20th Century American Literature

DongA University Humanities

Professor Carrier

**Lecture Notes: Sherwood Anderson (1876-1941)**

1. Biography
   1. Anderson was born in a small Midwestern American town in 1878. His father was a former Union Army soldier in the Civil War. Sherwood had six brothers and sisters.
   2. His father was a harness maker, and with the increasing popularity of the automobile, had problems staying out of debt (and staying sober), so the family moved a lot during Anderson’s early childhood, eventually settling in the small town of Clyde, Ohio.
   3. Because of his father’s financial problems Sherwood worked to help the family as a child, as an assistant sign painter, newsboy, stable boy, in printing shops, and even a bicycle factory.
   4. His schooling was incomplete, but he loved to read and read whatever books he could find, at the school library and from the private libraries of people he knew.
   5. Around Anderson’s 18th birthday his father disappeared and his mother died from tuberculosis. Anderson left the small towns he had grown up in and moved to Chicago.
   6. Anderson worked in Chicago and when the Spanish-American War broke out he joined the Army. By the time his unit reached Cuba the war was already over, however.
   7. When he returned home, Anderson returned to school, earning the equivalent of a high school diploma at the Wittenberg Academy in Springfield, Ohio.
   8. During his time in Springfield Anderson met some important business contacts and entered started working in the “mail order” and advertising industry. He quickly rose to become the president of his own company in Cleveland, Ohio.
   9. During this time he also married and had three children with the daughter of a wealthy business associate. For a time he was very happy but business pressures and perhaps marital problems caused him to have a mental breakdown.
   10. On November 28th, 1912, Anderson became upset at his office and disappeared for four days. When he came back he could not remember whom he was or where he had been. He was hospitalized and treated for “nervous exhaustion.”
   11. When he recovered he decided to start a new life. He divorced his wife, abandoned his children, left Cleveland, and moved to Chicago where he began to pursue a career as a writer.
   12. His most famous works were written over the next twelve years. Although he supported himself as a writer for the rest of his life, only one book, *Dark Laughter*, became a best seller.
   13. Anderson eventually married three more times and continued writing until he died in 1941 at the age of 64. His cause of death was suspected to be peritonitis, an infection of his internal organs caused when he accidentally ate a toothpick.
2. Themes
   1. Small Town Life:
      1. Although many scholars have drawn comparisons between the townspeople of Winesburg and the real-life townspeople of Clyde, Ohio, where Anderson grew up, Anderson himself denied that there was any connection, saying that the ideas for most of the characters came from people he met in hotels when he was a travelling salesman.
      2. Nevertheless, the depiction of small town life in the novel is one of the most vivid descriptions of that culture and the loneliness of the people who lived in the isolation of small communities where everyone knew everything about them.
      3. *Winesburg, Ohio* has been compared to two other “rural” works: Edgar Lee Masters’ collection of fictional biographical poems *A Spoon River Anthology,* and *Main Street* by Theodore Dreiser.
   2. Loneliness, Isolation, Inability to Communicate: The problems of Anderson’s characters are often due to an inability to communicate their inner feelings to anyone else.
   3. Self-discovery: Many of the characters in Anderson’s novels are dealing with a conflict between their “inner life,” and their public life, often in the area of sexual identity, something that was rarely described in literature at this time.
   4. The American Dream: Like many writers from this period (most notably Upton Sinclair), Anderson was obsessed with how America could both be seen as “the land of opportunity” and a place where dreams were shattered and broken. He was especially suspicious of the effects of modern industrial society on the mental health of workers.
3. Style
   1. Anderson work is sometimes described as a “bridge” between the Naturalism of the previous literary period and the Lost Generation of the Modernist period. His works certainly have aspects of both: the pessimistic determinism of Naturalism; the isolation and self-destructive tendencies of the Lost Generation. His later works become darker and even more experimental in style and structure.
   2. The language of Anderson’s work is similar to reporting, but he uses very subtle symbols to portray a very complex psychological states. A good example are the way he uses the hands of Wing Biddlebaum to reveal the character’s inner insecurity.
   3. The simple, stripped-down language of Anderson’s prose was an inspiration to many authors who came after him, including Ernest Hemingway, and his focus on the voices of “outsider” characters and their oppression by society influenced William Faulkner (although both later ridiculed his “cult of the simple” and refused to admit his influence.)
4. Important Works
   1. *Winesburg, Ohio* (1919)
   2. *The Triumph of the Egg* (1921)
   3. *Dark Laughter* (1925)
   4. *Death in the Woods and Other Stories* (1933)
5. Critical Reception: Anderson’s books were not incredibly popular during his lifetime, although he enjoyed enough success to support himself as a writer. His literary reputation has gone through several stages of popularity and rejection, however, today many scholars consider *Winesburg, Ohio* to be a classic and important American novel.