

Sherwood Anderson's "Mother" and the Evaluation of the Genre

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Sherwood Anderson's *Winesburg, Ohio* (1919) has been the focus of numerous studies from a number of standpoints. This paper explores a short story "Mother" (1919) from *Winesburg, Ohio* and studies it from an evaluation-based perspective embracing the analysis of the artistic language and the style of the author's narration. The main focus of the study is concentrated on the genre-related issues as well as on the determining the reason why Anderson avoids the development of the given text and transforming it into the regime of a more large-scale prose. As it turns out from the analysis, Anderson elaborates a specific style of narration and creates the form that can be characterized as the mode of "epic sketch". Anderson favors to use much smaller meter and scope, and that choice serves the writer's purpose to describe the psychological portrait of one of the characters of the above-mentioned short story.

Keywords: artistic language, narration, epic sketch, psychological portrait, psychological potential

Introduction

"Anderson's writing of *Winesburg, Ohio* became a legend in his own time—and in his own mind" (Crowley, 1990, p. 10). Sherwood Anderson's (1876-1941) short stories have always been subjects of keen interest for critics and scholars, particularly the evaluation of the genre-related issues. Quite often scholars and literary critics cannot reach the final decision as regards the genre reviewed material falls into. Anderson's *Winesburg, Ohio* (1919) attracted readers' attention by its unusual form: A collection of closely integrated autonomous stories "taken together made something like a novel... [But] *Winesburg, Ohio* is neither a novel nor a random set of stories. Rather it is one of the earliest examples of an important American genre, as yet unnamed by literary historians, ..." (Crowley, 1990, p. 14). Such evaluation can be explained by the author's specific manner of writing, which can be interpreted as a style that reflects the polar nature of the short story genre.

Our discussion about the genre-related issues is based on the analysis of Anderson's short story "Mother" (1919). The brief scheme of the plot contains so many parallel themes and allusions that, according to the norms of literature, the potential of the scheme, enriched with words, needs to be rendered—if not in the novel, but in a full-scope story, at least. Instead of it, the author suggests only some specifications of the motive. The purpose of our comparative analysis is to reveal these specifications: The details and moments of the short story that spoiled rather than improved the artistic side of the work, assisting in the entire exposition of its contextual, ideological, and artistic potentials. We are also planning to analyze those moments where the author's writing hardly adds anything that develops either the psychological potential or parameters of the dialogue—which can automatically transform the text into the regime of a large-scale prose.

The Outline

The plot of Anderson's short story "Mother"—alongside the typical and banal social conflict depicted in it—creates a sharp contrast with a few characters of other tales from *Winesburg, Ohio* whose neurotic nature resembles their "Kunstkammer"—or art chamber. The short story also offers us a full and extensive picture of the potential that involves the components of characters and plot.

The outline of "Mother" is built on the history of the poor family and on the parents' hopeless effort to make their son's dream come true. As for their own dreams, they are destined never to be realized.

Before considering the examples we should determine the followings: (1) For what reason does Anderson avoid the development of the text?; and (2) What does the author gain by that?.

As we have already mentioned, the outline of the text gives the picture of the life of the poor family with a strong distrust among its members. Before Anderson, half a century earlier, Hawthorne and later, Faulkner and Salinger would have transformed the similar situation into a novel.

In order to get a better idea about the strategy of our analysis, it is necessary to conceive the whole contour and outline of the short story. This short story involves a triangular relationship of selfhoods, where the son—George Willard—represents the central determinant figure of the "gravitation". His parents, with all their might, are trying to please him. This fight is, in some way, analogous to Berthold Brecht's "The Caucasian Chalk Circle" (1944). The son's welfare is the most important thing for the mother, and not only for her, but for the father as well: The irony of the conflict is that each of them has his/her own interpretation of welfare for their son: "George Willard's mother and father, ... each has a different story in mind for their son" (Lindsay, 2009, p. 179), and neither father nor mother's notion of their son's well-being coincides with their son's desires.

It follows that, the parents are trying to adjust the pattern of their ideal to their son. This wish has one covert reason: The mother, Elizabeth Willard, disappointed by her fate, tries to revenge her husband, Tom Willard, for his destructive interference into her life. The father—who does not perceive his wife as a personality and, blames her for his misfortune, for she did not support him sufficiently—tries to adjust his pattern to his son. For him, it is a chance to take revenge on his wife.

Less attention is paid to the third character, to the son, who plays the role of an object in the scenario performed by the others rather than the role of a subject who possesses his own will. Such atmosphere continues till the end of the short story, when the son rebels and announces his wish to make his way in life and direct his future life according to his own will:

In the hallway there was the sound of footsteps and George Willard came in at the door. Sitting in a chair beside his mother he began to talk: "I'm going to get out of here," he said. "I don't know where I shall go or what I shall do but I am going away". (Anderson, 1981, p. 42)

Such explosion weakens the potential of the plot and the idea, because the phrases and the dialogue, inserted into the limited form of the short story, depreciate the artistic potential of the material, not to mention the irrelevance that exists between the material and the chosen genre.

As for the rebellion, we would like to point out and add some lines by Lindsay (2009) where he wrote:

Actually, socially approved, culturally sanctioned rebellion is fairly common for men in the small midwestern town of *Winesburg, Ohio*, especially the rebellion of exile. It's no surprise, of course, that American culture romanticizes

rebellion, providing lots and lots of stories tacitly affirming the shucking of the old. (p. 179)

And, one more detail about the rebellion: "When men rebel, they follow congenial, culturally approved, literarily established story lines that encourage a way of being. ... For men, flight from home, ... is part of the standard narrative of manhood" (Lindsay, 2009, p. 178). When George Willard leaves the town in the final story of *Winesburg, Ohio*, it can be rendered as "the coming-of-age ritual" (Lindsay, 2009, p. 179) signaling the beginning of his manhood.

In our comparative analysis we have applied to the theme of influence in the art of drama. We were inspired not by the theme of influence itself but by the role or function which "Mother" had on the play "A Touch of the Poet" (1942) by Eugene O'Neill. The resemblance is seen in the comprehension of the plot and in the scheme of the psychological conflict. Tom Willard, the father of the rebellious hero, resembles O'Neill's hero, Major Melody: Both are victims of hard times, both are ill-fated, both consider that their wives prevent their advancement, that their wives are vivid symbols and targets of criticism, and finally, both men are trying to pursue their career in politics.

Anderson, Freudian Thought, and Local Influences

As we have mentioned, the relationship between the son and his mother is the leading theme of the short story. It should be pointed out that the 1920s became the apotheosis of Freud and Freudianism, and Anderson was among the earliest American writers who responded to Freud's theories. It is rather difficult for critics to define and separate the writer's outlook—from the material that can be explained by the influence of Freudian thought: "There is some justification in noting the parallel courses of psychoanalysis and Anderson's fiction, but there seems little evidence to prove that those two courses intersected at any vital points" (Hoffman, 1966, p. 192). Hoffman discusses Sherwood Anderson's indirect acquaintance with Freudian theory through his early associates in the Chicago Renaissance and the lasting effects of that knowledge on his writing. As for the influence, Hoffman (1966) pointed out that "... it is necessary to determine the antecedent, local influences which affected Anderson's style and attitude" (p. 174). "These are obviously native influences, and he needed no textbook psychology to appreciate their weight or value" (p. 176).

These local influences, as Curry (1980) wrote, were:

Anderson's own memories of his boyhood and youth in Ohio towns, especially Clyde, [which] came a live to him when he moved into the boarding house at 735 Cass Street in Chicago. Many of the boarders were men and women like himself, emigrants to the big city from small rural communities throughout the Midwest. They were confused, silent people whose drab lives stirred Anderson's creative imagination... In his *Memoirs* Anderson explains the process by which his fellow boarders stirred his memories of Clyde: "It was as though I had little or nothing to do with the writing. It was as though the people of that house... used me as an instrument. They had got, I felt, through me, their stories told, and not in their own persons but, in a much more real and satisfactory way, through the lives of these queer small town people of the book". (p. 246)

Epic Sketch

Elizabeth Willard's dramatic emotions are described skillfully, in an artistically impressive mode and with psychological convincingness—in the manner so characteristic of Anderson, in the manner of "the native inarticulateness of the Middle Westerner" (Hoffman, 1966, p. 186). In mother's portrait the line of descriptive, objective narration is interchanged with the author's interference style, when the author specially explains and

analyzes the character's conduct and speech.

Such two-layered style helps the author to provide the short story with an economical and, at the same time, accelerated mode of narration. By the help of such acceleration Anderson creates the form that can be called the mode of "epic sketch".

Epic sketch implies not only: (1) the wide-ranging narration—involving time and space—that justifies the pretension of the objective and large-scale picture of reality; but it also (2) presents the naturalistic detail of a psychological significance that helps and responds to the needs of interpreting, presenting and understanding of both: the character and the main idea of the general theme.

"Main Street" and Its Symbolic Meaning

Such is the detail concerning the mother. How hopelessly she spent hours gazing at the "Main Street" of the town which gained the symbolic significance not only of the future, of the idea, and of a better life but, in general, it carried the idea of hope, the desire to escape and, finally, it arose the feeling of dissatisfaction caused by the existing reality: "European readers who come to Anderson's *Winesburg, Ohio* for the first time feel the proximity of a new speech, a 'new country', a fresh view of the Main Street..." (Gregory, 1977, p. 4).

The path, associated with the distance and reflecting the desire of poor people to evade their sufferings, makes the heroes—of a short story and of a play too—dream of far-off places and think one and the same: Hope and help are hidden "beyond the horizon", the phrase which Eugene O'Neill used as a title for his play "Beyond the Horizon" (1920) where the theme of irrelevance between a dream and a reality is interplayed: The trio of heroes become victims of their wrong choice that was done by each of them only because of overrating of their cherished dreams and building the conflict on illusions. Characters never know what to expect in their further emotional wallop, for the future can be a source of endless pessimism and conflicting impulses.

In the following passage the author achieves the great dramatic tension, that is effectively crowned with the prayer uttered by the mother: "... she went into his room and closing the door knelt by a little desk, made of a kitchen table... she went through a ceremony that was half a prayer, half a demand, addressed to the skies" (Anderson, 1981, p. 37).

Besides the sad, psychological mood of this scene, two impressive details are observed: "a desk from a kitchen table" and "half a prayer, half a demand, addressed to the skies". The first phrase strikes by its social-financial motive, by the notion indicating the poverty of the heroes. As for the second detail, here in the phrase—"addressed to the skies"—the strong pathetic feeling of predestination is felt.

There is another detail which is similar and typologically relative to the above-mentioned theme.

"Smart and successful" (Anderson, 1981, p. 37)—The way Tom Willard's wife describes the standard of her husband's dream career. But so immense is her anger toward her husband that she detests the idea of applying the same "descriptive terms" to her son. She sacrificed her love to her revenge and hatred which she had been keeping and kindling in the depth of her heart toward her husband for years.

The Continuation of Old Themes

The theme of hatred, revenge, and punishment has become classics of American literature since the period of Nathaniel Hawthorne and totally corresponds to the most dramatic periods and themes of the Puritan tradition. From this point of view, we can say that Anderson's short story "Mother" continues old themes and motives of

the American National Literature.

Devotion to these old themes is felt in Elizabeth Willard's prayer, when she—with glowed eyes and clenched fists, shaking—declares:

Even though I die, I will in some way keep defeat from you... If I am dead and see him becoming a meaningless drab figure like myself, I will come back... I ask God now to give me that privilege. I demand it. I will pay for it... I will take any blow that may befall if but this my boy be allowed to express something for us both... And do not let him become smart and successful either. (Anderson, 1981, p. 37)

Elizabeth's text is very impressive by its idea and artistic mode which is intensified by laconism. But, in spite of such laconic style of expression, some interesting moments can be observed in the aforementioned passage: (1) Mother's selfless love, the pathetic side of which reminds us the pictures of unequal battles in wildlife, when mother-bird in order to save her little nestling shows resistance against beasts of prey. We have not mentioned the "animal world" just for a nice metaphor; if we remember Elizabeth's nonentity and silent role, how silently she strolls up and down in her room, it would be clear that we have a background to look for the similarity beyond the human society; (2) Pride and self-criticism that is felt in her bitter comparison that is full of dignity: "... a meaningless drab figure like myself" (Anderson, 1981, p. 37); and (3) A great desire of self-realization, which she fancies, lies in the unification with her son: "... my boy be allowed to express something for us both..." (Anderson, 1981, p. 37); at the same time, the meaning of this citation has another layer: As, prior to it, mother mentions her death and passing away, her words—"us both"—carry more value, for the mother wishes happiness together with her son not in this world but out of this world. Why so? The reason is simple: The existence in this world is temporary; but those who are gone to a better world are eternally unified, and the mother's wish is connected with that idea: to be inseparable from her son.

The artistic language of the short story implies eclecticism. It is seen only in the opening paragraph of the story, when the author's narration is suddenly changed with the character's unexpected psychological reaction on a definite little episode, but when the mode and the pace of narration are changed again, we can conclude that we deal with the case when the author practices an elaborated method, and instead of eclecticism, it would be right to speak about a specific method and methodology. It should be pointed out that "Throughout his career Anderson saw himself as an experimental writer" (Stouck, 1990, p. 48). In reference to Anderson's style Stouck (1990) wrote: "Anderson has long been recognized as an innovator in style, influenced by the vernacular of Mark Twain and responsive to the prose experiments of Gertrude Stein" (p. 45).

In contrast with the scene of Elizabeth's prayer, the author portrays her son's periodical visits to her room when she does not feel well. George Willard appears as an emotionally emptied hero. In relation to George Willard's characterization, it is worth mentioning T. S. Eliot who influences the world culture by introducing the term "hollow men" and by creating their specific psycho-social type.

Narrative Technique

The description of the son's and his mother's boring visits to each other—the piece which might have been organically inserted not only in Nathaniel Hawthorne's novel, but in the diaries and records of the 17th century American chroniclers—was followed by a mystical scene in characterization of which it would be appropriate to use the term "epiphany".

The actualization of this term is usually connected with James Joyce—but Franz Kafka, not to mention the writers of a later period, such as Faulkner and other literary luminaries—Kafka also used it as an artistic method, and as the adroit and effective element of the artistic language. The generalization and absolutization of a routine moment to the category of allegory and symbol is the essence and the characteristic feature of epiphany. According to Joyce's theory "... an ordinary person, event or object—a triviality—occasion the epiphany" (Curry, 1980, p. 244). Anderson used the similar narrative technique and if "... Joyce called the revelation of inner significance 'epiphany', Anderson spoke of significant 'moments'" (Curry, 1980, p. 244). In the short story, such revelation lies in the absurd struggle of a baker—who is sick and tired of life—with a little, hungry cat which tries to take a few bites in the bakery. The scene of fight is absurd, because the baker's misfortune is not the cat's fault. But the cat is the only visible, concrete, and accessible creature that the baker can put the blame on for all his troubles. And one day, while watching the daily scene of chasing the poor, little creature and its fleeing from the baker's hands, Elizabeth realizes that her own fate bears the striking similarity to this scene and she bursts into tears.

The benefit of this scene is that Anderson transforms it into a method. The indication of such silent drama is given in the very first paragraph of the short story where the author describes the businesslike "promenade" of Elizabeth Willard's ambitious and materialist husband who, being oppressed by the reality, visions his back-dragging symbol:

As he went spruce and business-like through the streets of Winesburg, he sometimes stopped and turned quickly about as though fearing that the spirit of the hotel and of the woman would follow him even into the streets. "Damn such a life, damn it!"—he sputtered aimlessly. (Anderson, 1981, p. 36)

This damnation fully responds to his whining wife's mood when she catches a glimpse of the stupid baker.

In spite of the mother's sincere feeling and wish to establish a dialogue with her son, in reality its accomplishment is impossible; instead, she has to content herself by an imaginary dialogue and, thus, remains locked in her solitary "cell".

Because of this imaginary feeling, the mother believes that her son is of the same breed as she is and there is nothing paternal in him: "He is grouping about, trying to find himself. He is not a dull clod, all words and smartness."¹ Within him there is a secret something that is striving to grow. It is the thing I let be killed in myself" (Anderson, 1981, p. 39).

These last words indicate how great is the mother's belief in her son's future life—which is woven on her own pattern—and which will crown her tortured existence.

Crowning Piece

From that point on, the crowning piece of the short story begins. This piece is written in a different style, different in the mode of genre and it gives us basis to put forward critical remarks.

First of all, it is the pace that corresponds with our idea about the epic sketch and with the notion about the epic sketch, in general. At the same time, it is a deliberate transition into the stylistics of the genre of drama that is followed by the line of blunders: First of all, it is an inconsistent and inaccurate interpretation of a character. The oppressed woman's face, marked with smallpox scars—presented on the first lines of the short story—does not fit in with the behavior of the "moderately arbitrary" woman, and with the indication of "a tigress", the description

¹ These are the father's characteristic features—Tamar Khetsuriani.

that appears on the last lines: "As a tigress whose cub had been threatened would she appear, coming out of the shadows, stealing noiselessly along and holding the long wicked scissors in her hand" (Anderson, 1981, p. 42). On such background, the dialogue between the practical father and his son seems to provoke more convincence among the readers, and because of it, all the remarks, which we have listed above, are called forth.

Conclusions

Anderson avoids and rejects the possibility of the traditional and "approved" development of the narration. Instead, he uses a laconic style of narration.

It turned out that the purpose of that choice was connected with the description of the psychological portrait of one of the characters—Elizabeth Willard. It goes without saying that this purpose has a "full right" of existence as a material for prose; besides, in this process other characters are disclosed as well. But such "complex" approach to the task in terms of a short prose form puts forward one twist of the thematic line, which is constructed on the fate of a single character.

At the beginning of the present article we have mentioned the specific manner of writing so characteristic of Sherwood Anderson, and it should be pointed out that it is that very manner, so vividly felt in all his writings, that seems "... to assure him of a life beyond the horizon..." (Gregory, 1977, p. 31).

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