

# The Sweetness of Twisted Apples in *Winesburg, Ohio*

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## Introduction

There appear a lot of “grotesque” people in *Winesburg, Ohio*. The author of the book, Sherwood Anderson certainly does not use the word “grotesque” for the meaning of physically deformed, but for the psychologically deformed, who are clumsy and simply cannot express themselves well. Wing Biddlebaum in the chapter “Hands,” Dr. Reefy of “Paper Pills,” and Elizabeth Willard of “Death” are some of the examples who are described as “grotesque” in the novel.

They look weird, but actually, they are ordinary people. Yet, one characteristic they share is that they are sensitive enough to feel the truth of others. Once sensed, they seem to react quite intuitively. Their compassion goes like rebelling against authority, against the perfect. Because they find themselves as somewhat rejected, they even feel sympathy toward twisted apples which pickers in the orchard reject. They appreciate the sweetness of the twisted apples. They find the gnarled, ugly apples which the pickers reject sweet. It is natural for the pickers to gauge value upon its shape thinking about whether they are good enough for sale or not. Yet, unlike the pickers, the grotesque do not mind about shape as long as the taste is the same. For those the content, the essence of the apples, namely sweetness counts more than the appearance. They are in other words, pure enough to discern the genuine. Thus, toward the rejected ones without considering the real value, they autonomously sympathize.

Wing Biddlebaum, Dr. Reefy and Elizabeth Willard are not like that from the beginning, though. Wing Biddlebaum used to be a teacher in Pennsylvania. Dr. Reefy in his later years marries a young woman who once was his patient. Elizabeth Willard was a girl, very vivid, with a dream to become an actress. They have suffered in youth and have become as they are. On the way, they all seem to have feelings of being rejected from where they once belonged. This paper, therefore, tries to explore their problems in the past and its connections with the present and see how the influence affects their later lives. Then, it concludes that living in a small town with a population of one hundred or so, they are not weird, left out people, but rather, they are quite ordinary citizens that they themselves are “the sweetness” in Winesburg.

## I Concerning Wing Biddlebaum

Wing Biddlebaum is said to live always frightened. Although living in Winesburg nearly twenty years, he never feels that he is a member of its society. He has lived alone ever since his only relative, his aunt died. He has no friends. The only human being he sometimes talks with is George Willard, a young reporter working for a newspaper office called "Winesburg, Eagle." The actual age of Wing Biddlebaum is 40, yet he looks like 65 years old. Also, it is said that he is so afraid of people and becomes so nervous among them, that his pseudo name "Wing" comes from a resemblance to a frightened bird.

He is comfortable living unnoticed. He is quite all right if people leave him alone. Yet, one peculiar thing which is very different from the others makes him stick out against his will. As written "Wing Biddlebaum talked much with his hands,"<sup>1</sup> (p.9) his hands are the characteristic that nobody can even imitate. He has such talented hands as to pick up as much as a hundred and forty quarts of strawberries in a day. Thus, although he wants to live invisibly, his hands at work in the strawberry fields do not allow him to live as he pleases.

His hands are the start of his problem, his preference to living reclusively to follow. While Wing Biddlebaum, born Adolph Myers, was a teacher in a school in Pennsylvania, he was very popular among children. When he talked about his dream and encouraged the boys to be ambitious, he used his hands as if conveying his passion. They flirted as if to caress, to pet their shoulders, backs, and faces. Then it happened. One day, a drunken father misunderstood when he heard of it from his "half-witted boy"<sup>1</sup> (p.14) as sexually immoral and abused. He and other parents of the children, who were evoked from the rumor suspected that their children also became victims of Biddlebaum. Then one night, they attacked him and kicked him out of the school.

After drifting to live with his aunt in Ohio, Biddlebaum eventually tries not to show his hands to others. He unconsciously knows that his mishap is something to do with his hands, because the mobs that night yelled at him roaring "Keep your hands to yourself!"<sup>1</sup> (p.16) Yet in a different place, Ohio, the same hands do not take long before they become famous and something to boast of in the town. However loathsome hands are to him, the people in Winesburg admire them.

His hands sometimes are uncontrollable when he is with young George Willard, though. Like long-suffocated hands suddenly come alive, they regain their will and freely talk. The passion returns and they begin expressing Biddlebaum's dream which collapses in Pennsylvania. Like things intervening for George Willard, his hands speak truth. Then George Willard, as if mesmerized, becomes "the medium through which [Wing Biddlebaum] expressed his love of man."<sup>1</sup> (p.16) His hands, the embodiment of his dream, eloquently start talking. It is at this moment we think he does not completely forget the dream he once had in Pennsylvania.

While a teacher in Pennsylvania twenty years ago, he often talked earnestly to his young

school children about the importance of having a dream. Although his dream and his passion seem dormant in his daily life in Ohio, we find that he still keeps them deep inside of him, as we witness when George Willard is around. The quality of the same sort of the innocent children in young George Willard's, probably brings that change to Biddlebaum. Biddlebaum's long time forgotten passion, revives. As if smoldering, it suddenly flares.

The peculiarity of his talented hands other than strawberry picking comes after supper time. He picks up the fallen bread crumbs from the floor with such speed. Anderson writes the manner he picks them up and carries them to his mouth one by one, as unbelievable rapidity. His "kneeling figure looked like a priest engaged in some service of his church [and] might well have been mistaken for the fingers of the devotee going swiftly through decade after decade of his rosary."<sup>1</sup> (pp. 16-17) Thus depicted him as a religious figure, the image of Wing Biddlebaum starts to wear some sort of a martyr. The martyrdom Anderson depicts reinforces the idea that Wing Biddlebaum has been victimized in Pennsylvania. The people there deprived Biddlebaum of his job and unlawfully banished him from the society.

Anderson supports Wing Biddlebaum and others who are not good at living among people. One example shows this clearly. In 1932 Anderson received a letter from a Methodist missionary named Arthur Smith. He criticized Anderson that he without permission used real persons living in Clyde that time in his fiction *Winesburg, Ohio* and calls the novel "burlesque." During that time, Anderson with great affection refutes the missionary:

It is true that no one of them was very successful in life. These people did not become bankers, or stockbrokers, establish any of our great modern industries or rise to the management of great businesses, but were simple good people, who remained in obscurity in their own little village. Life hurt and twisted them.<sup>2</sup>

Also, he adds that this book is not a burlesque. He does not write this to make fun of these people or to make them ridiculous. Rather, it is an effort to treat the lives of simple ordinary people in an American mid-western town at that time, with sympathy and understanding.

Anderson calls them "ordinary people" and writes about of them that "life hurt and twisted them." He sympathizes with unsuccessful ones. This view point commemorating the figure of Wing Biddlebaum who is busy picking up bread crumbs, even reminds us of another character, Willy Loman, in *Death of a Salesman* in a later novel of Arthur Miller's. However betrayed, Willy never deserts his sons. At the end of the play, he buys some vegetable seeds and plants them in his little yard in his apartment. As Willy Loman's planting the seeds symbolizes rebirth, Wing Biddlebaum's picking up bread crumbs one by one symbolizes collecting scattered dreams. The same kind of tragedy of the phrase "life hurt and twisted them" echoes.

## II Concerning Dr. Reefy

Dr. Reefy's case is a little different. He has habits to take notes and make paper pills out of them in the pockets of his white doctor's coat. When the pockets become full and cannot take any more, he empties them. Those paper pills Dr. Reefy makes are similar to sand castles. Engaging in the repetition of making and breaking (discarding) for no particular reason appears meaningless to others.

However, about those paper pills, Anderson is positive and writes that they are as "little pyramids of truth."<sup>1</sup> (p. 19) The reason the author calls them "truth" is that Dr. Reefy writes on them about his deep thoughts. Many thoughts, which come onto his mind are written down and digested into his pockets for later use. They ferment and develop into a truth. Dr. Reefy uses those truths when he talks with his beautiful young wife as if teaching her a philosophy of life. Their marriage, however, does not last long enough for her to practice, because his wife dies within a year after the marriage.

This fruitless habit of his making pills, nevertheless, seems to soothe his frustration about his hands. As a deep thinker of life, Dr. Reefy's hands are his complex. It is presumable that they gradually become his frustration that he cannot perform well enough with these hands to be a doctor. Considering his profession, we hope that his hands are sensitive enough for surgical operation. Yet, his hands betray our expectation when we encounter the line which says that the knuckles of the doctor's hands are extraordinarily large. Thus, he does not like to show his hands. As if hiding, he always puts them into the pockets of his coat. Then, subsequently, his hands have become what they are, only useful for making paper pills.

Not only in his profession, the awkwardness regarding his hands occupies his whole life. It makes his life clumsy and difficult. One example is that he is not very popular. He has only one friend, John Spaniard, a tree nursery man, who sometimes comes to the doctor's office with gnarled twisted apples. The awkwardness also makes his general behavior awkward. He cannot behave sophisticated enough to pass as a doctor. Once he is at the death bed of his patient Elizabeth Willard. Her son George Willard comes home. The doctor arises and starts to go out. Before leaving, he puts out his hand as though to greet the younger man and then awkwardly draws it back again. If he is smart enough, he will leave the room after exchanging suitable condolence to the bereaved and be gone.

We assume that his young wife understands Dr. Reefy, at first glance though. She seems to be the only person who takes Dr. Reefy's paper pills positively. That Dr. Reefy is not very popular is no problem for her. She does not care about that at all. More important for her is Dr. Reefy himself. She may see her own father in Dr. Reefy. If he is alive, he is sure to teach her many things in life. Since his death, she is, unconsciously, searching for a fatherly figure whom she can rely upon. Therefore, she is relaxed when she first meets Doctor Reefy in his office. At first sight, she feels daughterly love toward Dr. Reefy.

She herself has a problem when she first appears in his office. She is pregnant at that time. The problem is that she is not sure whether she loves the man or not. Though she inherits big money after her father's death, she is not exactly a happy woman. While she is dating two men at the same time, the one with white hands is not true though he always preaches virginity in his courtship. The other man, on the other hand, is taciturn, but always manages to get her into the darkness, where he begins to kiss her. She almost decides to marry with white hands, but she suddenly notices that behind his talk of virginity, there is lust greater than anything else. Then she becomes pregnant with the quiet man.

Without exchanging many words, Dr. Reefy understands her, and she understands him, too. We read that "she was like one who has discovered the sweetness of the twisted apples, she could not get her mind fixed again upon the round perfect fruit that is eaten in the city apartments."<sup>1</sup> (pp. 22-23) The father of the baby in her is fake, but Dr. Reefy is genuine, she finds. As if magnets attracting each other, they are married. In autumn they got acquainted, married soon, and in the following spring she died. During winter time, the doctor is said to read her all what he has in his pockets, "little pyramids of truth." During the short period of their marriage, seemingly useless paper pills finally prove valuable when Dr. Reefy speaks the essence to his young wife. However brief, they both spend a heart-warming winter season understanding, communicating with each other.

### III Concerning Elizabeth Willard

Elizabeth Willard is honest in her desire. More than anything else, she wants freedom. She, therefore, thinks that Winesburg is too small for her to live her life. Born a hotel keeper's only daughter, she has many chances to meet men. She wants to use it as a chance for her to get out of Winesburg. Being confident in her tall, beautiful figure, she often jeopardizes herself by becoming too accessible to men. Yet, she innocently believes in love and tries to find a lover in order to actualize her dream of escaping from Winesburg. She thinks that only marriage can release her from whatever binds her in Winesburg.

She has "a swinging stride" to attract men. She takes it for granted and tries to make the most of it. When she is given eight hundred dollars from her dying father and is persuaded to leave Winesburg with it, she does not listen. She does not want to use money as a vehicle to get out of Winesburg, because Elizabeth is always thinking that it should be her husband who takes her out from Winesburg. Thus, she keeps dating the men who stay in her father's hotel. Even a bad rumor about her cannot stop her from haphazard living.

Despite her ardent need of a lover, she can never find the right man. When she marries Tom, an employee of her father, she is tired of searching, of being alone. It is an outcome of her greatest compromise. She openly says later that "It wasn't Tom I wanted, it was marriage,"<sup>1</sup> (p. 276) and accelerates her frustration in the end. One time, on a wild ride alone, she hysterically cries out that she wants to get out of town, out of her clothes,

out of her marriage, out of her body, out of everything.

She is lonely. She is alone even with her son. She needs someone who understands her, one whom she can trust and rely on, and with whom she can relax. It then does not take long before Elizabeth develops a strong attraction toward Dr. Reefy. They share a lot. As Elizabeth has wounds, Dr. Reefy also has pain in him. Their meeting at the doctor's office is something like a ritual. As if they perform some kind of religious ceremony, they sit looking at each other. In the solemnity, it begins. When one talks, the other listens. Even silence becomes communicating. Their mysterious meeting is thus described.

In the big empty office the man and woman sat looking at each other and they were a good deal alike. Their bodies were different as were also the color of their eyes, the length of their noses and the circumstances of their existence, but something inside them meant the same thing, wanted the same release, would have left the same impression on the memory of an onlooker.<sup>1</sup> (p.270)

Her wounds are not the sort to be operated on. What she wants is for a sincere listener. Since Dr. Reefy is well aware of his expected role, that Elizabeth does not care much of the medical treatment from Dr. Reefy, he can relax when he is alone with her. He acts more like a psychiatrist than a physician. He tries to listen to her until she is satisfied. One day, when she is complaining about her unsuccessful marriage, a miracle happens. A tired-out woman suddenly regains a youthful swinging stride and out of her excitement, she starts walking about in the doctor's office, telling him about her wild ride. While listening to Elizabeth, Dr. Reefy suddenly begins to love her. It is the first time that he sees her as a woman. To Dr. Reefy, there comes an illusion: the woman's body is changing, she is becoming younger, straighter, stronger. He thinks as if a lovely, innocent girl comes out of the husk of the body of the tired-out woman. He has never seen anybody walk like that: swing, swing, swing. In her rhythmic walk, he sees the young Elizabeth, whom he has never known, never seen before. Dr. Reefy, excited, intoxicated, holds her in his arms, passionately kissing her and saying, "You dear! You dear! You lovely dear!"

Her exceeding trust in love, however, betrays her. To Elizabeth who lost her mother at five, love means everything. She needs to love and be loved. She always wants love. She therefore places love in the priority in her life. The fact that Elizabeth rejects eight hundred dollars offered by her father, shows how much she relies upon love. She does not notice that it makes her escape more difficult at that time. The promise of money does not motivate her. She cannot believe her release can be bought with money. Always she has to be helped by love, and in order to achieve it, she wants to fight for it. Young pride does not want any charity. By refusing her father's will, she closes "the door" with her own hands.

The money which Elizabeth cannot use herself is used by the next generation, her son George.

He uses the money to make a new start in the city. The hurdle of living in Winesburg which Elizabeth stumbled against, can be cleared so easily by the youth. Unlike Elizabeth, to George, money is worth more than love in terms of getting out of Winesburg. This outcome seems to derive not only from gender and generation difference, but from the degree of being "crippled." Elizabeth is more crippled than George. The more she tries to be true to herself, she has to stick to her set goal; on the other hand, George has flexibility in his choice.

## Conclusion

The reasons that these characters are called "grotesque" are closely related to their hands. Wing Biddlebaum's hands express his love for others. What Dr. Reefy's hands make resemble a sand castle, in terms of making and breaking. The hands of Elizabeth Willard's search for love.

Usually, the individuals loath their own hands, but their hands become effective at other times. In other words, to them, most of the time those hands are mischievous, trouble makers, symbols of awkwardness; but they are not always negative. They suddenly become positive and achieve wonder. Through George Willard, for instance, Wing Biddlebaum occasionally remembers his dream, relating to his hands. There are both a disgusting past incident and talented strawberry picking. Dr. Reefy also is reminded of his deep philosophy by another: one time, through his young wife and the other time through Elizabeth Willard. Dr. Reefy's paper-pill making hands are useless to many, yet very positive when they start speaking philosophy of life to his young wife or Elizabeth Willard. Elizabeth's hands can also be juxtaposed. However blindly love-searching her hands appear, when she puts out her hand into the darkness, she at the same time tries to get hold of some other hand who lifts her up, to save her from her dismay.

As Sherwood Anderson refers to them as "ordinary people," and continues that "they are people I personally would be glad to spend my life with,"<sup>2</sup> they are all honestly living their lives during one period in a mid-west in America. Due to their peculiarity, they are left out, or rejected, but they grow to appreciate the real sweetness of twisted apples. Then, on the way, they themselves transform from twisted apples to round ones.

## Notes

1 Sherwood Anderson, *Winesburg, Ohio* (New York: Random House), 1947.

2 *The Winesburg Eagle*, Winter 1989, No. 1, Vol. XIV, "Anderson's Epitaph" by Ray Lewis White.