Aaron Ritzenberg

**Sherwood Anderson (1876-1941)**

Sherwood Anderson was an American short-story writer, novelist, and memoirist. He was a businessman turned author whose writing often rendered the lives of ordinary people in the Midwest during the emergence of modern culture. His most enduring literary legacy is *Winesburg, Ohio* (1919), a work that explores the inner lives of an array of characters in a small, seemingly isolated town. His experimental prose style, along with his lyrical treatment of everyday lives, influenced a number of American modernists, including Ernest Hemingway, Hart Crane, Katherine Anne Porter, Henry Miller, William Faulkner, and Nathanael West.

Sherwood Anderson was born in 1876 in Camden, Ohio, the third of seven children. His experiences growing up in the small town of Clyde, Ohio—where he helped support the family by taking on a wide variety of jobs—served as the basis for much of his later writing. He served in the military, worked as an advertising man, and managed an Ohio paint factory. In 1912, he suffered what most historians think was a nervous breakdown in response to business and marital stresses. Anderson would later write about this time as a moment when he repudiated the life of materialism in order to fully invest himself in artistic pursuits.

In 1916, at the age of 40, Anderson published some of the tales that would appear in *Winesburg, Ohio*. His early works, including *Windy McPherson’s Son* (1916), *Marching Men* (1917), and *Mid American Chants* (1918), are not critically acclaimed, but they venture into themes that Anderson would return to throughout his career: the search for meaning in a quickly modernizing world, the alienating effects of business culture, and the difficulty of sustaining intimate relationships.

With *Winesburg, Ohio* (1919), Anderson rebuked the forms of both the traditional novel and the conventional short story; instead he wrote a cycle of interlocking short stories that featured the recurring character George Willard—an empathetic young writer who comes of age in the small town. *Winesburg, Ohio* is populated with isolated, desperate, and “grotesque” characters whose commonplace lives are filled with loneliness and longing.

Anderson’s later novels, including *Poor White* (1920), *Many Marriages* (1923), *Dark Laughter* (1925), and *Beyond Desire* (1932), continued to explore the emotional frailty and spiritual poverty of lives in the age of mechanization. Anderson’s many works of nonfiction offered social commentary in response to the isolation of modern life. In *A Storyteller’s Story* (1924), Anderson detailed the evolution of his own writing; a year later, in *The Modern Writer* (1925), he described the obligations of ethical writers. In his letters and autobiographical writing, including *Tar: A Midwest Childhood* (1928) and the posthumous *Sherwood Anderson’s Memoirs* (1942), he changed some of the facts of his life to suit a narrative that valued artistic sensibility over material gain. Anderson died in 1941.

With *Winesburg, Ohio*, Anderson emerged as a major American writer. His reputation suffered during his lifetime. However, most critics now recognize the lasting literary influence of his work that, despite its darkness, continually returned to the redemptive possibilities of writing and art.

**Key Works**

*Windy McPherson’s Son (1916)*

*Marching Men (1917)*

*Mid-American Chants (1918)*

*Winesburg, Ohio (1919)*

*Poor White (1920)*

*The Triumph of the Egg (1921)*

*Many Marriages (1923)*

*A Story Teller’s Story (1924)*

*Dark Laughter (1925)*

*The Modern Writer (1925)*

*Sherwood Anderson’s Notebook (1926)*

*Tar: A Midwest Childhood (1926)*

*Perhaps Women (1931)*

*Beyond Desire (1932)*

*Death in the Woods and Other Stories (1933)*

*No Swank (1934)*

*Kit Brandon (1936)*

*Sherwood Anderson’s Memoirs (1942)*

*Letters of Sherwood Anderson (1953)*

*Return to Winesburg: Selections from Four Years of Writing for a Country Newspaper (1956)*

*Sherwood Anderson: Selected Letters (1984)*

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