

Sherwood Anderson's "The Man Who Became a Woman": A Contribution to the Psychoanalysis of Sexuality

Dr. Robert Zaslavsky

Although Anderson's reputation as a writer would have been secured if he had written nothing but *Winesburg, Ohio* (1919), one should not assume that his talents did not extend beyond that. His body of novels and short stories deserves to receive far more attention than it has been given. In particular, he is perhaps the most unassumingly psychoanalytic of American writers. This characteristic can be seen most strikingly in the story "The Man Who Became a Woman."¹ Unfortunately, "The Man Who Became a Woman" is not among those stories that are often, if ever, anthologized for study in Literature (or American Literature) classes (or even in Psychology classes).² This is unfortunate because the story is a subtle examination of psychosexual development, and it rewards close study.

Analysis of the Story

Since one always should begin at the beginning, and since the beginning of any story is its title, one should consider the title first. The title of this story is shocking and daring, perhaps not quite as much so now as when it was written, but still somewhat so. At the same time, the simplicity and matter-of-factness of its statement may give one a comic feeling. All this combines to make one wonder about the subject and tone of what is to follow.

If one were to speculate about the content, one might consider three possibilities. The story could be about: (1) a man who undergoes a sex change operation (a transsexual); or (2) a man who dresses as a woman (a transvestite); or (3) a man who is homosexual. It turns out, to jump ahead for a moment, that it is not precisely about any of these, although it does touch on homosexuality.

About what, then, is it precisely? Its central concern is the problem of defining one's sexual identity, finding one's sexual identity, developing proper gender identification. This is the key psychological issue that the story dramatizes, which is not to say that there are not other issues that it also dramatizes.

¹ The story appeared in the short story collection *Horses and Men* (1923), a volume that is virtually inaccessible nowadays. Therefore, I have placed a copy of the story (with paragraph numbers added for ease of reference) on the Downloads page of my web site (www.doczonline.com).

² Before I retired, I used the story regularly in both literature and psychology courses for high school students (juniors and seniors).

The first word of the story is “My.” The story, then, is told in the first person, which suggests that the point of view is subjective and psychological rather than objective and naturalistic.

The narrator’s name is Herman Dudley (§ 17). This name reflects the central theme of the story. His given name is Herman, which is constituted of “her” and “man,” which encapsulates the gender polarity of the title. His surname is Dudley. This too has a significance that emerges through the story. The name contains the word “dud,” which connotes an item that has failed to achieve its intended purpose, or simply a failure. As the narrative progresses, one realizes that this is an apt description of Herman in his relationships with women, from whom he shelters himself, or from whom for most of his young life he keeps himself safe.

Therefore, the narrator’s name is a fitting encapsulation of his dilemma.

Herman opens his story with a summary of the first nineteen or so years of his life. The summary takes three brief paragraphs in a story that runs for many pages.³ There is very little detail in the summary. Such lack of detail about a person’s childhood is not coincidental or accidental. It suggests that the childhood must have been psychologically painful. Of course, if he had not mentioned his childhood at all, one would not be justified in drawing this conclusion. In other words, if the story had begun—as it certainly could have—with the fourth paragraph, then the question of his childhood would be an open question. However, since he does mention it, one has to wonder why he mentions so little of it.

Therefore, it is important to look at what he does say.

He says that his hometown is in Nebraska, a quintessentially nondescript midwestern state, and he does not name the town. The town is so typical and ordinary that it is not worthwhile to describe it (§ 1). Saying this accomplishes two things: first, he gives his story a certain typicality or universality; and second, he invites or allows one to conclude that his childhood was uneventful and trouble-free.

However, in psychoanalytical terms, to present one’s childhood without details is equivalent to not remembering one’s childhood. Not remembering one’s childhood is an indication that one’s childhood was painful, not necessarily physically abusive, but psychologically abusive, suggesting psychological abandonment by one’s parents. This constitutes a classic case of repression. Repressing one’s childhood suggests that one had been treated, or made to feel like, an orphan, even in one’s own home.

For Herman, this eventuates in the actual orphanhood that he experienced after his psychological orphanhood, when his father died and his mother left him. In this way, actual events catch up with, and mirror, the psychological situation. That both parents are nameless reinforces this: their anonymity is the emblem of their abdication of their roles as parents.

Herman tells us that his father was a druggist. Herman worked as a clerk in his father’s pharmacy. Herman initially simply imitates his father, an imitation that infects his movement away from home and out into the world. He cannot create an identity for himself. In a way, his job describes his mental condition: he is like someone drugged without a will of his own. He is a boy who seems unable to become his own man. As he says (§ 2), at the age of nineteen, he is just beginning “to make [his] start in the world.” In other words, still at the age of nineteen, he is like a newborn infant, without parents

³ This amounts to less than two percent of the story as a whole.

to guide him, an only child and an orphan (as opposed to his mother, who at least has a sister).

Herman has set out and come to Chicago. At that time, Chicago was a pivotal city, a national railroad center, a center of commerce. In terms of the life of the United States, Chicago was the paradigmatic crossroads city, the city from which one could go anywhere as one followed the paths that radiated out from it in all directions. Therefore, in coming to Chicago, Herman has come to a crossroads in his life. In addition, all roads are now, at least in principle, open to him.

However, when he moves from Nebraska to Chicago, his first job is again as a drugstore clerk. He resists the opportunities that the city offers and remains a shadow—remains in the shadow—of his father by doing in Chicago exactly what he had done in his father's store. However, his psyche, his soul, reacts against this, and he becomes sick of his life. This is a psychogenic condition akin to depression. Instead of sinking into the depression, Herman embarks on what he calls "the great adventure" (§ 3), namely the adventure of finding out who and what he is, the adventure of finding a personal identity (and a sexual identity).

His first step on this journey is to return to infancy so that he truly may start over. In other words, in the first phase of his great adventure, he enters an infantile phase of irresponsibility and instant gratification. This is the infantile life of a bum, a "tramp" (§ 3), a life of loafing and stealing and "trying to see the world" (§ 3). The language of sight suggests that this is a path toward gaining a sense of vision.

What begins to bring this phase to an end is the same thing that brings such behavior to an end in infants, namely the fear of punishment.

The formative, and hence most important, experience that he had in these early years of wandering the world was his immersion in the subworld of horses (§ 4).

Horses are traditional symbols of desire or the desiring part of the soul,⁴ and they are traditional exemplars of masculinity. Both these aspects of horses are reflected in the use of the term "stud" to describe a sexually desirable and successful male.

Two types of horses are mentioned in the story: the stallion and the gelding, namely the sexually active male horse and the castrated male horse.

In this subworld of horses, Herman meets a series of alternate father figures (or male role models):

- (1) Alfred Kreymborg, the owner of a gelding named Lumpy Joe (§ 9ff.);
- (2) Tom Means, Lumpy Joe's groom, a budding writer (§ 11ff.);
- (3) Pop Geers, the jockey (§ 32ff.);
- (4) The unnamed owner of the gelding Pick-it-boy that Herman grooms, and the later owner of the stallion O My Man (§ 35);
- (5) Burt, the Negro groom of O My Man (§ 37ff.);
- (6) The redheaded man in the saloon (§ 91ff.).

The personalities and/or names of these six men are significant.

(1) Alfred Kreymborg's name is a kind of inside joke. The actual Alfred Kreymborg was an influential literary editor (and writer) in the early years of the twentieth century (and later). Therefore, the use of this name is a sly homage. However, it is not without bite, as it were.

⁴ One can see this most clearly in Socrates's account of the soul in Plato's *Phaedrus*.

The Alfred Kreymborg in the story is past the age of active sexuality, as he himself says when he encourages Tom Means and Herman to cruise for girls (§ 12): "I'm an old duffer and way past that myself." He has had a long and full life of active sexuality, but now he has reached a life stage of diminished desire. His horse reflects this. It is a gelding, and its name is Lumpy Joe, an epithet that could be construed as an apt description of what Kreymborg's sex organ has become.

Nevertheless, he has an understanding of, and a sympathy for, those who are of an age to be sexually active, an age that he remembers with fondness. Two things indicate his fond memories of his own active sexuality:

(a) He is constantly pulling on his mustache (cf. § 11; § 30). In psychoanalytic terms, this is what would be called upper displacement, i.e., doing something to a higher area of the body that one would rather have done to a lower area of the body.

(b) He hums a song with almost a twinkle in his otherwise solemn eyes (§ 30). The song is "about a deep well and a little grey squirrel crawling up the sides of it." One does not have to be a Freudian analyst to realize what the deep well signifies and what the little grey squirrel represents.

(2) Tom Means has a curious attitude to sex that is revealed only obliquely. He is committed to becoming a writer. He expresses his ideal of the desirable life thus: "He's satisfied I think to sit around like that and wait until the big moments of his life come . . . then, darn his soul, he can give all of himself to the thing right in front of him" (§ 33). This seems to suggest that Tom avoids women and sex deliberately in order to be able to liberate his energy for writing and for writing alone. This is an example of what is called sublimation, in which primitive and deep erotic impulses are rechanneled into artistic expression. In his abstention from sex, Tom is appropriately the groom for Lumpy Joe, because—as a result of his sublimation—his joe is as lumpy as Kreymborg's.

Tom Means too has a revealing name. The nickname "Tom" as a word is used to designate the male of certain animals (e.g., cats or turkeys), and as such it is equivalent to what "stallion" is for horses. In that sense, his name might be ironic. In addition, the full name "Thomas" means "twin." As a potential writer, Tom is a twin to Herman, whose potential to a writer is proved by this story that he has written and that readers are reading. Furthermore, "Tom means," i.e., he expresses meaning, and he does it through writing. Finally, as both a person and a writer, Tom is Herman's *means* to achieving greater self-awareness and self-expression.

Tom too ultimately becomes a sexually active and mature person, or at least it is suggested that he does, when—speaking of the past—Herman says of Tom, "He was then unmarried" (§ 6), which implies that *now* (at the time of Herman's writing the story) Tom *is* married (cf. § 34). This strengthens the parallelism between Herman and Tom by showing that they have undergone parallel developments in their lives.

(3) Pop Geers is a father figure, as the nickname "Pops" indicates. He is what he does: he is a person of action, not of thought or of speech (§§ 32-33). When he was an active jockey, he truly was in gear, especially heading a horse into the stretch. Now that he is retired from jockeying, however admirable he may be in other ways, as his silence indicates, he is somehow deficient, i.e., he has popped his gears.

(4) The unnamed horse owner has an undefined sexuality, although the suggestion is that he is either a latent or an actual homosexual, something that is indicated by "that

queer high voice of his" (§ 53). The two horses that he owns are emblematic of Herman's dilemma: either Herman must remain a boy (pick a boy as his identity) or Herman must decide to grow up to be (and to see himself as) "O My Man" (and develop mature male sexuality).

(5) Burt is an outsider because of his blackness. Nonetheless, he is the most mature role model that Herman has. He is quite rightly the groom for O My Man, just as Herman is quite rightly the groom for Pick-it-boy.⁵

(6) The unnamed redheaded man in the bar becomes the occasion for giving Herman an actual momentary glimpse of fatherhood by putting him in charge of a child (§ 106). This man represents a kind of raw and pure masculinity. He also represents a kind of primitive fatherliness. After all, he keeps his son with him (even if it is to a saloon), and he responds to his son's needs when the boy cries.

The last of the major persons mentioned in the story is Herman's wife, Jessie (§ 23). The name "Jessie" evokes the word "jess," which is a strap that forms part of the leash that is used to control falcons. In this sense, she acts as a stabilizing control over Herman's waywardness, and it is within such a nurturing control that Herman finally can find it within himself to express himself by writing.

Herman mentions Jessie three times.

First, Herman says (§ 23) that throughout what he calls a happy marriage, he has had recurring nightmares about the painful events that he is now in the process of narrating. Apparently, then, his relationship with his wife alone has not been such as to enable him to come to terms with these events. Only writing (i.e., publicly communicating) will clean the slate, or so—at any rate—he believes.

Second, he indicates (§ 41) that it took a long time and a great deal of experience after the events that he is now narrating before he could approach women and eventually marry (cf. § 22: "a bachelor, like I was for so long").

Third, when he speaks of being able to sit down and write (§ 131), he refers to the comfort of the home that they share, in which Jessie's being in the kitchen while he writes suggests that she has provided the nourishment, the nurture that he needed before he could express these formative events and his feelings about them.

Although there are many issues at stake in this story, it seems most fruitful to focus on the issue of sexual identity. At the heart of this is the so-called Oedipus complex.⁶ In the story, the most evident invocation of the Oedipal situation is in Herman's discussion of going to town with his father and seeing a woman standing outside a railroad station (§§ 115-116). The woman reminds Herman of the queens in fairy tales. Here the sexual rivalry between father and son emerges when the father comes out of the railroad station, interrupts the son's sexual fantasizing about the woman, and then drags the son away. While he drags him away, the father and the woman exchange smiles that are implicitly sexual.

In the father-son rivalry, as it is expressed in many myths,⁷ the son may experience what is called castration anxiety.

⁵ One might speculate that the name "Burt" is short for "Bertram," which means "bright raven." This would be appropriate since the raven is black and a symbol of secret knowledge.

⁶ Cf. Sigmund Freud, *The Interpretation of Dreams*, tr. James Strachey (NY, Avon, 1965), Chapter V, Section (D), subsection (β), pp. 294-298. Also see Bruno Bettelheim, *The Uses of Enchantment: The Meaning and Importance of Fairy Tales* (NY, Vintage, 1977), pp. 38-39 et passim.

⁷ Perhaps the most notable example is the myth of Cronos and Uranos.

Castration anxiety can take a number of forms. One may fear that one's father will eliminate one as a sexual rival by preemptively castrating one. Or one may become impotent. Or one may doubt one's own masculinity to such an extent that one believes oneself to be as good as gelded, which for a man may be equivalent to being a female.⁸

The fear of castration may make one feel so paralyzed with fear that one becomes psychologically emasculated. One may, then feel that one is so demasculinized that one looks into the mirror and see oneself as a woman. This is precisely what Herman experiences (§§ 86-88).

In addition, one may become so overwhelmed by one's anxiety and fear that one projects it even onto potential female love objects whom one sees as also posing the threat of castration during sex. This is sometimes manifested in dreams, when boys, even adult males, envision a female sex organ with teeth. The name for this dream image is the *vagina dentata* (toothed vagina). In the story, this is implied in Herman's vision of the coal refinery (§§ 82-83), when he sees the coke ovens. An oven is one of the metaphors for a woman, particularly for a woman's womb.⁹ The toothed ovens here represent Herman's nightmarish castration anxiety in connection with women. Herman says (§§ 82-83),

. . . they looked like the teeth of some big man-eating giant . . . the kind of hell-holes men are satisfied to go on living in . . .

He explicitly links this with the "contempt for all men" (§ 83) that women are assumed to have. From this point of view, for a man to be together with a woman sexually is to be "as wet and cold as a rat in a sewer" (§ 81), i.e., a view of sex that is far more degraded than the previous, more mature and comforting image of the gray squirrel in the well sung by Kreymborg (cf. § 30).

Herman's vision of the toothed coke oven, then, is a powerful image of his feelings of castration anxiety. It is not surprising, then, that immediately after he has this vision, he looks in the bar mirror and sees himself as a girl (§ 88):

The point is that the face I saw in the looking-glass back of that bar . . . 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.

In this connection Herman denies—correctly—that he is a homosexual: "I'm not any fairy." (§ 94)

Here, at the peak of his sexual confusion, he encounters the redheaded man in the bar. When he describes the man, his description shows that the redheaded man and Burt are parallel (§ 97):

Only his eyes were small. In his big head they looked like the eyes of a bird.

⁸ There are many reported instances in the literature of psychoanalysis of a little boy seeing a little girl naked. When he sees that she lacks the organ that he has, he subconsciously may believe that she once had such an organ but that it was taken from her, and this confirms his fear of castration.

⁹ Cf. the old-fashioned expression "a bun in the oven" as a euphemism for pregnancy, as an oblique way of saying that she has a baby (bun) in the womb (oven).

The word "bird" here is a pun on the name "Burt." As if to insure that the reader does not miss the point, Herman adds (§ 97): "And I remember that his lips were thick, like Negroes' lips."

For all his primitive physicality, the redheaded man represents a kind of sexual security and maturity. He seems to have achieved a balance between his masculine and feminine aspects: he has fathered a child, and he mothers (takes care of) the same child.

Because he has embraced his feminine aspect, because he is devoted to his child, the others (including Herman) call him "cracked" (§ 100).¹⁰ Some of the men tease him, and the worst of the taunters sings a song (§ 104), according to which the redheaded man's "crack [is] getting bigger." His being cracked has a manifest double meaning: (1) he is crazy; (2) he is unmasculine because he has a gap where a man's sex organ should be, i.e., he is a gelding. The man who teases him in this way indicates that this is the hidden meaning by his bodily motion (§ 105): "the showy-off man . . . kept prancing like a turkey-cock." If one drops the word "turkey," what the show-off is saying is, in effect, "I am and have what you are not and do not have."

When the redheaded man is faced with such an accusation, his response is to display his masculinity in a very primitive and physical way. Nevertheless, when his child cries (§ 111), he turns to the child and leaves the arena of combat.

This entire incident makes Herman physically ill, makes him nauseated. The pattern of the story since the beginning has been that for Herman, illness is a signal that he is about to make an important psychological change. Here too his illness has a therapeutic effect upon him. It initiates a re-experiencing of his unresolved fears. It initiates an important growth experience.

The first phase of this growth experience is his recollection (§§ 115ff.) of the Oedipal situation (discussed above). One should add now that it is significant that in his recollection, his father "was all dressed up, as for a funeral or Fourth of July." (§ 115) This suggests that all growth experiences are deaths in the sense that a part of a person ('the old you') dies in order for a new part of the person ('the new you') to emerge. In addition, all growth experiences are independence days, declarations of independence from parents, from old habits, from fears, and so forth.

In order to prepare for growth, Herman retreats to the warmth of the stable. There he has what is presented as a sexual encounter with his horse, whose "flanks quivered" (§ 121), which implies an orgasm. Since the horse is a masculine exemplar, a symbol of male desire, this experience is equivalent to masturbation, which is a common habit among children in the Oedipal phase.

It is here that Herman indicates to the reader that his later life was heterosexually active and full (§ 121):

as sometimes [i.e., since then], to tell the plain truth, I've felt about touching with my hands the body of a woman I've seen and who I thought was lovely too.

In other words, what has happened to Herman has enabled him finally to embrace his proper sexuality.

This, then, is a step on the way to sexual maturity.

¹⁰ This is echoed in the image that Herman indirectly has of himself when he looks in the mirror, since the cracked mirror will return him a cracked image of himself (cf. § 101).

At this point, the two black men appear. Herman's comments here reveal that his thinking about blacks is becoming less stereotypical. Earlier, in his insecurity, he had accepted society's prejudices and stereotypes regarding blacks and whites (§ 39):

But with a Negro you couldn't be close friends like you can with another white man. There's some reason you can't understand but it's true.

His attitude to blacks is undergoing a change in the direction of seeing that those prejudices are just that, a change in the direction of appreciating the injustices that blacks suffer (§§ 127-131). His development as a person suggests that ethnic stereotyping is rooted in personal and sexual immaturity. Conversely, the more that one is secure in one's own identity, the less that one needs scapegoats and hate objects. For Herman, the process will not be complete, the achievement of freedom from prejudice will not be complete, until he achieves sexual maturity and marries (§ 131).

However, in the barn, Herman is still frightened. In his fright, in his insecurity, his thinking is still stereotypical, as he indicates when he discusses his attitude toward women (§§ 139-140), which is of a piece with his reluctance at that time to accept blacks as equals. That is why he criticizes feminists in this context.

The suggestion is that his experience here will alter his point of view. Indeed, it is quite an experience!

He directly experiences rape, the most graphic example of the exploitation of women by men. The drunken blacks mistake him in his nakedness for a woman. Although no physical violation actually takes place, the psychological violation does. As a description of rape, this is very powerful. It shows the helplessness, the inability to cry out, the shame, the reluctance to speak about it, and so forth.

The attempted rape pushes Herman forward on his road toward personality reconstruction by causing him to move beyond the Oedipal phase to a literal re-experience of his birth. In other words, the attempted rape pushes him back to the womb.

First, he finds himself in a slaughterhouse, in the middle of a horse's skeleton. This is a symbolic return to the womb that sets the stage for a rebirth of identity. In order for one to have a birth of identity, one must have a death of a previous identity. This, like all powerful growth experiences, is an experience filled with terror (§ 161):

There was a new terror now that seemed to go down to the very bottom of me, to the bottom of the inside of me, I mean. It shook me It was a terror like a big wave that hits you when you are walking on a seashore, maybe. You see it coming and you try to run and get away but . . . the wave comes high as a mountain, and there it is, right in front of you and nothing in all this world can stop it. And now it had knocked you down and rolled and tumbled you over and over and washed you clean, clean, but dead maybe.

The cleansing is the rebirth that is also a death. This is the same kind of experience that writing his story provides for him, a cleansing confession (cf. § 22).

Now Herman decisively moves toward becoming a man (§ 165):

I stood on my own feet again and I wasn't a woman, or a young girl any more but a man and my own self, and as far as I know I've been that way ever since.

When he compares the night to a mother (§ 165), he strengthens the analogy to birth.

The confirmation of his birth or rebirth is the scream that he utters (§ 164) just before he makes this assertion. Some might call his scream a primal scream, a scream that makes contact with one's primal trauma in order that one may be able finally to express one's deepest emotions toward one's childhood.

Having screamed and left the skeletal womb of the slaughterhouse, he now finds shelter in a living womb, the cave in the haystack, where he falls asleep with the sheep that have found shelter from the storm there. The storm outside reflects the psychological storm inside Herman. The rebirth in the cave restores Herman's psychological calm, and therefore, when he leaves the cave, the outer storm is gone too. In addition, in his new birth, he is as naked as a newborn baby is.

Now Herman finds his true father in Burt, who protects him and who—in his protecting—becomes the true king-father of the fairy tales, as the word "royal" (§ 175) indicates.

Therefore, having found a true father and a new sense of identity, Herman leaves the wayward life of immature sexuality and embarks on a path toward mature sexuality.