



A Study of Sherwood Anderson's *Winesburg, Ohio* From the Perspective of Eco-criticism

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Abstract

Sherwood Anderson (1876-1941) is a famous American writer. His creative ideas and skills have exerted a profound influence on many American writers. At the same time, his works express that under the impact of modernity and mechanization, the ecological environment has been seriously damaged, and the local civilization has gradually disappeared, and describe the loss of human sense of belonging and spiritual alienation in this process. *Winesburg, Ohio* is a famous work by Sherwood Anderson. In this book, he sharply describes the negative impact of mechanization on ecology from three aspects of natural ecology, spiritual ecology, and social ecology, and he calls for the return of ecological values and the protection of ecological environment. While discussing the ecological crisis brought by modernity, Sherwood Anderson also discussed the reconstruction of the close relationship between man and nature, which provided ideas for solving the plight of human existence and called for building a world in which man and nature live in harmony, which coincided with the central idea of ecological criticism. From the perspective of eco-criticism, this paper discusses the problems brought by modern civilization in *Winesburg, Ohio*, subverts the control of industrial civilization over human, re-realizes the harmonious coexistence, and re-stores the harmonious relationship between human and nature, which is important to guide the construction and development of contemporary ecological civilization.

Key words: Sherwood Anderson; *Winesburg, Ohio*; Eco-criticism

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1. INTRODUCTION

Sherwood Anderson is a famous American writer. His creative ideas and techniques have had a profound impact on many American writers, and he enjoys a reputation in the history of American literature. At the same time, his works express the nostalgia and reluctance of the traditional local civilization damaged by the impact of modernity and industrialization, which is fully reflected in his most famous work *Winesburg, Ohio*.

1.1 A Brief Introduction to Sherwood Anderson and *Winesburg, Ohio*

Sherwood Anderson is born in Illinois in 1876 and dominates the American literary scene at the beginning of the 20th century. The reason why Anderson occupies an important position in the history of American literature is that he is the first American writer who tries to establish the form of American short story which is different from the European literary tradition, which left an indelible influence on later American writers as Ernest Hemingway, William Faulkner, etc. In addition, he also is the first one to pay attention to the inner world of the ordinary people and the father of the American psychological writer, who tries to reveal both the physical and psychological destruction brought by the modernity. By revealing the human misery of a township in the modern age, his work has become a powerful weapon to break the industrial barrier and pave a peaceful way to back to the golden age, that is, the restoration of the harmonious relationship between human and nature.

Winesburg, Ohio, is a revolutionary book, which is the famous work of the writer. It is the portrait of ecological

crisis in the industrial age, and it is one of Anderson's excellent works to demonstrate his ecological thoughts and appeals. It reflects the ecological and spiritual reality of a town in the modern age, which also offers a positive way to compete with the deserted situation caused by modernity.

1.2 Literature Review

Sherwood Anderson occupies an important position in the history of American literature. Since his contribution to American literature had been realized, different perspectives and theories have been used to approach Anderson's works.

1.2.1 Studies Abroad

At Abroad, the studies about Sherwood Anderson's *Winesburg, Ohio* has started from the 1950s, which mainly focused on the characters analysis, author's artistic style as well as the work's absurdity.

The research covers the social significance of *Winesburg, Ohio*. In 1977, Jon S. Lawry published an article named "The Arts of Winesburg and Bidwell, Ohio" in *Twentieth Century Literature*, which expounds that the fictions of Winesburg can be seen as referential to a large American dilemma of progress and value (65). In 1980, Martha Curry published an article named "Sherwood Anderson and James Joyce" in *American Literature*, which indicates that both *Dubliners* and *Winesburg, Ohio* provide modern man with a vivid revelation of his frustration, isolation, and paralysis (249). That is, the spiritual dilemma as well as the physical destruction caused by modernity is one of major topics in the earlier time, which have an closely connection with the social reality.

Besides, the content analysis of *Winesburg, Ohio* focuses on the "grotesques" and artistic features. On the one hand, the grotesque aesthetic is one of the subjects of analysis. In 1972, Ralph Ciancio published an article named "The Sweetness of the Twisted Apples": Unity of Vision in Winesburg, Ohio" in *PMLA*, which indicates that the grotesques Anderson's philosophical vision complete the novel's unity (994). In 2005, Melissa Gniadek published an article named "The Art of Becoming: Sherwood Anderson, Frank Sargeson and the Grotesque Aesthetic" in *Journal of New Zealand Literature*, which expounds the grotesque aesthetic in *Winesburg, Ohio*. On the other hand, Anderson's writing skills are also the subject of analysis. In 1963, Epifanio San Juan published an article named "Vision and Reality: A Reconsideration of Sherwood Anderson's 'Winesburg, Ohio'" in *American Literature*, which analyzes Sherwood Anderson's writing form, writing technique, and style of narrative art (137). In 1982, Raymond Wilson published an article named "Rhythm in 'Winesburg, Ohio'" in *The Great Lakes Review*, which explains the artistic beauty of *Winesburg, Ohio* through the illustration of symbolism in the text. In 1985, David Stouck published an article named

"Sherwood Anderson and the Postmodern Novel" in *Contemporary Literature*, which indicates the significance of Anderson's fictional experiments with fantasy, expressionist symbolism, and the self-conscious narrative voice (316). That is, the researches mainly focus on Anderson's masterpiece, *Winesburg, Ohio*, especially its grotesques aesthetics. The kind of analysis interlinks the key characters with the writing skills, and the elucidation of figures is closely connected with the unique writing techniques.

Moreover, with the development of the times, there are some papers that evaluate *Winesburg, Ohio* from the feminist perspective. In 2018, Peter Nagy published an article named "The Woman in the Man: Male Modernism and Cross-Gender Identification in Sherwood Anderson's Winesburg, Ohio" in *College Literature*, which indicates that Sherwood Anderson depicts a style of artistic masculinity that challenges the dominant gender norms in the early twentieth century in *Winesburg, Ohio* (773). That is, *Winesburg, Ohio* can be seen as the manifesto against sexism, and the research perspectives is advancing with the times, it is available to find a new interpretation in this book to fill the academic vacancy.

In brief, though the literature quantity is less and the research perspective is limited and rigid in earlier studies, the research tendency is increasing year by year especially after 2010s and there are attempts to study this text from new perspectives.

1.2.2 Studies at Home

At home, the studies about Sherwood Anderson's *Winesburg, Ohio* has started from the end of 1990s. The number of researches is relatively less, mainly focus on the text analysis with various literary theories as well as the author's unique writing skills.

The research about Sherwood Anderson mainly focuses on his book, *Winesburg, Ohio*. Take the following literature as an example. In 2001, Chen Juan published a master's thesis named "A Critical Study of the Theme and Technique in Sherwood Anderson's *Winesburg, Ohio*", which analyzes Anderson's loose fictional form, simple prose, colloquial vocabulary as well as the syntax with profound meaning. In 2002, Li Xiaoyun published a master's thesis named "'Grotesques' in American Transitional Time --- On Sherwood Anderson's *Winesburg, Ohio*", which analyzes the formative factors of "grotesques" through the combination of psychoanalysis and social analysis. In 2007, Bai Dan published an article named "Industrial Civilization and Human Alienation -- An Interpretation of symbolism in *Winesburg, Ohio*" in *The Science Education Article Collects*, which demonstrates the confusion and suffering of the little people under the social transformation. In 2013, Wang Xiaojing published a master's thesis named "An Interpretation of *Winesburg, Ohio* from the Perspective of Symbolism", which analyzes the grotesques' spiritual

predicament and Anderson's consideration and concerns with symbolism. That is, most of the research focuses on the origin of the formation of "grotesques", the use of symbolism, as well as narrative art.

What's more, the topics of dissertations mainly focus on the analysis from the literary theories. Take the following literature as an example. In 2003, Ma Zheng published a master's thesis named "Modernist Art in *Winesburg, Ohio*", which indicates the spirit of negation of modernism reflected in *Winesburg, Ohio*. In 2006, Yang Po published a master's thesis named "*Winesburg, Ohio*: An Expressionist Painting of 'The Scream' Grotesques", which compares "The Scream" and "Grotesques" by analyzing cultural and historical background. In 2008, Wu Yangyan published a master's thesis named "The Grotesque and Modernist Aesthetics: A Study of Anderson's *Winesburg, Ohio*", which through the analysis of the deformed characters, demonstrates the aesthetic value of modernism in the works. In 2012, Jia Yingxiao published a master's thesis named "Grotesques' Choices: Interpretation of Sherwood Anderson's *Winesburg, Ohio* from Sartre's Existentialism", which indicates the absurdity of world and the suffering of ordinary people with existentialism. In 2014, Yang Jing published a master's thesis named "Grotesques' Living Predicament: An Existentialist Approach to Sherwood Anderson's *Winesburg, Ohio*", which uses the existentialist perspective in-depth analyse of the human survival dilemma in that age. In 2014, Wu Meijun published a master thesis named "The Expressionist Technique in *Winesburg, Ohio*", which analyzes the application of expressionism in this novel. That is, modernism, existentialism, expressionism and spatial narrative, etc are widely used to analyze *Winesburg, Ohio*, which are the elucidation of modernism's negativity with vivid characters and narrative techniques based on the literary theories.

There are only a few articles analyze this book from the perspective of ecocriticism and bildungsroman. In 2003, Chen Shuangmei published a master's thesis named "Bildungsroman and Sherwood Anderson's Fiction", which indicates that this book is the demonstration of Willard's growth as an artist with distinct characteristics of the times. In 2004, Shao Yi published a master's thesis named "The Passage to Spiritual Harmony --- *Winesburg, Ohio* as a Bildungsroman", which indicates that this book has integrality with the growth of Willard. In 2010, Zhao Rui published an article named "On *Winesburg Ohio* from an Ecocritical Perspective" in *Journal of Lanzhou University of Arts and Science (Social Science Edition)*, which criticizes the influence of industrial civilization on human beings. In 2014, Wu Guixing published an article named "A Study of *Winesburg, Ohio* from the Perspective of Ecocriticism" published in *Journal of Lujiang University*, which indicates that the destruction of natural environment is the reason of distorted humanity.

That is, the ecological thoughts embedded in this book is not taken highly of, the number of related researches is less and remains the elementary level.

In general, though the quantity of literature about Sherwood Anderson and *Winesburg, Ohio* is relatively less, it enters a rapid and creative period after 2000, especially in the 2010s, and there is a rising trend in general. In addition, the research perspective is no longer limited to writing skills or narrative arts, and the methodology applied in *Winesburg, Ohio* follows the theoretical frontier.

1.3 Eco-Criticism

Eco-criticism is a literary theory that arose in 1970s and became a prominent theory in 1990s. In the late 1970s, the discussion on ecology began to enter the literary world in the form of nature writing and environmental literature, which attracted wide attention from scholars, but eco-criticism has not yet appeared as a professional term. In 1978, William Rueckert first proposed the term eco-criticism in *Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism* (Wang, 2007, p.19). Since then, academic conferences and professional journals on eco-criticism have gradually increased, Cheryll Glotfelty is a leading figure in this field, and the research scale has been expanding.

The main purpose of eco-criticism is to re-examine and explore the relationship between man and nature through literature and cultural studies, so that human beings can better understand the ecological dilemma they are caught in and the importance of protecting the natural environment. Chinese scholar Wang Nuo defines ecological criticism as "a literary criticism that explores the relationship between literature and nature under the guidance of ecologism, especially ecological holism. It should reveal the ecological thoughts contained in literary works, reveal the ideological and cultural roots of ecological crisis reflected in literary works, and explore the ecological aesthetics and artistic expression of literature" (2011).

With the rapid development of industrialization, there also is the severe crisis of environment caused by abusing natural resources. Therefore, ecocriticism is showing great vitality with its positive attitude of paying attention to the relationship between human beings and nature in this case.

2. THE DESTRUCTION OF NATURAL ECOLOGY IN WINESBURG, OHIO

Winesburg, Ohio occurred in the late 19th century and early 20th century, in which factory economy gradually replaced handicraft economy. The most direct and obvious consequence of industrialization is the destruction of the natural environment.

It's obvious that people have a harmonious relationship with nature before the industrial invasion, just as Anderson describes the old house of Seth Richmond in Chapter 10 "The Thinker". The house where Seth and his mother lived in Winesburg had been the town's tourist attraction, but it had lost some of its glory when Seth had lived there as a boy. The banker White's huge brick house cast its shadow. The shadow of the banker's house can be seen as a barrier which impedes the protection of a virgin nature, and drives the overboard pursuit of money at the cost of natural environment.

When the location of the house is a tourist attraction, ordinary people enjoy the gorgeous beauty of nature, and man and nature are intimate. However, with the invasion of industrialization, ordinary people gradually become addicted to the pursuit of material life and the accumulation of money. Obviously, wealth is the only criterion to prove a person's happiness and value in the modern life. In brief, influenced by modernism, people think that it is morally acceptable to abuse natural resources in exchange for material prosperity.

In addition, the development of human beings is the epitome of social or historical development. Because history is a whole composed of many events of human behavior, everyone is the promoter of life and a part of history. Therefore, everyone can be regarded as a medium to promote the development of history. That is to say, the older is close to the antecedent past, while the younger is close to the latest one. Through intergenerational comparison, it is easier to see the destruction of the natural environment in *Winesburg, Ohio*. Taking Chapter 18 as an example.

"All through the night as the train rattled along, the grandmother told Tom tales of Winesburg and of how he would enjoy his life working in the fields and shooting wild things in the woods there. She could not believe that the tiny village of fifty years before had grown into a thriving town in her absence, and in the morning when the train came to Winesburg she did not want to get off. 'It isn't what I thought. It may be hard for you here,' she said, and then the train went on its way and the two stood confused, not knowing where to turn, in the presence of Albert Longworth, the Winesburg baggage master" (2020).

There is a strong contrast between the memory of the times before the invasion of industrial civilization and the present situation of the times which suffered from the invasion of modernity. The great sense of gap brought by the changes of times and technological changes to modern people is shown by the memory of grandmother. When the aged old man lived in a modern city which lost close ties with the natural environment and subsidized his family by selling weak labor in exchange for low remuneration, the beautiful environment in her memory was the spiritual sustenance for her continued existence. But now, the pastoral joy in her memory has been crushed by modernity, and her difficult years in modern life have

become a nightmare that she can't escape because she lost her key. And her life has become a dry vine, dying for lack of natural nutrition, and unable to find a future to attach to.

However, when she lived in an undeveloped virgin land, her life was happy, her soul was full, and when she was young, the strength she drew from nature was so powerful that she was comforted by the oppression brought by the highly developed economy in her life, which always gave her a direction and hope for survival. The intense contrast of the old woman's mood in the early and later stages of her life shows the loss and sorrow of human life brought by modernity in the process of blindly exploiting nature and seeking economic development.

Human life is a blood vessel branch of the lifeline of nature, and the movement of blood vessels determines the health of a trunk. Therefore, nature is the birth and death of all things. The dying breath of the older generation living in the agricultural era is a typical example of the accelerated extinction of primitive nature driven by modernization.

In short, industrialization is the chief criminal promoting the disappearance of natural beauty and bringing ecological unbalance, as well as driving the separation of the close contact and the harmonious relationship between human and nature.

3. THE ALIENATION OF SPIRITUAL ECOLOGY IN WINESBURG, OHIO

Due to the destruction of nature, the harmony between man and nature is no longer exist, and the result is the alienation and isolation between man and social environment. As Wang Nuo mentioned, the loss of a harmonious relationship with nature leads to prolonged mental suffering (2011).

Just as Louise Bentley says in chapter 6 "It was like poison in my blood" (2020). Here "it" superficially refers to the farm of her father, but it is actually refers to her miserable experience and the dehumanized impact of industrialism on her in that area during the transitional age. At that time, a delicate woman must reveal her economic value by doing unmatched physical labor for lack of business knowledge and economic acumen. More specifically, Louise, as a girl, is nothing to the radical investor her father. If a lady is useless in the era of the factory enterprises, the life will be complete darkness. Louise's instincts and emotion are repressed, she becomes the victim of industrialization, who should have enjoyed a kind of peaceful country life when the human live in a kind of pastoral golden age without the roar of machine and the squeeze of capitalism and everyone's nature spurt out without limitation.

Without the real care and help from the society and others, Louise, who is greatly excluded, turns the

capitalist society's deep isolation and marginalization of her vulnerable group into resentment against her own son. When there is such deep estrangement and resentment between family and relatives, the relationship between strangers in society drops to freezing point, and there is no warmth and intimacy at all. Therefore, the highly developed modernity leaves only the estrangement caused by distorted thoughts and endless doubts.

In short, in a sad and sympathetic way, Anderson describes a group of weird people whose psychological characteristics are somewhat unhealthy because their desires are thwarted and their dreams shattered. It is obvious that the rise of mechanization promotes the continuous transformation of the society dominated by handicraft industry and agriculture, while it unscrupulously makes huge profits by exploiting the labor force, denies that the agricultural civilization conforms to nature, which was once regarded as a comfortable and harmonious lifestyle, and constantly squeezes people's value and attacks people's self-confidence, which eventually explodes individual labor, and at the same time, makes their spirit constantly distorted and alienated, and this kind of mental torture will pervade the society.

4. THE ISOLATION OF SOCIAL ECOLOGY IN WINESBURG, OHIO

The modernism grabs the development possibilities of the traditional region where the human and nature enjoy a kind of harmonious relationship. People should have enjoyed close communication with others, but they are imprisoned by the material demands of society and their own hesitation to act in a new age. The inherent crisis of the industrial revolution is that more and more people lose their spiritual morality, leading to alienation of people and deepening the degree of social deformity.

It is true that the increasingly industrialized and commercial America brings the moral degradation and dehumanization of the society. With the rapid development of modern civilization, people like Doctor Reefy are confused, because they can't find a way to express their thoughts and find a way to communicate with others, thus losing the ability to communicate with society. The paper pills in his pocket can be seen as the concretion of Doctor Reefy's thought, that is, the representational display and expression of his spiritual world.

The morality and humanity of Doctor Reefy which have been included in the scraps of paper is squeezed, and later is compulsorily transformed into the lifeless balls with the result of being abandoned. Obviously, The scraps of paper that eventually turned into hard little balls are the demonstration of Doctor Reefy's mental suffering. His spirit is maltreated by the rapidly changing modern society in which the traditional values is extinguished, which also is the consequence of social morality's aridity

where the harmonious interpersonal relationship is gradually extinguished; and his vitality disappears for lack of the nutrition of traditional value. At last, a person's moral beauty can only be expressed in distorted form, just like a crooked apple which is sweet inside but deformed in appearance, which is abandoned by capitalism and modern society pursuing superficial superiority and prosperity.

Influenced by the collapsing interpersonal order and competitive social atmosphere, modern people whose social ability has been continuously deprived and weakened can only give up their thinking ability in modern revolutions again and again, constantly reduce their positions, sacrifice a body that has lost its thinking ability to the fast-developing modern society, and escape the pain brought by modernity with a numb attitude in exchange for the right to survive.

In short, the alienation of society leads to the distortion and deformity of modern people's living environment, and the harmonious and orderly social order has disappeared. The horn of modern civilization constantly interferes with the normal people's thinking order and drives them to pursue a self-centered way of living, which leads to the loss of personal survival potential, but also makes the social order further deteriorate and distort.

5. THE RECONSTRUCTION OF HARMONY BETWEEN HUMAN AND NATURE

It is obvious that the citizen is besieged by the weak body, the psychological alienation, and the isolated social atmosphere, which is the byproduct of the rapid development of industrialization and modernization. So, Anderson hates bitterly this emerging inhuman civilization. Though Anderson faces the isolated and cold society which impedes the heartfelt interaction, Anderson manages to reconstruct the spiritual communication and the harmonious atmosphere taking nature as a medium, which is demonstrated in his work. Through this way, the humanity rather than materiality may be revival again.

Taking the characters in *Winesburg, Ohio* as examples, Enoch Robinson, an artist who is accomplishing nothing, free himself from the self-accusation in his landscape painting; Elmer Cowley, a young man who is eager to get rid of the label of grotesques, find warmth and direction beside the fire in forest; Alice Hindman, a lady who aspires to be loved and represses his sexual desire, comprehends the true essence of life in cold rain and wet grass.

All of these examples can reveal that human beings can be healed in nature, this kind of effects may exist just for a little moment, but it is enough to leave a deep impression in people's mind. These impressions are transformed from one generation to another one through the means of communication. That is to say, an individual's redemption

may be a miniature in nature, which is not enough to restore a new healthy individual physically and mentally, but it can transfer its influence to another creature, and the interaction between creatures will be strong enough to change this constantly alienated society, because all creatures have organic connections, and the whole biosphere is an organic whole with dynamic connections.

According to ecological holism, each factor in the universe is connected with others, and individual changes can have an impact on other individuals. Therefore, the weak awakening consciousness of an individual can be shared by others, and the gathering of weak forces can have the effect of causing a great sensation. The symbol of the combination in *Winesburg, Ohio* is George Willard and Tandy. The former listens to a great number of stories from the citizens. The nature as a medium provides an access for grotesques to become a factor in the interacting net which includes everything in the world, so even a single person can immerse the community of life in which their spirits are baptized and their twisted hearts are redeemed. Consequently, George can have a complete salvation as a symbol of the younger generation as a combination of awakening consciousness. Another symbol is Tandy in chapter 11, who is not infected by the materialism so heavily, so even under the catalysis of a single factor --- a stranger's confession of his inner belief, she can feel the awakening consciousness of a kind of people who want to escape the destruction of modernization. Through this dynamic connection in nature, the younger generation, influenced by the older generation, can seek ways to save themselves on the basis of the elder's experience, and their search will bring hope and provide opportunities for the revival of the whole society.

To make a summary, the restoration of one's life both physically and psychologically mainly includes two steps. The first step is to experience the healing power of nature, which can remedy the individual's psychological distortion. The second one is the combination of most people's awakening consciousness based on the dynamic connection in nature, which can be transmitted through an interacting net with language and empathy. Obviously, the real salvation of a society needs the self-salvation of everyone in the dynamic network of the universe, which is interconnected and influenced by nature.

6. CONCLUSION

In *Winesburg, Ohio*, Sherwood Anderson expounded the negative impact of modern civilization and mechanization on traditional ecological society from two aspects of natural ecology and spiritual ecology. He not only depicts the serious damage of mechanical civilization to ecology through vivid brushstrokes, but also successfully captures the unique spiritual alienation characteristics of ordinary people in the society during the transition period from agricultural society to industrialized society through a series of grotesque descriptions.

In *Winesburg, Ohio*, Anderson bluntly said the ugliness of modern life, taking his deep concern for his hometown and its people as the driving force, deeply analyzed the essence of prosperous life, broke the hypocrisy of modern civilization, and expressed his deep concern for human existence. Although Anderson is faced with a closed and cold society that hinders spiritual communication, he still reconstructs spiritual communication with nature through the medium of nature. Although the protagonists in *Winesburg, Ohio* suffered severe psychological trauma under the oppression of mechanical civilization, and showed bizarre physical symptoms, there is still a way to restore their quiet old life, that is, to return to nature, and let the power of natural healing save the distorted mind and rebuild the harmonious atmosphere. Moreover, everything in the world is interrelated, whether animals, plants or humans, all living things are components of natural circulation, and the whole ecosystem is an organic whole full of dynamic connections. Therefore, the protagonists in *Winesburg, Ohio*, while healing them, take nature as the background, reshape their sense of responsibility for nature under the interaction of each other, and give life vitality to the whole society, thus building a harmonious, orderly and active and prosperous ecosystem.

The fate of mankind is closely related to nature, and everyone should cultivate the virtues of loving, respecting and protecting nature. In this way, human beings can realize the unity of man and man, man and nature, successfully rebuilds the harmonious relationship between man and nature, and build a community of human destiny, which is very important to guide the construction and development of contemporary ecological civilization.

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