

**Art and Maturity: Two Windows into the World of *Winesburg, Ohio*  
[A Guide for Teachers]**

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Sherwood Anderson's *Winesburg, Ohio*<sup>1</sup> is a seminal work of twentieth century fiction. It is a compelling Bildungsroman whose naturalness of expression is an avenue of access to penetrating insights into the nature of the work of art and the artist as a young person on the verge of pursuing that art. This dimension of the book most tellingly reveals itself in the introductory "The Book of the Grotesque" and the penultimate "Sophistication,"<sup>2</sup> the two of which are related in important and incisive ways. These two chapters are two privileged windows into the universe of the novel, and they are structured with parallels that unveil that privilege to the reader.

Window I: "The Book of the Grotesque"

[¶¶ 1-3] The reader is introduced to two persons, an old writer with a white moustache and an old carpenter with a white moustache. They both smoke cigars. The parallel descriptions of the two suggests that they are not different persons, but rather two different aspects of the same person, alter egos of the writer whose placement at the beginning of the narrative implies his primacy in what follows. Therefore, this initial description is actually a description of the artist in maturity.

If this is so, then perhaps the house in which the writer lives is something more than, other than, a literal house. Anderson suggests what it is meant to be in his memoir, *A Story Teller's Story*.<sup>3</sup>

My body was a house in which I lived and there were many such houses all about me but I did not live in them. Perhaps I was but trying to make solid the walls of my own house, to roof it properly, to cut windows, becoming accustomed to living in the house so that I could have leisure to look out at the windows and into other houses.... One's body was a house in which had lived two, three, perhaps ten or twelve personalities. The fancy became the head of the house and swept the body away into some absurd adventure or the mind took charge and laid down laws.

(222, 272; also cf. 290-291)

The house, then, is the artist's body, and the windows are the artist's eyes. The artist needs access to windows on the world, i.e., the artist needs eyes open to actuality.

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<sup>1</sup> The text of reference for this essay is the New York, Viking edition, published in 1962, © 1919. Hereafter this will be cited as "WO."

<sup>2</sup> The texts of both stories, with bracketed paragraph numbers for ease of reference, are available as downloads on my web site ([www.doczonline.com](http://www.doczonline.com)).

<sup>3</sup> Sherwood Anderson, *A Story Teller's Story* (NY, Penguin, 1969, © 1924).

The writer is presented primarily as one who sees, who wants “to look.” On the other hand, the carpenter is presented primarily as one who constructs.<sup>4</sup> Art, then, or writing, is presented as a combination of seeing and building, of vision and making. A work of art, say a book, is an artificial construction that provides a view of the world, an access to the world, a window on the world.

The world is a world whose essential feature is war, Civil War, a war of brother against brother. The carpenter’s brother had died in that war, which poignantly reinforces the writer as, so to speak, the replacement of the lost brother. Again since brothers are frequently literarily alter egos, this adds another support to the ‘alter egoness’ of the two.

In a way, this relocates the war from the outside world to the inner life of the individual, in which each brother represents one aspect of a single individual. Each individual, then, is constituted by a civil war of psychological forces. The allusion to imprisonment further suggests that each of us is a prisoner of the war within ourselves, within our body, which is not only a house, but also a prison insofar as one cannot transcend the warring forces that beset one internally. The artist, the writer, gives us, makes for us, a vision of those forces.

The allusion to Andersonville Prison, an actual Confederate Army concentration camp, is pointed. The naming of the actual prison is not an accident. After all, the prison could have been given a fictional name, as the town has a fictional name. What the name impels one to conclude is that the artist or writer whom the narrative here adumbrates is Sherwood Anderson himself. Winesburg, Ohio, then, is truly an Andersonville.

The writer has a plan for gaining access to the world, namely to have the carpenter raise his bed “so that it would be on a level with the window.” However, the carpenter does not follow the plan. This indicates that the writer’s initial plan for a writing is sometimes altered or modified in the light of actuality (that of the world and that of the process of writing). The writer, then, may envision an ease of access to the world that is nullified in the process of writing, a process that proves to be more difficult than was assumed originally. Therefore, whatever helpful blueprint is one’s initial guide, in the actual process of expressing or building one’s vision, that blueprint or guide may require modification, and one may need to leave it behind (at least partially) and to adapt oneself to the demands of the process.<sup>5</sup>

[¶ 4] This leads to the distinction between mind and heart. The two are related intimately. The map of life needs to be supplemented by the felt sense of life. However, to plunge feelingly into life (to be “a hard smoker”) is risky. It requires an unselfish openness, a willingness to abandon one’s selfish individuality. In other words, it requires that one die as a selfish egoist in order to live as a vital reflection of, and on, human nature. The writer must leave behind his or her old body, the body of selfish concern, as, say, a snake leaves its dead skin behind. The writer must become open to being fertilized by the world, must become pregnant with insight.

Sight without insight is sterile, and insight without sight is deformed.

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<sup>4</sup> So, the writer is identified with eyes, while the carpenter is identified with hands. This duality introduces two of the central images of the book (eyes and hands).

<sup>5</sup> Cf. Ralph Ellison, “Hidden Name and Complex Fate,” *Shadow and Act* (NY, 1964), 162: “when I say that the novelist is created by the novel, I mean to remind you that fictional techniques are not a mere set of objective tools, but something more intimate: a way of feeling, of seeing and of expressing one’s sense of life.”

The combination of sight and insight entails abandoning both personal stereotypical categories and societal stereotypical categories. It is beyond age distinctions (both old and young), beyond gender distinctions (both male and female), beyond appearance distinctions (both beautiful and ugly). This is the transcendent perspective that the writer generates.

True writing, then, is true conception. True conception is what the open, vulnerable, unprejudiced thinking of the young thing within the writer represents. Such thinking fuses eternally youthful femininity and eternally youthful masculinity: its image is Athena or Joan of Arc, the woman knight.

[¶ 5] Although a writer is a human being like all other human beings, the writer knows human beings in a way in which other human beings do not. The writer knows human beings in a more intimate way. Knowing that he or she knows others in this way gratifies the writer, gives him or her pleasure. However, the narrator's question suggests that it may not be as simple as that. What the question calls into question is not the writer's knowledge, but the writer's pleasure in that knowledge. Perhaps, then, there is a pain too involved. This is left open here.

[¶ 6] The writer's different way, more intimate or deeper way, of knowing people is a different way of seeing people. This different way of seeing extends even into dreams, dreams that are both dreams and not dreams at the same time. For the writer, then, things are simultaneously what they are and not at all what they are.<sup>6</sup>

The writer's vision is described as an "imagined" procession of persons whom the young female warrior parades before the writer's windows or eyes.

[¶¶ 7-8] What matters in the procession are the figures themselves, not the writer. In other words, it is the work of art that is important, not the life or personality of the writer.

Now the reader is shown the uniqueness of the writer's perception, the intimate knowledge of persons that the writer possesses. That knowledge or vision is that all persons are, or have been made into, grotesques. In other words, all persons have become distorted in some way. Yet even if they be distorted, they are not necessarily, by virtue of that, ugly. Some, of course, are ugly or horrible, but others verge on the beautiful in some way. These latter suggest that in grotesqueness, there may be a certain nobility or grandeur. Furthermore, some are comical, amusing. The procession, then, is not monolithically either macabre or tragic.

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<sup>6</sup> A similar notion is expressed in Wallace Stevens's "The Man with the Blue Guitar," stanza 1 [*The Collected Poems* (NY, Vintage, 1954), 165]:

The man bent over his guitar,  
A shearsman of sorts. The day was green.

They said, "You have a blue guitar,  
You do not play things as they are."

The man replied, "Things as they are  
Are changed upon the blue guitar."

And they said then, "But play, you must,  
A tune beyond us, yet ourselves,

A tune upon the blue guitar  
Of things exactly as they are."

This is the writer's insight. Such an insight into human nature is painful. It is painful presumably because the writer empathically feels the pain that human grotesques feel. Therefore, when a particularly deformed woman passes before his inner eyes, the writer whimpers like a dog in pain. However, to an uninformed or superficial observer who happened to be in the room at that moment, the writer's whimpering as he dreams would seem to be the external expression of a trivial nightmare or of indigestion. This suggests that the writer's vision is not discernible by looking at the surface of the writing alone, but one can understand the truth of its meaning only by penetrating to the inner depths of the writing that the surface may seem to belie or even to deny.

[¶¶ 9-10] Even though the insight is painful, and even though expressing it is painful, the writer's desire to write, to describe the insight, is overwhelming and compelling. Therefore, the writer leaves his sheets to seek his sheets: he goes from the canvas of the imagination (the bed sheets) to the canvas of expression or writing (the sheets of paper).

Now one sees that the writer's vision and expression are in harmony, the vision and the writing are parallel. The clue to this is that the writer writes for exactly as long as he saw, namely "for an hour" (the phrase that occurs at or toward the beginning of both ¶9 and ¶10).

The writer continued writing until he completed a book titled *The Book of the Grotesque*, the same title as the title of this story. The writer never published that book, but the narrator saw (and apparently read) it once and never forgot it. In addition, encountering that book helped the narrator to understand humans and their world.

This suggests that a piece of writing does not have to reach a large audience to have an impact. It may be enough if it reaches one sympathetic soul, one sympathetic person. If it does reach, or communicate with, such a person, then the writer's vision becomes a legacy, an inheritance, for that person. In other words, the writer's vision helps another person to understand the world: through the book, the writer reveals to someone else the truth about people and about the world.

This raises the question of what that truth is that the writer reveals.

[¶¶ 11-14] The truth is constructed out of the countless, perhaps infinite, human thought possibilities. Thoughts are merely thoughts, and thoughts as thoughts are vague and amorphous, neither true nor false. Truth is a humanly constructed matrix of meaning. When it is a construction of humans as humans, when it is properly comprehensive and not selfishly appropriated, then—and only then—is it matched to actuality.

Truths as such, truths as truths, are always true and always beautiful.

For every essential human characteristic, there seems to be a truth.

However, there is a danger connected with truths. The danger is that they can be appropriated selfishly. When individuals appropriate them selfishly, those same individuals rob them of their integrity and completeness and comprehensiveness by putting them together in inappropriate ways. When that happens, the individuals become distorted, emotionally crippled, dysfunctional.

For example—to oversimplify a bit for clarity—there is a truth of thrift: husbanding one's resources is valuable and desirable. Yet when thrift becomes the narrow and dominating principle of one's life, then one becomes a miser, and a miser is a grotesque.

Or, there is a truth of virginity: one's sexuality is not something to be squandered cheaply. Yet when virginity becomes the narrow and dominating principle of one's life, then one becomes repressed, and much of life's fulfillment is closed to one. To be repressed is to be a grotesque.

Or, there is a truth of passion: feeling and sexuality are proper and desirable modes of human expression. Yet when passion becomes the narrow and dominating principle of one's life, then one becomes promiscuous, and a promiscuous person is a grotesque.

Possessing a truth selfishly and improperly is what renders truth impure and false. Therefore, falsehood is not untruth, but rather it is corrupted truth. Ownership is what corrupts truth, what makes the owner a grotesque.

In a way, then, being a grotesque is analogous to being a stereotype. A stereotype—from the Greek στερεός (solid) and τύπος (outline)—is an outline that is given solidity. All stereotypes possess two characteristics: (1) they are partially correct; (2) they satisfy certain needs of those who make them.

A grotesque is like a living stereotype, a hollow shell turned into a living monster. That is what most human beings are.

[¶¶ 15-16] The carpenter too is a grotesque, like the grotesques in the writer's book. Yet he is "lovable." Therefore, some distortions of human personalities are attractive, not repulsive or ugly.

In addition, the carpenter is that aspect of the writer that connects the writer to the grotesques who are described in the book. The carpenter is concerned with making and what is made. This suggests that in a sense, all grotesques are made—one even could say, self-made. Each grotesque takes a comprehensive truth and *makes* it into a narrow principle of life that excludes all other principles. This is the distortion of the grotesque, i.e., this is the psychological trap into which most human beings fall. Even the writer is not immune to this danger: after all, it is a part of him, as it is a part of all humans, as it is a part of all of us. Nevertheless, the writer is able to keep this tendency in its proper place, i.e., the writer is able to put this into perspective.

Finally, the writer does not publish the book. Therefore, the writing of the book is like the original plan for the placing of the bed. Just as the bed was not placed where the writer wanted it to be placed, so too the book is not published as one would expect a book to be published. At the beginning, the writer had to use a chair to compensate for the deficiencies in the way that the bed actually was placed. Analogously, the book that the reader is reading, the book written by the narrator after he met the writer and read his book—the book that the reader is reading—is the reader's chair. It is the chair onto which readers have to climb in order to gain the vision (sight/insight) that the writer has. In other words, this book that one is reading is one's steppingstone to seeing the world truly, which means that it is one's steppingstone to controlling one's own inner tendency toward becoming grotesque.

In short, what allows one to be truly what one is, is indicated by the conjoined first and last phrases of the story: what allows us to be truly what we are is "[t]he writer...in the writer's book."

## Window II: "Sophistication"

[¶ 1] The story begins in "early evening." Most of the stories in *Winesburg, Ohio* take place in the evening and at night. This helps to create an atmosphere of uncertainty, obscurity, isolation, gloom, tension, loneliness, and fear.

In addition, it is "late fall," at the time of the county fair. In other words, the seasonal cycle is nearly over: the harvest has just been brought in, and nature is about to retreat for the winter in order to hibernate so that it may reenergize itself for the next cycle, the next phase, the next year.

"The day had been clear," but the clarity of the day is replaced now by cloud after cloud of dust. Therefore, clarity is replaced by obscurity.

The children are asleep, and they sleep "curled into little balls." In other words, they sleep in the foetal position. This physical withdrawal of the children, this nocturnal regression, mirrors or reflects the psychological withdrawal or regression of the adults.

Finally, the rolling dust clouds sparkle with reflections of the setting sun, which gives the scene a kind of nightmarish quality, as St. Elmo's fire does to a ship at sea.

[¶ 2] The town of Winesburg is filled with crowds. That is, it is filled with a mass of persons, not with distinct individuals.

When night arrives, the horses become unsettled, the clerks become frenzied, and children who are lost in the darkness of separation from their parents cry out strongly in their urgent yearning to be reunited with their parents.

In sum, the leisure of this American town is labored. Its leisure or amusement is artificial, forced, crazy, lacking in genuine spontaneity. Therefore, even its play is work.

[¶ 3] The crowds make it difficult to move freely and easily: one must push one's way through them.

The person doing the pushing here is George Willard, the unifying protagonist of the body of Winesburg stories. His name has great significance and resonance.

"George" is an English version of the ancient Greek word for farmer, and this is an appropriate given name for someone from a Midwest farming community. The name also carries a wider cultural significance. To the English and to Americans, the name suggests two key cultural figures: Saint George and George Washington. Saint George is the patron saint of England, famous for the slaying of a dragon and regarded as a symbol of victory or triumph. George Washington (whose second initial solidifies this connection) was, so to speak, the patron icon of the United States, the first American president and a symbol of freedom and independence.

George's family name "Willard" is a Germanic name that means "firm of will" or "strong-willed."

Therefore, the name "George Willard" taken all together signifies victory, triumph, determination, freedom, and independence. The question to ask is whether George Willard actually possesses all these attributes or whether they are only potentialities waiting to be actualized.

The only adjective used to describe him here is "young," and the picture of him that emerges in this context is of an irrational youth. In the next paragraph, he will be placed on the verge of adulthood. Therefore, this story, this episode in his life, will represent the crucial moment of transition from youth to adulthood.

George pushes through the crowd and hides himself. Therefore, two things are emphasized about him: on the one hand, his separateness from the crowd; on the other hand, his furtiveness and voyeurism ("With feverish eyes, he watched...and looked

sharply about"). In addition, he places himself in darkness, away from the artificial illumination of the store lights. Therefore, as a person, he is in the dark, and he has a way to go before he sees the light. In his darkness, he is impatient, unsettled, uneasy.

In his muttering, there is a hint about the cause of his behavior, but it is only a hint that invites wondering. One wonders who "she" is, and to whom "him" refers. The way in which he asks himself about them suggests that the "she" is a young woman in whom he is interested romantically and that the "him" is a possible romantic rival. One wonders why he is hiding and waiting. One assumes that he is waiting in the hope that "she" will appear, so that he can 'accidentally' bump into her, an example of immature behavior to which nonetheless all humans can relate.

Finally, one sees that he is dominated by his thoughts, thoughts that he cannot shake off.<sup>7</sup>

[¶ 4] George Willard is rapidly becoming an adult. This makes him feel lonely, even among the crowds at the fair. His loneliness is rooted in his feeling that he no longer belongs in his hometown. The others in the town, those who surround him on this day, now seem like children to him. Therefore, even though he may not yet know exactly where he belongs, he knows that he no longer belongs here among them.

This is what has prompted his imminent departure from Winesburg in order to go to a big city to be a journalist, a writer.<sup>8</sup> This is what makes him feel almost grown up. To be precise, he feels like an in-between, like an intermediate, being, i.e., he feels like someone in transition, neither a boy nor a man.

Nonetheless, he feels old, i.e., he feels that his life, or rather the life that he has led so far, his youth, is at an end. In addition, he feels tired, tired from the effort that is required to leave his old life behind.

Furthermore, his growing maturity isolates him from those around him. After all, those around him continue in their usual, their habitual, ruts.

Finally, his isolation gives him a look (a feeling, an air) of tragedy. His isolation makes him "half-tragic."

However, if he is half-tragic, he must also be half-comic. The other half, the comic half, is only implied. It will not be actualized fully until he does two things: (1) he must find a sympathetic person with whom to share his feeling; (2) he must decide firmly to leave his old life behind, to leave town. Six or so months earlier, his mother had died. The death of his mother, with whom he lived and to whom he had been very close, had shattered his last connection to his previous life. Nevertheless, he needs something to reassure himself that his future life, a meaningful life, is possible.

What follows begins to spell out, to elaborate, what he feels and what he needs.

[¶ 5] Here one begins to find out what is needed, what the key is, for making the transition to adulthood.

First, one must take "the backward view of life." This means that one must stop living only in the present moment, i.e., one must start looking at life in terms of all of it, in terms of past and future. One must stop acting as if the future will take care of itself: one must stop seeing the current moment as an unlimited field without limits or boundaries. Instead, one begins to think in terms of a lifetime with both its possibilities and its limitations. In Freudian terms, this means abandoning the pleasure principle

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<sup>7</sup> In Winesburg, Ohio—as perhaps in life—those who are dominated by their thoughts are unable to act meaningfully.

<sup>8</sup> George has already been working as a reporter for the local newspaper, *The Winesburg Eagle* (cf. the first page of the first inner story, "Hands," et passim).

and beginning to live by the reality principle. It means beginning to take meaningful control of one's life. It means doing what is good for one instead of what feels good to one. This means that one looks beyond the present moment to the future, i.e., one looks to what kind of life one will have in the world. This fills one with "ambitions and regrets," regrets for wasted opportunities of one's youth and ambitions for what one can be in the future. Therefore, the present is no longer all that there is, and one now sees the whole sequence of time.

When this happens to George, suddenly he hears his former life calling to him like a ghost, calling to him as a ghost of the departed calls out to the living. He realizes now that life has limitations, boundaries. When he realizes this, his certainty fades away: he is no longer sure of himself. An abyss of uncertainty opens up in front of his mental vision. Since George is imaginative, this feeling tears open a door on the world as a whole. He sees that the world is filled with human beings who emerge from nothingness, live routine lives, and then dissolve back into nothingness.

These human beings form a procession. George sees this procession marching in front of him, just as the old man in "The Book of the Grotesque" saw the procession of grotesques in front of him. This parallel between George and the old man suggests that George is at least potentially a writer, an artist.

George's vision of the unfulfilled, meaningless lives of most humans makes him feel sad and sophisticated. Sophistication is worldly wisdom. The sadness that accompanies it is the sadness of pity for all those lost human souls, and of pity for himself as one of them.

George is eighteen years old. That eighteen years that he has lived has seemed like an eternity, like forever, until now, but now it seems like the briefest instant, like a mere breath, compared to all human history. This applies not only to the now of his life, but also to his whole possible lifetime. Even his whole possible lifetime is the briefest instant, a mere breath, compared to all human history. Therefore, "he hears death calling." That is, he realizes that for all of us, death is just around the corner: no matter how many actual years we have before we actually die, death is still just around the corner, because all those years are just an instant compared to all human history.

This is a painful insight. The only way to blunt the pain is to touch another human being and to be touched by another human being. The only way to blunt the pain of knowing that we all must die is to communicate truly with another human being and to have that other human being communicate truly with you.<sup>9</sup>

For a man (a male), complete self-understanding can be reached only through a woman, because only a woman will activate the feminine part of himself, and he needs the feminine part of himself to complete his masculine part. Correspondingly, as one sees in what follows, for a woman, complete self-understanding can be reached only through a man, because only a man will activate the masculine part of herself, and she needs the masculine part of herself to complete her feminine part.

[¶ 6] It is not surprising that at his movement of sophistication, at the moment when he realizes that men and women need each other to complement themselves, George thinks about Helen White.

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<sup>9</sup> That the narrator puts this in terms of touch, in terms of hands, is significant. In Winesburg, Ohio, both the town and the novel, the primary vehicle of communication is the hands. A person with hands in his or her pockets is closed off from other human beings, but a person whose hands reach out, whatever the risks, at least has the chance of understanding and being understood.

She too has a significant name. Her given name (Helen) is an allusion to Helen of Troy, the woman whom Homer compares to an immortal goddess at her first appearance in the *Iliad* (3. 121 ff.) and who has come to be regarded as the epitome of beauty and desirability. Her surname (White) typically suggests purity, brightness, integrity, and goodness. Therefore, the name “Helen White” connotes physical and moral perfection combined. In addition, she is the banker’s daughter, and that associates her with wealth, although for her, the wealth, the richness, is a wealth or richness not only of material goods but also of character.

Helen and George are parallel figures who are undergoing the same process of growth and change.

During the summer immediately before this autumn, George had taken a walk with Helen. During that walk, he had behaved immaturely, hiding his insecurity behind a façade of superficial braggadocio. These two young persons had grown up together, and that was not the first time that George had acted in that way.

George realizes that his actions then were false, i.e., he realizes that he was adopting an empty pose. He was trying to convince her that he was a ‘real man,’ but he knows now that he was actually an immature boy who was ignorant of what true manliness or true manhood was. George realizes now that true manhood is something different. He has changed, and he wants to communicate that change to Helen.<sup>10</sup>

[¶ 7] Helen has reached a point in her life exactly parallel to the point that George has reached. In other words, this growth is not an exclusively male phenomenon, but rather it is equally available to females and males alike. It is not a gender-based growth: it is a growth that occurs in humans as humans.

While George has been working as a reporter on the local newspaper (*The Winesburg Eagle*) since high school graduation, Helen has been attending college in the large city of Cleveland. Helen’s attending college at a time when far fewer women attended college than do today indicates that she is an independent woman at a time when women’s independence was not the norm. Therefore, one already knows that she is different from, even beyond, the normal run of persons.

Helen has come home from college for a visit, and she brings with her one of the college’s instructors as a guest. The instructor is a young man who is narrowly educated and who has an impressive appearance. Helen, then, is showing off a bit by parading his companionship. However, one should not be too hard on her for this, because the young instructor actually has been invited by Helen’s mother. For Helen, he is nothing more than an ornament, a decoration. This represents a subtle role reversal, one of the many role reversals that occur in the novel.

The young instructor—whose lack of a name implies his lack of individuality—mistakes Helen’s courteous attention for romantic interest. As a result, he contemplates marrying her. However, his motives are suspect: he wants to marry her for—even if not only for—her money. In this role reversal, he is, so to speak, the gold-digger.

Helen is not totally comfortable in his company. She becomes restless and wants to ditch him.

[¶ 8] Unbeknown to each other, as George is thinking about Helen, so too Helen is thinking about George.

Helen too is remembering the walk that they took together during the preceding summer. In addition, she too feels that she has changed as a result of her experience in

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<sup>10</sup> One knows from earlier chapters that before this year, in his relationships with women, George was interested only in petty sexual conquest. However, now he wants true soul communication.

the city, which is presented as a place of light, not darkness. Now that she has changed, she wants to communicate that change in herself to George.

On their walk, perhaps she acted as much the stereotypical female as George had acted the stereotypical male. She wants to correct the impression that she had given George on that summer day.

Human relationships are—or ought to be—two-way streets.

[¶¶ 9-11] Now, after the reader has been prepared for it, the account will be given of that walk that is on the minds of both George and Helen, the walk that both George and Helen are remembering. For reasons that neither of them had understood at first, that summer evening had had an impact on both of them.

From an objective point of view, it was a wasted evening (“rather stupidly spent”). It was wasted presumably because an opportunity for genuine interpersonal communication was lost, bungled.

The two of them walked outside town to the farm fields surrounding the town. They stop, they pause, “near a field of young corn.” The youngness of the corn reflects the youth of George and Helen.<sup>11</sup>

George takes off his sport jacket in an attempt to be casual. However, as soon as he starts to speak, he becomes confused, unsure of himself, defensive. First, he tries to equalize the apparent gap that he thinks may have been created between them by Helen’s departure from the town while he has stayed behind and by Helen’s continuing her formal education while he has worked on the local newspaper.

As George speaks, he realizes that he is not saying exactly what he wants to say or what he feels that he should say, so he says—in frustration—that he had better stop talking.

George is confused by his verbal inability, so he tries to reach out more directly without the inadequacy of words: he puts his hand on Helen’s arm. However, he does not feel comfortable about this either. The two young persons start to head back to town, with George now feeling hopeless, desperate. His desperation makes him try to speak again, but instead of speaking truly and sensitively, he brags, boasts, declaring that he is going to be a big shot (“a big man”) in his hometown.<sup>12</sup>

George’s inability to talk about himself any longer leads him to lurch into talking to Helen about her. However, what he says to her about her is as vague and false as what he had said about himself. He says that he wants her to be different from other women, yet he cannot tell her exactly what that means or how she should do it. His inability to say what he wants to say is emphasized by his saying “You see” twice, something that one says repeatedly only when one is afraid—even somehow knows—that the other person does not see, does not understand.<sup>13</sup> Hence, he falls back on a crude stereotype, telling her that he wants her to be “beautiful.”

George simply cannot find the words to say what he feels, so the two continue to walk back into town, and they walk silently. Helen seems unable or unwilling to help George: she simply allows him to fumble on, then to fall silent. When they reach Helen’s house, after their long silence, at Helen’s gate, George tries again to speak, but everything that pops into his head to say seems “pointless” to him. Finally, he manages to say something, but what he says is silly and irrelevant, so Helen turns away from him to go inside her house without even saying goodbye.

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<sup>11</sup> References to this corn will occur at key moments in what follows.

<sup>12</sup> Recall that this is a flashback to the preceding summer.

<sup>13</sup> This is re-emphasized by his repetition of “none of my business.”

From the vantage point of the present, one can see that, yes, that earlier evening was wasted, yet it was not totally wasted. In addition, one can see that both George and Helen were already struggling to break the chains of normal gender-based stereotypes. At that time, perhaps still too close to high school, they fell back into those stereotypes, at least to the extent that George felt obliged to take the lead while Helen simply held back from asserting herself properly. In Helen's case, on that summer evening, she could neither act as she later does with the college teacher, nor could she act fully independently. Therefore, she lapsed into silence. At that point, neither one of them was quite ready to step outside the social roles to which most persons cling, even though both were already uncomfortable with those social roles.

This concludes the flashback, after which the narrative returns to the present of the fall evening.

[¶ 12] As George hides in the darkness of the stairwell and looks out at the crowd on Main Street, he remembers the field of young corn (see ¶ 9), the field of corn before it was ripe for harvest. Just as the corn was not yet ripe for harvest, so too George and Helen were not yet ripe for growing up, not yet quite ripe for becoming adults.

Now, in the fall, as George remembers the summer evening, he feels "ashamed" of how he had acted then. His feeling of shame is an indication of his growth.

Suddenly, the crowds of ordinary persons in the street seem to him to be acting "like cattle confined in a pen." In other words, they seem to have no individuality, no purpose of their own. Only small children seem to have any spontaneity at all.

Those who are close to George's own age act awkwardly. The faces of the young males are red, presumably from drinking too much.<sup>14</sup> The young females on their arms are like ciphers, mere appendages to their male companions.

In the dance hall, the fiddlers are tuning up, and the uneven tuning sounds of both the fiddlers and the brass instrument players of the band drift down to where George is hiding. These sounds annoy George, who is behaving immaturely, as the narrator indicates by calling him "young Willard," thereby emphasizing his youthful immaturity. In addition, the narrator robs him of his individualizing given name, which was used to designate him at the beginning of the paragraph when his shame at his summer behavior was a sign of maturity.

Here his immaturity reasserts itself. Even in his isolation, he feels as if the crowd is pressing in on him. This makes him want to run away and hide someplace where he can think in peace and quiet. What he says to himself shows that he is still being controlled by his jealousy. Consequently, he can no longer stand still, so he goes along the edge of Main Street, through the grocery store, and out the back door of the store into a back street.

[¶¶ 13-14] The jealousy that possesses George makes him feel isolated, or—to be more precise—makes him feel doubly isolated: on the one hand, he is isolated from the crowd; on the other hand, he is isolated from Helen. Only immature pride keeps him from bursting into tears.

He comes to the horse barn where a group of racing men has gathered to listen to the bragging of the owner of the barn, Wesley Moyer, who also owns racehorses, one of which had won a race that afternoon at the fair. Wesley himself is "prancing," i.e., walking like a horse, holding a whip (a riding whip) that he taps against the ground. To repeat, Wesley is bragging ("boasting") about himself and his winning horse.

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<sup>14</sup> Prohibition is just around the corner. The book was published in the year that the eighteenth amendment was ratified, so its events antedate that societal upheaval.

Ordinarily, George would have enjoyed such talk, but now he is distracted. He still feels some shame about his own bragging in his summer conversation with Helen. Therefore, Wesley's boasting angers him, and he mutters to himself complainingly about it.

The complication in George's attitude here is that it is both immature and mature at the same time: his behavior is immature, but his reaction against bragging is mature. George regards Wesley's words as the meaningless words of a superficial person, so George hurries away.

[¶ 15] George enters a vacant lot. The vacancy or emptiness of the lot reflects or mirrors George's own feeling of vacant emptiness or loneliness. The pile of rubbish over which he trips mirrors the pile of unhealthy thoughts that have been clouding his mind. The nail that tears his pants represents the unhealthy, destructive anger and jealousy that he is feeling, a feeling that he expresses by swearing.

Then George does something quite striking and remarkable. He gains control of himself by mending his torn pants with a pin, i.e., by sewing the rip in his pants. Sewing was—for some persons, still is—regarded as a feminine activity. Only after engaging in this feminine activity can George strengthen his will or determination. Only after engaging in this feminine activity can he decide to put aside his petty jealousy. Only after engaging in this feminine activity can he do what he should have done in the first place, namely simply go to see Helen directly and openly.

Once he reaches this mature determination, he does not hesitate to carry his purpose out. Therefore, his climbing over the fence represents his conquest, his control, of his own inner psychological obstacles and conflicts.

[¶¶ 16-18] While George was hiding in the stairwell and thinking, then walking until he reached the determination that impelled him to cross the vacant lot on his way to Helen's house—while George was undergoing this, Helen was as restless and uncomfortable at home as George had been in town. What Helen is now experiencing occurs simultaneously with what George has been described as experiencing (cf. ¶18, end, to ¶ 15, end).

As the college teacher talks on the porch to Helen and her mother—but more to her mother—Helen is so uncomfortable that she retreats into the house through the front door. She walks through the house to the back door. However, she hesitates for a moment, perhaps a bit unsure of herself, and she eavesdrops on more of the conversation between her mother and the teacher. She hears her mother talking about her, bragging about her (as the horse owner Wesley bragged about his victory in the horse race). Mrs. White believes that her family, especially her daughter, is too good for the persons in Winesburg, Ohio. Nonetheless, she and her husband have stayed in the town. Perhaps, then, there is an undercurrent of frustration to Mrs. White, a subconscious awareness that she and her life have been less than it should have been.

Hearing this is enough for Helen, so she bolts out the back door into the garden.

In Western literature, the phrase "the garden" is frequently charged with a cultural meaning that goes back to the Biblical account of the Garden of Eden, a place that represents humans in a state of prelapsarian perfection.

Helen's fleeing back into the garden intimates that she is trying to reach a state of perfection, a kind of life better and more meaningful than the one led by her parents and the others around her in the small town of Winesburg.

In the garden, Helen pauses and trembles (perhaps in frustration, perhaps in fear, perhaps in anticipation). Parallel to George, she too reacts negatively to what she considers to be the meaningless words of superficial persons.

Suddenly “eagerness” blazes up inside her. This eagerness allows her to release the male aspect of herself sufficiently so that she rushes out into the street aggressively seeking George and calling out his name. Just as George did, she stops for a moment. Then she laughs “hysterically.” The laugh represents a release of tension and a feeling of freedom.

Down the street where Helen is leaning against a tree, George comes along still muttering the words that he started to mutter as he climbed over the fence when he left the vacant lot. At first, when George sees Helen appear almost miraculously in front of him, he is frozen. However, he recovers his wits quickly, says the two simple words “Come on,” and then takes hold of Helen’s hand. This is a powerful gesture of his intention to communicate, to communicate truly, with her. They walk away together, “with hanging heads.” This suggests that they are letting go of thinking, letting go of their thoughts or minds, and therefore, they are allowing their hearts or feelings to express themselves.

As they walk, George wonders what he should do and say. In what follows, neither of them *says* anything. Rather they both simply act in a way that brings them into true soulful intimacy.

[¶¶ 19-21] George and Helen go to the upper end of the field. The comparative adjective “upper” is significant: it initiates a series of words that refer to their being together as an ascent, an elevation: they are raising themselves up, improving themselves.

They go the upper end of the “Fair Ground.” The typical way of referring to this place would be the “Fair Grounds.”<sup>15</sup> That the narrator now changes the plural to singular suggests that George and Helen are reaching an arena of fairness, i.e., that they are ‘on fair ground,’ which suggests that all unfairness is left behind, so that they are truly equals.

They are going toward a “half decayed...grand-stand.” If only half of the grandstand is decayed, the other half must not be decayed. The condition of the grandstand, its two halves, represents the time of life at which George and Helen are. The half that is decayed represents the unhealthy attitudes that both have left behind, while the non-decayed half represents their new attitudes, attitudes that give them a beautiful view of life, a view that is epitomized by the cornfield ripe for harvest that they can see.

George and Helen climb the hill to the Fair Ground, the ground of equality. They pass the Waterworks Pond. As they climb and walk together, George’s feeling of loneliness is both shattered and strengthened because of Helen’s presence next to him. His loneliness is shattered because Helen is present: he is no longer alone by himself. His loneliness is strengthened because Helen is present: they are both now isolated from all others, and together they feel a double separateness because each one feels not only his or her separation but also the separation of the other. In other words, the isolation that they share is more intense than the loneliness that each one felt alone. However, because they share it, it is nullified, canceled, negated. Each young person reflects the other young person.

Now the narrator comments that in young persons, two aspects are present and always in conflict with each other.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Cf. the earlier story “The Awakening” (WO, p.187).

<sup>16</sup> From the point of view of maturity, the keyword is “always.” These same two aspects are also present in older persons, but at least in some older persons, they are not *always* in conflict.

These two aspects of the human personality are: (1) an animal-like and younger part of us that acts spontaneously and without thinking; (2) an older and more sophisticated part of us that acts based on thoughts and memories. The second aspect is said to be more sophisticated than the first aspect, which means that the first aspect too can be sophisticated, although less sophisticated than the first aspect.

At this moment, George is being controlled by the thoughtful, more sophisticated aspect of himself, and hence the narrator calls him “George Willard,” using both names together as a sign that he is becoming complete as a person. When Helen senses this in George, i.e., when Helen senses in George what she also senses in herself, she is filled with respect for George, as he must be filled with respect for Helen.

They ascend to the very top of the healthy part of the grandstand: this spatial position reflects their psychological position as a peak of vision.

[¶ 22] The experience of the fair ground—here, and only here, given in lower case letters as a way of ensuring that one sees the double meaning—the experience of the fair ground at night, after the fair is over, is a memorable and unique experience. It feels as if the spirits of those who attended the fair that day are still there. Although it is not stated explicitly, one is meant to realize that George and Helen both sense this presence of the spirits in the place. George earlier had had a vision of ghosts from his past life, from the past in general. Now both see a vision of present life. Having passed from the past to the present, George is ready now to begin facing the future.

What George and Helen sense at the Fair Ground are not so much the individual personalities of the persons who had been there, but rather their life force. Here again there is a progression: in his previous vision (¶ 5), George had seen death, but now he sees life: indeed, the absence of the living persons makes the awareness of the life that animated them there more powerful.

In addition, the death that George had seen before (¶ 5) grew out of his awareness of the smallness, pettiness, and meaninglessness of the lives of most persons. That sense of life’s meaninglessness is only one side of the coin, only one side of the story. The new vision or sense complements the previous one, completes it. That new vision or sense, the other side of the coin or story, is that life—even the life of those in his hometown—is something worth loving, something lovable. That means that life can be—even if it is not for most persons—meaningful. The sense of completeness that this new feeling of the meaningfulness of life provides causes George to cry tears of joy. This too is a change from his earlier suppression of the impulse to cry (cf. ¶ 13).

[¶ 23] This new vision, this vision of light, so to speak, does not cancel out the old vision. The old vision is still there, all around us. Therefore, even though George and Helen have ‘seen the light,’ they are still “in the darkness,” and George still feels the smallness of his own life. However, now he is beginning to put that feeling in its proper place. That is why the feeling of the smallness of his own life no longer irritates him. That is why he no longer is angry. Anger is childish, immature, and George has begun to leave the immaturity of anger behind and to replace it with the maturity of sophisticated acceptance.

Because Helen shares this point of view, George feels like a new person. Helen is described here in terms of her hand’s reshaping of George’s view of life’s workings or machinery. Consequently, George no longer feels contempt for other persons, no longer looks down on other persons. Instead he reveres them, and his reverence for them is an echo or reflection of his reverence for Helen. His reverence for her is parallel to her respect for him.

George wanted there to be reciprocal love between himself and Helen, but he wants the love to be pure. When he thinks that he does “not want...to be confused by her womanhood,” he means that he does not want the love between them to be cheapened or clouded by sex. Here the phrase “in the darkness” is repeated as a reminder that the world as a whole is still a darkness in which George and Helen are a pocket of light. The light that they embody is represented by George’s reaching out to hold Helen’s hand. When she responds positively to his touch, he puts his other hand on her shoulder. This means that they are now facing each other.

The wind that blows and makes George shiver represents the danger that threatens their new understanding, the danger that it could be lost so easily if they are not strong. That is why George feels that he must summon all his strength in order to hold onto what they have, to hold onto what they have discovered simultaneously and then shared with each other.

Again the phrase “in the darkness” recurs, but now it is not first in the sentence, because George and Helen are in a “high place,” i.e., they have risen above the meaningless and cheapness that always threaten humans in the modern world. Now no longer alone, they embrace. In their embrace, they are “oddly sensitive,” sensitive in a way that is odd, strange, different from most humans. The narrator describes them as “two...human atoms,” i.e., they are like two atoms that have been brought together to form something extraordinary, a human molecule. What binds that molecule together is the identical thought that each one has. Because they have an identical thought, or identical thoughts, they do not need to speak. Each simply senses the thought of the other as identical to his or her own thought. This represents an emotional peak of tremendous power. It is a moment that the two should be allowed to share in private. Therefore, the narrator pulls down the curtain, so to speak, and turns away in the next paragraph back to the town of Winesburg.

[¶ 24] The return to the town is, in a way, a return to the beginning of the story (with specific references to ¶ 1, ¶ 2, and ¶ 12). This is a way of indicating that the growth that George and Helen have undergone represents a new beginning for them.

Again, as at the beginning, the winding down of the day is described. However, things now are presented very differently from the way that they were presented before. There is no description of dust, and the horses and clerks seem calm and composed. Instead of speed and frenzy, now there seems to be tranquility. The fiddles that annoyed George now are tuned, and the young persons are dancing freely (“flying over a dance floor”). The madness, fear, and isolation of the beginning seem to have faded away.

However, it is important to realize that in actuality things are fundamentally the same as they were before. The change in the way that they are described represents, not a change in the way that they are, but a change in the way that George and Helen look at them. The calmness and composure are the calmness and composure of George and Helen, a calmness and composure rooted in their newfound intimacy and maturity.

[¶ 25] Now the phrase “In the darkness” recurs (cf. ¶ 23) to remind one that the change is in George and Helen, not in the world as a whole. To emphasize that change, to emphasize the completeness that they have achieved, the narrator refers to both of them by their complete names (“Helen White and George Willard”). In addition, if one notices that both their family names begin with the same letter, namely “W,” one realizes that what you need to complete yourself is a ‘double-you,’ another person who matches and completes you, an alter ego.

However, this new maturity is not such that one's achievement of it guarantees that it will automatically last. Such is not at all the case. This new understanding is precarious, shaky: it fades and reasserts itself, fades and reasserts itself. When the new understanding fades, the temptation is strong to replace it artificially with sex, as represented by their kiss. Sex can create an illusion of intimacy, but that is not a lasting solution, and one should not rely upon it. George and Helen do not want to live an illusion any longer, so the impulse fades quickly, and the maturity reasserts itself.

Again the narrator injects the horse racing men (cf. ¶¶ 13 and 14). In the earlier description of them, one of them was boasting, and George found them annoying. However, now they are redeemed and presented in a positive light: here the horse race men are providers of warmth and light (fire), and they are sources of life-giving nourishment ("kettles of water"). In addition, George now is not at all annoyed.

[¶ 26] When George and Helen now walk "into the darkness," the prepositional phrase reminds one of the surrounding world and its temptations. They pass the same cornfield that they had passed on their summer walk (¶ 12), a cornfield whose immaturity at that time reflected the immaturity of George and Helen. However, now the corn is ripe but not yet harvested (an exception to the general harvesting that has taken place). This uncut ripeness reflects the condition of George and Helen, who are matured but not yet totally secure in their burgeoning maturity.

As they walk back to town, their maturity falters again, and at the top of the Waterworks Hill, they embrace eagerly and kiss longer than before. In other words, again the temptation of sex presents itself to them, again they are tempted to seek the consolation of sex. However, again they resist this cheap and artificial solution to their momentary feeling of uncertainty. Their resistance increases their respect for each other.

They are both embarrassed that they had gone as far as they had. To ease their embarrassment, they allow the younger, animal-like aspect of themselves to emerge, and they begin to play together as little children do. However, there is a significant difference: the animalism into which they now fall is purified and non-sexual, having been made so by their strength and sophistication. It is so strikingly non-sexual that they are described as having gone beyond gender: "they became, not man and woman, not boy and girl." This animalism is a purely human animalism, a sense of freedom and spontaneity. Just as they were presented before as two human atoms, now they are presented as two human animals. They are now able to communicate freely with each other on a variety of levels, and in particular, on whatever level they are, they communicate as equals.

[¶ 27] In this playful mood, George and Helen go down the hill. Again the phrase "In the darkness" recurs. However, the surrounding darkness does not dampen their spirits. In their youthful enthusiasm, the world seems renewed and reborn as "a young world." The reason for this is that they see the world with new eyes, with fresh eyes: the world that had seemed so oppressive to them before they inched into maturity, that world now seems open and full of possibilities.

As they continue down the Waterworks Hill, Helen trips George, and George falls down the hill. As he falls, he laughs with joy, and he continues laughing until he rolls down to the bottom of the hill. Helen runs down the hill after him.

This description is deliberately evocative of the nursery rhyme "Jack and Gill," a brief commentary on which requires a brief excursus.

### Brief Excursus on "Jack and Gill"

The full text of the rhyme<sup>17</sup> is instructive:

Jack and Gill  
Went up the Hill,  
    To fetch a pail of water;  
Jack fell down  
And broke his Crown,  
    And Gill came tumbling after.

Up Jack got,  
And home did trot,  
    As fast as he could caper,  
To old Dame Dob,  
Who patched his nob,  
    With vinegar and brown paper.

When Gill came in,  
How she did grin,  
    To see Jack's paper plaster;  
Dame Dob, vexed,  
Did whip her next  
    For causing Jack's disaster.

The first peculiarity to be observed in this deceptively simple rhyme is, as the original readers or hearers of it would have known, that the last place that one would dig a water well is on the top of a hill. This suggests that the journey to fetch water is not meant in a literal sense, but adumbrates another kind of journey. The second peculiarity is that Jack seems totally unharmed after being asserted to have broken "his Crown." This suggests that Jack's crown is something other than his cephalic crown, after the breaking of which one is not likely to be able to leap up and run gaily anywhere. The third peculiarity is that Gill should grin when she sees how Dame Dob, Jack's mother presumably, has patched Jack's injury. The final peculiarity is the whipping of both Jack and Gill ("next") by Dame Dob coupled with Dame Dob's accusing Gill of causing Jack's injury, even though there has been no suggestion before this that she was at fault in any way.

It is not fanciful to see, without transgressing the demands of delicacy, that this rhyme is actually a fable about the loss of sexual innocence (the breaking of the genital crown). Jack's mother tries to repair the damage and to keep her child in a state of childish dependence and innocence. That this is futile is suggested by Gill's grin of triumph at the success of her seduction of Jack.

Therefore, the rhyme of Jack and Gill describes the reenactment of the fall of Adam and Eve that all humans are alleged to suffer as their human legacy of that primal fall.

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<sup>17</sup> The text is taken from *The Annotated Mother Goose*, edd. William S. and Ceil Baring-Gould (NY, 1967), pp.58-59.

## Window II: "Sophistication" (Continued Conclusion)

George and Helen, then, are presented as the new Jack and Gill for the modern world. This new Jack and Gill have replaced sexual union with spiritual union. The new Jack, i.e., George, does not run home to his mother, but instead he remains with his soul mate Gill, i.e., Helen. Helen takes George's arm, and they walk back to town together. Again, since they are both thinking and feeling the same thing, they have no need to speak. True silence is preferable to false speech.

Indeed, they did not have the words to describe that which they both had learned on this late fall evening, no words to describe that which both needed and gained. Whatever it was, it was for both of them a true steppingstone to maturity, a true steppingstone to honest and equal male-female relationships "in the modern world."

The qualification "in the modern world" is important, because the modern, industrialized, technological world is particularly hostile to true and equal communication between human beings. The modern world is characterized by what has been called alienation, i.e., by isolation from the community, isolation from other humans, isolation from work, even isolation from play. The modern world places more obstacles in the way of true human communication than previous ages did. This makes the achievement of George and Helen more impressive.

This does not mean that George and Helen go on to have a romantic relationship with each other. They do not. Rather, they have been able to help each other to face the future better prepared to find an appropriate way of life and an appropriate mate. Whether either or both of them actually find the life to which they have become opened, one does not know. What one does know is that together George and Helen have come to the edge of adulthood. Of course, they are both still young, and they have their whole lives before them. All that the narrator shows is the hopeful and promising beginning without revealing the rest.

## Epilogue: "Departure" (The Final Chapter)

In the next chapter, the last chapter, of *Winesburg, Ohio*, the time is April, the following spring, i.e., the beginning of a new seasonal cycle. In addition, it is the day on which George leaves for the big city. One does not know what has happened between George and Helen in the intervening months, except that they have remained in touch with each other. After all, Helen had to go back to college, so they could have seen each other primarily during school vacations.

On the day that George leaves, Helen is in town (presumably on spring break). However, when she races toward the train to say goodbye to the departing George, she arrives too late, and George is too busy with his seat and the conductor to see her. The conductor "knew George well and knew on what adventure he was just setting out... [He] had seen a thousand George Willards go out of their towns to the city" (*WO*, p. 246).

The end of the novel is uncertainty about what the future will provide. It is enough that the journey toward it has begun.