

# Winesburg, Ohio as a Bildungsroman

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Engleski jezik i književnost

Gloria Benčina

***Winesburg, Ohio* kao roman o odrastanju**

Završni rad

Mentor: doc. dr. sc. Jasna Poljak Rehlicki

Osijek, 2024.

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Bachelor's Thesis

Supervisor: Dr. Jasna Poljak Rehlicki, Assistant Professor

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## **Abstract**

Sherwood Anderson, in his short story collection *Winesburg, Ohio*, introduces the character of George Willard whose development and growth are intertwined in the stories. Even though the protagonist is not directly mentioned or involved in each one of the stories, they all have a significant role in the shaping of his character. This paper examines his journey from youth to adulthood by comparing the collection with a Bildungsroman and analyzing George's development through the interconnected stories, focusing on his experiences, relationships, influences, and realizations. The analysis is done by connecting the work to the typical themes of a Bildungsroman but also by understanding the biographical, literary, and cultural context of the work and how they shaped the character of George Willard.

**Key words:** Sherwood Anderson, *Winesburg, Ohio*, Bildungsroman, short stories, character development

## Contents

Introduction.....	1
2. Biographical Context .....	3
3. Literary and Cultural Context .....	5
4. Defining the Bildungsroman.....	7
5. George Willard’s Development: An Analysis .....	9
5.1. Early Life’s Innocence .....	9
5.2. Self-Discovery Through Adolescence .....	11
5.3. Maturity and Realization.....	13
5.4. Final Transformation .....	15
6. Themes of the Bildungsroman in <i>Winesburg, Ohio</i> .....	17
Conclusion .....	19
Works Cited .....	20



## Introduction

Sherwood Anderson's *Winesburg, Ohio* (1919) is his most successful work and an important part of the twentieth century American literature. His unique writing style, inspired by both European and American Modernists, revolutionized the American short story and inspired famous writers like William Faulkner and Ernest Hemingway to craft their own unique style of writing.

This collection of interconnected short stories resembles the Bildungsroman when viewing George Willard as the protagonist and following his psychological and moral development. Because his character can be analyzed as traditional characters of the Bildungsroman, further similarities can be explored like traditional/conventional themes that also occur in Anderson's work. The development of George Willard's character from youth to adulthood will be explored, as well as his quest for meaning and identity.

Anderson portrayed George's experiences, encounters, and internal struggles as crucial for his personal development, but they also derived from author's own life. To be able to understand and analyze the work better and what shaped George's character, the collection is put in its biographical, literary, and cultural context.

In order to analyze the work as the Bildungsroman, the traditional one is defined along with some of the most occurring themes that are ultimately connected to Anderson's work. The character of George Willard is analyzed like the traditional protagonist of the Bildungsroman which shows some of its typical features that he also possesses. The analysis consists of dividing the protagonist's development into stages and studying each stage to better understand the behavior of growth at each stage of his journey.

The first three chapters of the paper serve as an introduction to its topic. In its biographical context, Anderson's life and work are explored to be able to see how the short story collection resembles his own experiences. The collection is then put in its literary and cultural context from which Anderson's writing style is analyzed as well as the society he lived in and how that was reflected in his work. Furthermore, the traditional Bildungsroman is defined which is crucial to be able to analyze Anderson's work as such. In the analysis chapter, the character of George Willard and his development from youth to adolescence are explored which leads to the final chapter where the Bildungsroman themes found in the short story collection are addressed and analyzed. This approach puts George Willard as a protagonist of

the collection and a hero of the Bildungsroman which is one of the possible ways to interpret Anderson's collection and is chosen to be addressed in this work.

## 2. Biographical Context

Sherwood Anderson was one of the great American writers whose influence was spread on numerous young writers of that time such as William Faulkner and Ernest Hemingway. His short story fiction, for which he is the most famous, became a model for the above-mentioned writers and helped them in crafting their writing style and publishing their first works. Anderson published several short stories, novels, poetry volumes, and memoirs during his lifetime but the most popular and influential work of his is *Winesburg, Ohio* (1919).

Anderson was born in 1876 in Camden, Ohio as the third child of seven. He lived in various small towns in Ohio such as Clyde which served as a model for Winesburg in his most famous work. There are more autobiographical elements that Anderson included in *Winesburg, Ohio* but also his other works such as *Windy McPherson's Son* (1916) and *A Story Teller's Story* (1924). He had to work from a young age to support his family and therefore could not attend school on a regular basis and accepted every job opportunity that came up. Since he had experience in various job positions, his descriptions of laborers in his works were rich and carefully thought through. Anderson's mother was ill throughout his childhood and eventually died when he was almost nineteen which led to his moving to Chicago. His mother was a role model to him and inspired him for the content of *Winesburg, Ohio* which Anderson decided to dedicate to her: "To the memory of my mother, Emma Smith Anderson, whose keen observations on the life about her first awoke in me the hunger to see beneath the surface of lives, this book is dedicated" (13).

In Chicago, Anderson worked as an advertising writer with a secret wish to publish the fiction he wrote in his spare time. In 1906, he returned to Ohio where he was a manufacturing businessman but six years later, after a breakdown, left his wife and children to return to Chicago once again. Encouraged by his writer friends Carl Sandburg, Ben Hecht, and Floyd Dell, Anderson started publishing his short stories in small magazines such as *The Masses* and *The Little Review*. His writing was influenced by modernist writers such as Gertrude Stein whose works inspired him to develop a style of his own: "He was strongly influenced by Gertrude Stein, and used poetic repetition and variations in words, phrases, and sentence structures to convey his images of people and their circumstances" (Odeh 54). At his peak, he published various works but only ten years after his *Winesburg, Ohio*, everything started going downhill. Even though he owned two newspapers, his writing career started to fall apart and eventually ended with his unexpected and tragic death by choking on a toothpick on his trip to Panama.

Anderson's life highly influenced his works, which can be seen through his experiences and worldviews which are woven into the narratives. The quest for meaning, self-reflection, loss, loneliness, and unfulfilled desires are only a few of many themes present in his works and in *Winesburg, Ohio* specifically.

### 3. Literary and Cultural Context

When urbanization and industrialization started changing the lives of people in the early twentieth century America, small-town people were affected severely. The simple agricultural life turned to modernity which led to all sorts of changes resulting in confusion and distress of small towns' inhabitants like the ones of Winesburg: "In *Winesburg, Ohio* his tales take on symbolic significance, with small Ohio town being a microcosm of modern life in general" (Odeh 54). These social changes can be seen in the lives of characters in Anderson's work where he depicts the characters as lonely, isolated, and imprisoned by the demands of the society contrasting the typical description of small-town life: loving, warm, and charming. George Willard encounters different individuals throughout his life in Winesburg whose lives, personalities, experiences, and beliefs mirror the ones of contemporary society.

Sherwood Anderson was a part of the Modernist Movement that advocated moving away from the traditional forms in order to depict the complex modern life by using new narrative techniques. The Modernist themes of search for identity and meaning are present in Anderson's works and can be seen in *Winesburg, Ohio* in characters such as George Willard who undergo self-discovery and experience the complexity of life. Anderson's innovative approach of including multiple perspectives in his work by writing interconnected short stories was discussed amongst critiques as well as the inclusion of psychology and focusing on characters over plot. The revolution that he brought to the American short story was notable which can be understood from White's words:

...for the publication of *Winesburg, Ohio* in 1919 dates the appearance of the modern American short story—the story, in colloquial style, concerned with revelation of character through psychological truth rather than with mere ingenuity of plot. To achieve such impact on American literature, Anderson produced in *Winesburg, Ohio* a highly crafted work, a cycle of stories unified by such devices as setting, perspective, mood, theme, and recurring characters. (658-9)

Influenced by both European and American writers, Anderson managed to shape his own writing style in the same way as his writing helped young writers like Faulkner and Hemingway to express themselves uniquely. James Joyce inspired him to focus on the inner thoughts of the characters while also exploring their flaws through a psychological approach like Henrik Ibsen. Anderson was eager to explore the complexity of American lives like his

colleague Theodore Dreiser which led him to focus on the reality of small-town life and the societal norms and demands depicted in his *Winesburg, Ohio*.

Anderson's new approach to short stories led many to wonder if the *Winesburg, Ohio* collection can be analyzed as a traditional Bildungsroman with a focus on one central character – George Willard. There are many different opinions on the topic like the one from John S. Reist, Jr.: “Had Anderson intended to construct a *Bildungsroman*, he would not have titled the work *Winesburg, Ohio*;" (27). His opinion is based on the fact that the title of the work is the name of the town which makes its every resident equally important regardless of their involvement in the plot. Some others even argue how Anderson's work could be a Bildungsroman of the failed writer Enoch Robinson rather than George' but the focus of this work will be on the opposite opinion and the analysis of Anderson's work as if it is a Bildungsroman.

#### 4. Defining the Bildungsroman

Translated from the German language, the meaning of Bildungsroman is “the novel of formation/education” which dates to the nineteenth century with the usual first example of it being the late eighteenth century Johann Wolfgang von Goethe’s *Wilhelm Meister’s Apprenticeship*. Professor Tobias Boes cited Wilhelm Dilthey in his text who commented on the history of the term: “In *Poetry and Experience*, Dilthey argued that the *Bildungsroman* was a distinctively German achievement, a product of unique political circumstances and an antithesis of the French and English novels of social realism” (647). Some of the most popular works that fit into the category of the Bildungsroman are Charles Dickens’ *David Copperfield*, Charlotte Brontë’s *Jane Eyre*, and James Joyce’s *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*.

The term is nowadays used for a literary genre that focuses on the protagonist who goes through psychological and moral development and usually follows them from youth to adulthood. This self-improvement journey is often followed by numerous struggles and obstacles, searching for the identity, and discovering and trying out new, sometimes even taboo things. In Karl Morgenstein’s lecture translated by Tobias Boes, the idea behind the term can be seen as how he imagined it to function:

The kind of formation [Bildung] that the novel, as we saw, is supposed to both depict and confer will either occupy itself with one of the many aspects of man - his intellectual, moral, or aesthetic sides, each conceived either as general or in regard to particular purposes - or call on the community of human powers and seek to harmonically stimulate and form them. (655)

The characteristic that is associated with Bildungsroman the most is the personal development of the protagonist. The readers are focusing on the character’s inner thoughts and personal struggles that usually detain them from joining society. They go through an exploration of their emotions, feelings, and thoughts but also learn about other’s. By giving them such experiences, the author triggers both moral and psychological growth in the character, making them learn about themselves and those around them. Because a lot of learning is included in the process, the characters are often young and inexperienced which makes them suitable for change, development, and growth. They often cannot understand themselves truly and embark on a quest to search for their true identity which leads them through self-discovery, exploration of personal beliefs and attitudes but also understanding and respecting the norms that the society has appointed.

To be able to develop and grow, the characters need to experience the brutality and reality of life which is often integrated in the work as their internal and external struggles and conflicts. The characters evolve by surviving these and mature in the process. Their maturity, identity, attitude, and personal growth result in them ultimately finding their place in society and being ready for what life has to offer.

Anderson's *Winesburg, Ohio*, as mentioned in the previous chapter, is often questioned to fit into the category of the Bildungsroman because of its many similarities to the traditional characteristics. Every short story in the collection can be viewed as independent and they all contain the motifs of development, identity, and struggles of the Grotesques, as Anderson calls them, but the next chapters will contain the analysis of *Winesburg, Ohio* as a story of George Willard like explained below:

[...] if Winesburg, Ohio is approached from the direction not of the subjects of the tales but from that of George Willard, a boy growing to manhood and becoming involved in the perplexing world of adults, developing from an aimlessly curious boyhood to an intensely conscious adulthood, the work composes as bildungsroman, the „novel of formation“ or „novel of education“ which portrays the development of the protagonist's mind and character as he passes from childhood through varied experiences into maturity and the recognition of his identity and role in the world. (Mohan, Srikala 46)



## 5. George Willard's Development: An Analysis

Even though not mentioned in all short stories from the *Winesburg, Ohio* collection, George Willard is an important character for the whole town and the one whose development and growth can be easily followed throughout the work. George appears in sixteen short stories – he does not appear in “Paper Pills” or in any of the four parts of “Godliness” while in the remaining sixteen he appears either as a protagonist, a listener, or is just briefly mentioned. This analysis will follow his development by treating him as a protagonist of the Bildungsroman: “As bildungsroman, *Winesburg, Ohio*, presents two mutually related and inseparable aspects of facets of George Willard's growth and development: his growth from adolescence to adulthood and his growth towards becoming an artist or creative writer. Both strands of growth are simultaneous and interdependent” (Mohan, Srikala 47).

### 5.1. Early Life's Innocence

The character of George Willard is introduced to the readers as a young inexperienced boy with a lot to learn. The author wants to educate him about the harshness and the reality of the world and can do that only by challenging his innocence.

In the short story “Hands,” George befriends Wing Biddlebaum, “the town misery” (Anderson 22), with whom he enjoys spending time. Like every innocent child, George can find a friend in anyone regardless of their past that he does not know or care about which makes Wing feel confident, safe, and happy in his presence: “The voice that had been low and trembling became shrill and loud. The bent figure straight. [...] Biddlebaum the silent began to talk [...]” (Anderson 22). This friendship was enjoyable and beneficial for both sides since George helped Wing to feel himself again and Wing gave all sorts of advice based on his own unfortunate experiences to George: ““You have the inclination to be alone and to dream and you are afraid of dreams. You want to be like others in town here”” (Anderson 23). By seeing Wing's reaction to his hands which are a symbol of his tragic past, George was able to experience empathy for the misunderstood. This is when he started to understand how impactful society is and that people need to be afraid of its judgment and maintain a good reputation to be respected.

As in most works and real-life situations, parents are the ones who usually shape or try to shape their children's way of thinking, and attitude, and steer them toward the right path in life. The same was for George Willard whose mother Elisabeth tried to be an influential figure.

Elisabeth's life was not the one she wanted for herself, so she had numerous attempts to make of George what she wanted to make of herself: "In the boyish figure she yearned to see something half forgotten that had once been a part of herself recreated" (Anderson 34). Her support towards George was quiet since their communication was "like a formal thing without meaning" (Anderson 34) and she never expressed her feelings, hopes, and wishes out loud – only to God when she was praying for George's wellbeing. Even though she was quiet, George eventually understood her love and support as he grew up but, still, there was a pressure that he was feeling from familial expectations. His mother wanted him to dream and follow his dreams, as Wing Biddlebaum also suggested. She wanted to have an acting career to give something to people and sees this ability in George, too. In his review of the short story collection, Dan Geddes calls George "a young father confessor to the town" which is something his mother also sensed based on the fact that: "Most people are drawn to him because of his moral freshness, his Adamic innocence, capacity of feeling, his responsiveness and openness to experience, his generally friendly nature" (Mohan, Srikala 48).

On the other hand, George's father Tom insists on him to come to his senses and stop dreaming: "He wanted his son to succeed. [...] 'You're Tom Willard's son and you'll wake up'" (Anderson 37). Tom Willard was a businessman and a politician who did not believe that somebody can be successful in life if they pursue something that is not tangible like arts or literature. Both his mother's and father's expectations and hopes were heavy on George and led to internal struggles about his desires and need to choose his own path in life. For a child, it is hard to ignore parents' life advice since there is always a risk of them being disappointed and children often seek their approval. From the attitude of George's parents, it seemed as if they were too much into their own wishes which made George feel that they would never be satisfied and never accept a choice that differs from their own. Here, a similarity between George and Anderson can be seen because of which Geddes calls him "Anderson's personal representative." Apart from the similarity of a dying mother in their childhoods, Anderson, like George, had two paths and needed to decide which one to take: a successful businessman or a writer.

These struggles and realizations in George's childhood attacked his innocence and prepared him for the reality of the society he lived in. From an innocent dreamer boy who wanted to play and make friends, he was expected to become someone great. He learned about the flaws and dangers of society's judgment which made him realize how careful one must be

in expressing oneself. Also, this is the beginning of his search for identity and understanding of his emotions, wishes, and beliefs.

## **5.2. Self-Discovery Through Adolescence**

By moving away from the innocence of childhood, George started his journey through adolescence. He has many encounters with townspeople both by working as a newspaper reporter and because people decide to confide in him: “They come to him with their stories (sometimes in the form of advice), but he is often aware that he doesn't fully understand what they are trying to say” (Stouck 150). Truly everybody is trying to give George some advice on how to live life based on their own experiences but George, being still young, does not always understand but tries to listen and think about it. He cherishes the advice he gets: “[...] George Willard, on his part, is always ready to credit the local talkers with more wisdom than they may strike us as having” (Simolke 33), but it puts more weight on his shoulders since he did not yet fully discover himself.

In “The Philosopher”, George receives advice from Doctor Parcival who is intrigued by George and likes to engage in discussions with him – it is always mostly him talking and George listening. George admired the way Doctor talked and enjoyed listening to his tales even though he was not sure which ones were true: “Sometimes the boy thought they must all be inventions, a pack of lies. And then again, he was convinced that they contained the very essence of truth” (Anderson 43). Doctor Parcival finds George interesting because he was once also a reporter. He tries to warn George not to become “just such another fool” and gives him advice to hate in order to be superior: ““I want to fill you with hatred and contempt so that you will be a superior being”” (Anderson 46). He himself follows this advice to hate and be heartless in order to succeed. Ultimately, he gives an explanation to George on why he is behaving that way: “[...] everyone in the world is Christ and they are all crucified” (Anderson 47), meaning that every person is meant to be loving and caring but then they are all awaiting the same faith – to be destroyed by the society. Doctor Parcival’s advice for George was out of good intentions because he did not want him to be a victim of society. From his advice, George could see the other side of human nature and the possibility of not behaving by the rules and was fascinated and intrigued by it. He was able to decide by himself what he thinks is right and form a moral compass that he was lacking. Also, once again he was reminded of the reality and brutality of

society and its dangers which made him more aware of his position and the requirements for success.

“So the sex, or at least the depiction of characters thinking about it in *Winesburg*, helped create the impression of a “cutting edge” book, a book that dared to break taboos” is how Dan Geddes commented on the inclusion of George Willard’s first sexual experience in “Nobody Knows.” Sex is something that is quite present in the adolescent stage of life either by thinking and learning about it or experiencing it. Louise Trunnion is the one who challenges George’s sexual desires in the short story which leads to be a crucial experience on his journey towards self-discovery. When George received a message from Louise that she wanted to meet, he did not think a lot about it but decided to go for it and be courageous. His mind was filled with different kinds of emotions beforehand and one of them was fear: “In his mind there was a fear but it was a new kind of fear. He was afraid the adventure on which he had set out would be spoiled, that he would lose courage and turn back” (Anderson 50). These internal struggles made him look awkward and unsure of himself but when he saw Louise and thought about the way she looked at him when they met in the street, he became confident: “Doubt left him. [...] He became wholly the male, bold and aggressive” (Anderson 51). The whole experience was filled with confusion, satisfaction, excitement, and later guilt. Mohan and Srikala explain it as: “If his encounter with Louise Trunnion gives him a feeling of entirely self centered masculine pride, it also leaves him with a sense of guilt for having violated the overt moral code of the community” (51) which is not different from most first sexual experiences that occur in adolescence. They also argue how George learns little from this experience (51) and the focus is more on the struggles of understanding societal norms. He is still pressured by society and its norms which can clearly be seen when he utters: “She hasn’t got anything on me. Nobody knows” (Anderson 52).

Another glimpse of George’s self-discovery can be seen in the short story “The Thinker.” Even though he is not the main character of the story, Anderson made space for his wishes to be said out loud: “The idea that George Willard would some day become a writer had given him a place of distinction in Winesburg, [...]” (120). In the story, it can be seen how George is confident in his career path since Anderson compares him to “an excited dog” (120) when he needs to write more for his job and how he is boastful when he talks about his plans and ideas to Seth Richmond. His interest in writing is mentioned before by his mother and Dr. Parcival but this is the first time George mentions it by himself and that there is: “[...] growing awareness of the meaning of this vocation” (Mohan, Srikala 51).

Both experiences and his interest in writing career are important factors in George's journey through self-discovery because they challenge his way of thinking and force him to form his own beliefs and attitude towards common life situations and requirements. He starts to experiment with his moral compass and think about what he wants for himself in the future while also allowing himself to experience things for the first time.

### **5.3. Maturity and Realization**

After some crucial moments during George's journey to self-discovery, the moments of maturity and realization came. George was challenged with various temptations, obstacles, and decisions that made him think about himself and who he wanted to be. By seeing what he is capable of doing and how other people function, George's path toward maturity is nearly finished.

George is again tempted with lust in "The Teacher" where his teacher Kate Swift, who is a passionate unsatisfied woman, gives him life advice and urges him to pursue the career of a writer. This encounter was very beneficial for George but it created new internal struggles that he had to overcome: "He began to believe she must be in love with him and the thought was both pleasing and annoying" (Anderson 142). Kate Swift was not in love with George, but she was amazed by his unusual talent and wanted to inspire him to embrace it and use it well: "Kate Swift's mind was ablaze with thoughts of George Willard. In something he had written as a school boy she thought she had recognized the spark of genius and wanted to blow on the spark" (Anderson 145-6). Even though the conversation with her was an inner challenge, it taught him the importance of understanding human motives and their complexities. Kate's words pushed George towards maturity when he stopped seeing himself as a boy with a dream but as a man with the ability to achieve something. She made him realize how much dedication it requires and the sacrifices he needs to make in his career and also inspired him to think about it as something important for the world: "'If you are to become a writer you'll have to stop fooling with words,' she explained. '[...] I would like to make you understand the import of what you think of attempting. You must not become a mere peddler of words'" (Anderson 146).

Not everybody motivated George to pursue his dream career. Enoch Robinson is an artist who decided to isolate himself from society and serves as a warning for George in the short story "Loneliness." Enoch is telling George the story of his unfortunate life as an artist which allows George to hear about a possible outcome that is not at all desirable. Enoch's life

was perfect at first but then came the isolation and now he is seeking refuge in a young boy who reminds him of himself: “I have looked at you when you went past me on the street and I think you can understand” (Anderson 155). George’s empathy grows here, and he is warned of the possible loneliness and madness of the artist’s life. This marks the growth of his emotional maturity and understanding of the importance of connections and relationships. The human need for meaningful connections is something that George starts to understand when he hears Enoch’s words: “It was warm and friendly in my room but now I’m all alone” (Anderson 158).

In “Death”, George’s mother gives him a final lesson from her death. George and Elisabeth did not talk much and it seemed as if they did not have a relationship at all but in reality, they both cared for each other. A lot remained unsaid when Elisabeth died which left an impact on George. His emotional maturity reaches the final stage in this short story, and it can be seen from his final realization of the passage of life. At first, George is not touched by his mother’s death and is irritated that she had to die on a day when he was supposed to have a date with Helen White: “Tonight I could have gone to see her and now it will have to be put off, he thought half angrily” (Anderson 202). This is where his child-like behavior is still present as well as when he starts to negate her death by saying that it is not her who is laying under the sheets. He starts talking about his plans and decides to do what she always wanted him to: “[...] definitely decided he would make a change in his life, that he would leave Winesburg” (Anderson 203). Because he experienced a lot by then and had some taste of life, he begins to think about death and goes through a realization that his mother is dead. His mother’s death introduces him to new emotions of loss and awareness of mortality. He once again confronts the harsh reality of life and decides to honor his mother’s desires by moving away to become what he was dreaming of. “My mother is dead [...] The dear, the dear, oh the lovely dear” (Anderson 204) - this is when he transforms from a child to an adult, that is, when he matures fully.

In addition, George meets his Helen White in “Sophistication” with whom he also shares a moment of realization and maturity. She helped him feel the connection Enoch Robinson was talking about as well as mutual understanding: “What he felt was reflected in her” (Anderson 210). Through interaction with Helen and sharing the silence, George finally becomes aware of himself, his true identity, and the experiences that connect him to others. The moment that they shared, of sophistication, is not only about personal growth but also about maturing and facing the future: “Anderson uses the word ‘Sophistication’ only in a

favourable sense to imply awareness, understanding of one's own self and other people, refinement of feelings and emotions. George Willard on whom attention is chiefly directed acquires all these largely because of the people he has come into contact with and the experiences he has gone through" (Mohan, Srikala 54). This realization marks George's complete emotional and mental maturity.

George's path towards maturity was marked by some influential figures like his mother, his teacher, and his love interest but also by people like Enoch who warned him of the harshness of life. He realized what he wanted to be in life and was keen on reaching his goal. His mother's death served as a push to pursue his career as Mohan and Srikala wrote: "With his mother's death George's education in Winesburg is almost complete. The means of his release are provided by her death, which breaks the ties, which have bound him to the small town" (53). He reaches the end of the path by sharing "a moment of common humanity" (Reist Jr. 27) with Helen White. George's final realization can be seen in his thoughts after the meeting: "Man or boy, woman or girl, they had for a moment taken hold of the thing that makes the mature life of men and women in the modern world possible" (Anderson 213).

#### **5.4. Final Transformation**

The short story "Departure," the last in the collection, is a story of George's final decision – to leave Winesburg and pursue his writing career. His journey to self-discovery and maturity is over and he is filled with confidence and a clear sense of his identity and purpose. He decided to listen to his mother and do something for her and other people, as she always wished: "When the book ends with his departure from Winesburg, there seems to be the promise that he will become one day the spokesman of inarticulate men and women like them wherever they may be found" (Mohan, Srikala 49). The experiences of life in Winesburg and the people he met showed him how he can do what he loves and help people by doing it: "It is they [the townspeople] who unconsciously help him to enlarge his sympathies, become empathetic, and thus make keen his powers of understanding and receptiveness to all human feelings" (Mohan, Srikala 55).

When George embarked on a journey to the new town, he was thinking about his life in Winesburg and how it shaped him as a person. He fell asleep and when he woke up and looked outside the window: "the town of Winesburg had disappeared and his life there had

become but a background on which to paint the dreams of his manhood” (Anderson 218). George, a forever dreamer, will not forget his Winesburg as Dr. Adli Odeh nicely wrote:

The fact that George Willard is able to place the experiences of his years in Winesburg in the background of his mind should not be taken to mean that he was insensitive to them, or he failed to perceive the significance of what he has experienced. It is rather a sign that his often painful experiences have not destroyed his capacity to dream, and it is his dreams that will provide direction and motivation in his manhood. (58)

Sherwood Anderson’s portrayal of George Willard shows an exploration of life, growing up, and finding a place in the world which is depicted through his journey from youth to adulthood. Ultimately, George becomes a man who is ready to make a decision and follow his childhood dreams regardless of the struggles and difficulties society and life could bring.



## 6. Themes of the Bildungsroman in *Winesburg, Ohio*

One of the possible approaches to Sherwood Anderson's *Winesburg, Ohio* is to analyze it as a Bildungsroman. Bildungsroman, as mentioned in the previous chapters, is a genre of a novel that follows a protagonist through their psychological and moral growth, usually from youth to adulthood. In his review of the short story collection, Dan Geddes wrote: "I treat *Winesburg, Ohio* as a novel primarily because I feel Anderson wished it be treated that way," but his opinion is that George Willard should not be treated as the protagonist but "the grotesques," as Anderson calls the townspeople. Given the extensive analysis that can be done on George's character development from youth to adulthood and the fact that he is present in almost every story either as a main or secondary character or as a listener, it can be argued that the short story collection can, in fact, be analyzed as a story of George Willard: "George, who appears frequently sometimes listening to another's experience and sometimes involved in an experience, seems to be the only character who is in a way developed" (Mohan, Srikala 48). There are multiple themes of the Bildungsroman present in Anderson's *Winesburg, Ohio* but the focus will be put on isolation and loneliness, search for identity, and influence through mentorship.

Isolation and loneliness are themes that often occur in the collection and represent almost every "grotesque" of the town. A good example of isolation would be Wing Biddlebaum who was forced to isolate by societal judgement. He lived far from everyone and no one except George wanted to hang out with him. George was then a child who was still learning about life and was not aware of how cruel society is. By having George as his friend, Wing felt less isolated and lonely and started to enjoy life again while George learned what empathy is. Another lonely soul worth mentioning is Enoch Robinson whose words served as a warning to George. They showed him the importance of human connection and meaningful relationships. Unlike Wing, Enoch's isolation was chosen by him alone and he regretted that decision badly. Enoch decided to confide in George because he could sense how they were alike. George was also lonely but he managed to hide it well: "That he also harbors feelings of loneliness and inadequacy seems not to occur to them, so that whether or not he actually shares in the aura of hope and life which interfuses the natural setting becomes less important than their belief that he does" (Love 49).

Another central theme of the Bildungsroman that occurs in Anderson's collection is the search for identity. George Willard wants to find his place in society and discover what kind of a person he truly is which is getting clearer by each encounter with "the grotesques". Doctor

Parcival's opinion on how life is supposed to be lived helps George understand his own wishes and beliefs. He starts getting familiar with his moral compass and the values he wants to have. The experience that was crucial to his self-discovery was his first sexual experience. He was tempted by his desires and discovered his personal boundaries and what is expected by society. Even though he felt guilty, he learned about himself a lot during the experience which led to the ultimate realization that can be seen in the "Sophistication": "He wanted to love and to be loved by her, [...]" (Anderson 211). The deep connection that he had with Helen White was the final part of his search for identity. He learned to cherish past experiences but to move forward, think about the future, and embrace the adulthood that is awaiting him.

In his journey, George was influenced by some people who can be seen as his mentors in his development. Both Wing and Kate, teachers who enjoy helping their students, motivated George to pursue his dream career and find his place in society. Wing urged him to dream and to use his talent for understanding people to do something big. On the other hand, Kate was almost obsessed with George's unusual talent and did not want him to ignore it at any cost: "Thus, Kate Swift's impulsive eagerness (in 'The Teacher') to 'open the door of life' to George Willard takes possession of her to such a degree that 'it became something physical'" (San Juan, Jr. 142). She pushed him to pursue a writing career and motivated him by telling him how he should not stop on dreams but realize those dreams since he has what it takes for them. George's most loyal mentor was his mother. She was rooting for him always and was hoping that he would succeed for them both. Even though her support was quiet, George knew that it existed and decided to listen to her advice and move out to follow his dreams. Her death devastated him but also helped him grow up: "George's ability to see this outwardly repulsive woman as a 'lovely dear' [...] shows that he now sees beneath the surface, the key to becoming the writer Kate and Wing imagined" (Simolke 46).

All of these themes that occur in Sherwood Anderson's short story collection are connected to the one key character – George Willard. Carlos Baker summarized George's development in his article: "We watch him through the stages of his growth, his colloquies with the 'grotesques,' his discovery of women, his attempts to write, and his half-boyish, half-mature love for Helen White, the nicest girl in town" (579).

## Conclusion

In *Winesburg, Ohio*, Sherwood Anderson manages to use a small, imagined town, that derives from his childhood residence, and its people to discuss universal themes of growth, personal development, realization, and human connection. By using the character of George Willard, Anderson puts an emphasis on self-discovery through adolescence and following one's dreams – something that he himself had trouble with in his early life. Alongside George, other characters experience internal struggles that resemble the ones from the twentieth century America's society.

*Winesburg, Ohio* is an example of Sherwood Anderson's unique writing style but also of the Bildungsroman with the central character in George Willard. The collection follows George's development and growth throughout his formative years and ends with his embarkment to adulthood which matches the traditional protagonist of the Bildungsroman. Also, the collection touches on themes like isolation and loneliness, self-discovery, search for identity, and influence which are often explored in the above-mentioned novel genre.

Mohan and Srikala cited something that Anderson said in his *Memoirs* (1942) which can appropriately serve as a conclusion for the analysis of *Winesburg, Ohio* as a Bildungsroman: "Much later in his *Memoirs* (1942) he wrote: 'I felt that, taken together, they (i.e. the stories) made something like a novel, a complete story (which have)---the feeling of the life of a boy growing into young manhood in a town'" (47).

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