic, and spiritual efforts to understand and engage with others like those taken by George Willard in Winesburg. The slow relational work of *Winesburg, Ohio* is displaced by a new, survival based social order much more reactionary and impersonal. The result is a divided community with a truncated capacity to care about one another. The particulars that are so deeply treasured in Winesburg are ignored entirely in favor of broad understandings of economic positions within a local hierarchy.

From the beginning of *Poor White,* Anderson is clear about the alienation that occurs due to industrial influence. Hugh McVey, the novel's main character, is a contemplative youth with a "great store of patience" and a propensity for "dreamy detachment" (7). Abandoned by his father, he is taken in by Sarah Shepherd, a New England transplant to Hugh's native Missouri, who "hated the town and the people among whom fate had thrown her" (7). Hugh is educated in the ways of propriety, his dreaminess trained out of him as Sarah tries to make him into a man approximating the industrious relatives she respects so much in New England. The result is a confused Hugh, who wants to heed Sarah, but finds it difficult to "overcome his inclination to give himself up to his vaporous dreams" (13). His emotional concerns, sinful according to Sarah Shepherd, are put aside to become a more productive, more "frugal," and more "honest" member of society (12). Hugh becomes defined by his confusion, finding it impossible to integrate himself meaningfully into his hometown. He moves to Bidwell, finding no more success there. He is socially isolated, becoming, in his own way, similar to a Winesburg grotesque.

Anderson describes pre-industrial Bidwell in terms very similar to those of pre-industrial Winesburg. Bidwell was a place where "every one knew his neighbor and was known to him. Strangers did not come and go swiftly and mysteriously and there was no constant and confusing roar of machinery and of new projects afoot. For the moment mankind seemed about to take time to understand itself" (44). The echoes of Anderson's ideal Midwest ring clearly here. Bidwell becomes representative of the thoughtful, attentive pre-modern Midwest.

Anderson's anticipated moment of human self-reflection is unfortunately but predictably interrupted by the encroachment of Industrialism from the east. Judge Hanby, the town's elder statesman, shares tales of factory work with the agrarian town:

> Factories are being built and everyone is going to work in the factories. It takes an old man like me to see how that changes their lives. Some of the men stand at one bench and do one thing not only for hours and hours but for days and years. There are signs hung up saying they musn't talk. Some of them make more money than they did before the factories came, but I tell you it's like being in prison. What would you say if I told you all America, all you fellows who talk so big about freedom, are going to be put in a prison, eh? (48)

Repetitive, impersonal "prison" labor is the direct antithesis of Anderson's assertion that "true civilization" is founded on careful, personal craftmanship. Beyond labor, as the wave of industrial life moved across the Midwest, "thought and poetry died or passed as a heritage to feeble, fawning men who also became servants of the new order," a consequence of the death of "individualistic life" (58-59). The birth of this new, thoughtless, impersonal, and standardized way of life renders the ideal premodern Midwestern identity effectively obsolete.

Anderson's conception of labor and the way it is transformed by industrial capitalism echoes Karl Marx's own statements about the alienating effects of industrialism. Marx argues that when labor becomes standardized, "the special skill of the labourer becomes worthless. He becomes transformed into a simple monotonous force of production, with neither physical nor mental elasticity. His work becomes accessible to all; therefore, competitors press upon him from all sides" (22). Anderson agrees, applying the same ideas more specifically to the Midwest. The craftmanship that was so essential to originally building Midwestern communities is now unable to compete with the ease and access of industrial productivity, becoming comparatively worthless. The laborers themselves become, by necessity, impersonal agents of production, unable to appreciate either the intrinsic value of their own labor, or the things it produces. Mental and physical "elasticity" become actively detrimental to a standardized system designed solely for efficiency. The death of "thought and poetry" is the death of "mental and physical" elasticity (22).

The overall effect on the worker—and by extension, the culture around the worker—, according to Anderson's autobiography, titled *A Story-Teller's Story,* is "impotence" (195). For Anderson, "to live is to create constantly new forms: with the body in living children; in new and beautiful forms carved out of materials; in the creation of a world of the fancy; in scholarship; in clear and lucid thought; and those who do not live die and decay and from decay always a stench rises" (195). Life in industrial Bidwell found a generation caught in lived impotence because their newly standardized, industrial way of life discouraged individual expression. The creation of new forms, in any of Anderson's listed areas, is inhibited by a world that prizes abstract value and efficiency over concrete experience and a sensual, organic lifestyle. Mark Bueschel provides an effective summary of the condition:

> humans no longer live in stable community and in an intimate connection with nature but are part of an abstract, highly competitive money-based economy…humans no longer stand in an actual relation to the land… but are instrumentalizing it for maximum financial profit rather than striving for families and small communities to be directly nourished by the land… economies have moved away from artisans working creatively with their hands to humans becoming mere cogs in a vast, machine-driven production system. (9)

The effect is a Midwest totally unmoored from its heritage. In its instability, it clung to industrialism for survival, embracing it because there was no other option. The result is catastrophic for communities like Bidwell. The once-vibrant, agriculturally successful, close-knit community becomes a breeding ground for investment schemes, cutthroat economic competition, and continually polarizing debate between neighbors about the current situation. The community is divided sharply along the lines of tradition and innovation, with those on the side of tradition finding themselves disenfranchised and destitute in the wake of total cultural upheaval.

Joe Wainsworth, an artisan harness maker, is the paragon of such industrial disenfranchisement. His slow, handmade labor is rendered obsolete by machine production, but Joe is an obstinate believer in the old ways, repeatedly affirming that “I know my trade and I don’t have to bow down to anyone here” (122). Eventually overwhelmed, Joe’s inability to adapt to the change that surrounds him leads to greater friction between him and his ideological opponents. Jim Gibson, Joe’s business partner and a natural fit for the town’s new industrial capitalism, wrests control of Joe’s harness business and fully embraces the new order. Joe, unable to handle obsolescence, murders Jim, taking symbolic revenge for his stolen way of life. Bidwell is reduced to a place where each individual’s most important personal detail is their

opinion on the mechanistic shift in society. Every other human particularity is ignored or decried because it detracts from the overall efficiency of the town. No time is taken to form relationships, to engage personally, or to build meaningful connections between people. There is no George Willard in Bidwell to reintroduce the grotesque individual to friendship and community. There is only competition and the desolation that comes from refusing to take part in it.

The Midwest was not the only region to suffer the indignities of industrial depersonalization, but its historical tendency towards individualism and agrarianism made it particularly ill-suited to deal with such a massive systemic upheaval. To Sherwood Anderson, the dramatic shift in Midwestern identity from slow to fast, from personal to general, from sacramental to impersonal, and especially from particular to standardized, represented the systematic dissolution of the fundamental premodern Midwestern identity. The arrival of industrialism and modernity signaled the end of a way of life, of a certain kind of community, and a certain kind of community interaction. In the same way that *Winesburg, Ohio* illustrates a uniquely Midwestern version of particularity that enriches and humanizes a community, *Poor White* describes how the denial of individualism and particularity in favor of industrial standardization inflicts a uniquely deadly cultural change upon the inhabitants of the Midwest. In the end, the value placed on particularity in the premodern Midwest could not be maintained through the rise of industrialism, leading the individual, the peculiar, and the grotesque, once uniquely prized and understood characteristics, to be ignored and excluded by modernity.

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