George Willard: 
Death and Resurrection

"I just want to go away."
Like *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* and *The Damnation of Theron Ware*, Sherwood Anderson's *Winesburg, Ohio* contains its own pattern of escape. However, in approaching this work, I have not blinked the fact that, by the strict application of techniques and criteria of the novel, *Winesburg, Ohio* is not a novel at all; it is—at least on the surface—a collection of tales, or episodes, strung together on intertwining threads of contiguous memories that involve a given time and place: a small town in Ohio in the late nineteenth century.

George Willard, in *Winesburg*, may be compared to Nick Adams in Hemingway's *In Our Time* (1925): the two young men grow to maturity by encountering a series of confrontations with life—sometimes "initiatory," sometimes in less traumatic "rituals of passage." But though Nick Adams is the central character of Hemingway's collection of stories, he does not serve as a focal point for the other characters. George Willard, on the other hand, is not only the most sustained character in Anderson's work, but also the reflecting agency by which the other characters in the town see themselves. In making Willard the repository for their problems, the characters in *Winesburg, Ohio* are able to gain some greater—if admittedly still small—insight into those problems. Further, by their confidences George Willard is able not only to gain some insight into the problems of his fellow townsmen but to learn something about himself.

Some of these stories may indeed be capable of standing alone and still make some sense. But fitted together into a larger work, as they are, they have been given a significance and a strength of meaning such as they otherwise could not have had. It is true that some have occasionally been published as autonomous stories. But if there is any doubt that Anderson meant *Winesburg* to be anything less than a single, unified work, then the introductory "Book of the Grotesque" should
dispel that doubt; for it is plainly meant to function as the intro-
duction to a longer work, and, indeed, makes more sense in
those terms, containing within itself the seed of all that is to
flower in the later episodes.

The main character in "The Book of the Grotesque" is a
writer; he is not a young man like George Willard, but an old
man who has already spent the larger part of his life in the
town. He is, in a sense, the George Willard who never left
home, but has stayed on to record, bardlike, the buried lives
of his people. Although he is not Willard, he seems to act as a
kind of anticipatory persona for George. For the old writer has
written a book (unpublished) very much like the book George
—or, indeed, Anderson himself!—will later write. The book
concerns the town and the old man's neighbors. Like the char-
acters in Winesburg, the people in the introductory "Book of
the Grotesque" are the stunted fractional men and women of
the larger work, Winesburg, Ohio. As the "I" in "The Book
of the Grotesque" tells us,

In the beginning when the world was young there were a great
many thoughts but no such thing as truth. Man made the truths
himself and each truth was a composite of a great many vague
thoughts. All about in the world were the truths and they were
all beautiful.

The old man had listed hundreds of the truths in his book. I
will not try to tell you of all of them. There was the truth of
virginity and the truth of passion, the truth of wealth and of
poverty, of thrift and profligacy, of carelessness and abandon.
Hundreds and hundreds were the truths and they were all
beautiful.

And then the people came along. Each as he appeared snatched
up one of the truths and some who were quite strong snatched
up a dozen of them.

It was the truths that made the people grotesques. The old
man had quite an elaborate theory concerning the matter. It was
his notion that the moment one of the people took one of the
truths to himself, called it his truth, and tried to live his life by it, he became a grotesque and the truth he embraced became a falsehood.  

Although it is true that George Willard is not the main character of the stories, he acts as a unifying agent for the larger work. If there were still some doubt as to the function of George Willard in *Winesburg, Ohio*, that doubt should be quickly dispelled when one comes to the last story, “Departure.” It is in this story that George, in leaving Winesburg, will tie up the loose ends of his life there in order “to meet the adventure of life” in the big city (p. 302). Only if we see the town and George’s past in it as the “background on which [he is] to paint the dreams of his manhood” (p. 303) can we see this story in its proper relationship to those that precede it: the causes of George’s departure are all there in the earlier chapters. That George leaves for parts unknown—the west-bound train he takes suggests he is bound for Chicago—is of no great importance. But his departure certainly is, for he will be able to look back on the town of his boyhood and youth with greater detachment; he will thus be able to see it not only more clearly and objectively but also more sympathetically.

In *Winesburg* George Willard is a representative figure who typifies all of the buried yearnings of his fellow townsmen, but unlike most of them, George finally manages to succeed in escaping the town. His escape, however, signals the death of his boyhood and the birth of his manhood. Like the chrysalis of the emerging butterfly, Winesburg has nurtured and prepared the young man for the breakout from the shell of its dead past into the new life of the future.

Willard, however, cannot be seen as a representative type except against the backdrop of the past and the small town that has for so long been symbolic of it. The small town in Amer-
ican literature has been a pervasive presence, ever since that literature broke out of its own colonial chrysalis and became a collection of regional literatures that contributed to the larger national literature. Our writers, for the most part, approached the small town with mixed emotions, depending on their own experience either as young people growing up in small towns or as adults forced to live in, endure, or escape them. The spectrum is broad: from Edgar Watson Howe's embittered memories, as recorded in his *The Story of a Country Town*, to Zona Gale's sentimental *Friendship Village*. No theme in American literature has held the imagination of our writers more firmly than has that of small-town life. Such once-obsessive themes as the fall from innocence, the initiation, and the escape itself have for a long time been subordinate to that of the small town and its impact on the emerging conscience. Anderson's *Winesburg* is, of course, one of the prime examples of that life.

Peeling off the outer layers of these lives in *Winesburg*, Anderson, in episode after episode, reveals what are essentially layers of respectability—or the appearance of it—to show us the core of reality that lies at the heart of the town. But if one cannot communicate, or find some degree of surcease from the loneliness in the consummation of a relationship with another, there is always of course, either in the first or last resort, the "out" of escape from those restrictions, an escape that Willard will eventually make. Insofar as he is more sensitive and articulate than the others in the town, George is also different. And it will be this difference that will eventually precipitate his escape from a place and a way of life where, though eccentricity and difference are not difficult to find, they still serve to arouse suspicion. Indeed, it is frequently by his contacts with the alienated souls in the town that George is permitted the partial insights that will lead to his maturity.
Thus, although George Willard may have much in common with his fellow townsmen, sharing in their grotesqueries (though to a lesser degree), he stands apart from them. When we first meet him in the story “Hands,” Willard is barely out of adolescence. But if he is barely out of adolescence then, most of the other characters in the book have already reached the fag end of life, chronologically and psychologically, when we first encounter them. George Willard is, of course, more literate than the others, and more articulate, not so much because he can read and write better than they—he is a reporter on the *Winesburg Eagle*—but because he is more sensitive. Where many of his “grotesque” neighbors are self-centered, obsessed by their own personal problems to the point of psychosis, Willard, although he also has his problems, is never so absorbed by them that he cannot look at the world and his neighbors and take stock of both with relatively greater objectivity. He is a sensitive receiver, absorbing all of those impressions with which he will later come to “paint the dreams of his manhood” on the canvas of his small-town youth.

George, in being sensitive to the drift of things in the town, not only is articulate in his sensitivity but, through it, shows the makings of a poet. Yet it is not so much the poet or the man of articulation that draws the eccentrics, the freaks, and the “queers” to George; it is finally his sensitivity. To them Willard is a healer.

Further, whereas George is fairly articulate, his fellow townsmen find it difficult to express themselves other than through wild outbursts or inchoate gesticulations. It is only when he is on the verge of making his escape from the town that George can “think through” his own relationship with his neighbors and see them through that mixture of pity and scorn with which a young man of slightly superior talents may look upon those who are educationally inferior to him.

Perhaps more than anyone else in town, George’s mother,
Elizabeth, hopes to mold, or remold, her son closer to her heart's desire. Thus, she vicariously wishes to satisfy a yearning that had burned briefly in her young womanhood, and then had flickered out in the "airless" small-town existence that has destroyed the hopes and the lives of many of her neighbors. No longer able to nurture her own dreams—to escape Winesburg to join a company of itinerant actors—Elizabeth Willard has now superimposed something of her own unfulfilled ambitions onto George. She now thinks of him as that remnant of her own youthful self that has not died and that still seeks to find its way out of the buried life into the sunlit world "above the surface."

George's relationship with his father, Tom Willard, is not quite as close as his relationship with his mother. But Tom Willard has also been disappointed by life. He is the proprietor of the New Willard Hotel, which has seen better days and which symbolizes for Tom Willard all of the larger disappointments of his disappointed life. Instead of fulfilling the promise that it had once held for him, it is now a gnawing reminder of the promise that has been broken.

The hotel was unprofitable and forever on the edge of failure and he wished himself out of it. . . As he went spruce and businesslike through the streets of Winesburg, he sometimes stopped and turned quickly about as though fearing that the spirit of the hotel would follow him even into the streets. "Damn such a life, damn it!" he sputtered aimlessly. (pp. 24–25)

For Tom Willard the hotel is a symbol not merely of the failure of his life generally but, more specifically, the failure of his domestic life. His recourse is to reach outward to that therapeutic panacea, or escape, of the American male who, defeated in the home, turns outward to those socially acceptable alternates of business or politics. For the most part Tom Wil-
lard's escape into local politics is virtually the only escape he is capable of. He still vaguely hopes that he will someday recoup his losses, i.e., his integrity as a man—he is "the leading Democrat in a strongly Republican community" (p. 25)—perhaps getting himself elected to Congress, or even someday becoming Governor. Until then he will vest some of that hope in George.

Tom Willard hopes to justify his own faith in George by contributing the paternal influence toward George's success. But this ambition is not without its snags, for in Tom Willard's attempts to influence George, to capture some of the son's affection if not respect, the rivalry between Tom and his wife for George's love and respect comes to a head. Each wishes for the boy something that neither has had: fulfillment in some sort of success. The form which that success is to take is objectively irrelevant. The locus of irritation lies in the rivalry between the two parents for the possession of the boy's soul. It is a rivalry, of course, that is overwhelmingly reminiscent of another father-mother rivalry in the modern novel, that of Gertrude and Walter Morel in D. H. Lawrence's *Sons and Lovers*. The parallel between the two situations—both patently Oedipal—suggests, as some critics have noted, Anderson's debt to Lawrence in his use of the earlier writer's theme.

George's ambition to become a writer—as distinct from being a newspaper reporter—is obviously the manifestation of a far greater drive within him than even Elizabeth can control. Apart from literary ambitions, George feels the compulsion to make something of himself. As the boy develops into manhood, he finds that he must free himself for greater things than common expectations; and he must do so in his own way. Paradoxically, each of the parents wants for George what George wishes for himself. But he cannot be pressured into his encounter with the world; he must do it in his own way, at his
own pace. It is significant that George’s decision to leave Winesburg, to pursue his own course with a minimum of parental interference, is made early in the book, long before the death of his mother. Early in the book, perhaps to prepare her for the inevitable, George tells Elizabeth of his intentions:

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.”

The woman in the chair waited and trembled. An impulse came to her. “I suppose you had better wake up,” she said. “You think that? You will go to the city and make money, eh? It will be better for you, you think, to be a business man, to be brisk and smart and alive?” She waited and trembled.

The son shook his head. “I suppose I can’t make you understand, but oh, I wish I could,” he said earnestly. “I can’t even talk to father about it. I don’t try. There isn’t any use. I don’t know what I shall do. I just want to go away and look at people and think.”

She wanted to cry out with joy because of the words that had come from the lips of her son, but the expression of joy had become impossible to her. “I think you had better go out among the boys. You are too much indoors,” she said. “I thought I would go for a little walk,” replied the son. (pp. 36-37)

The dialogue sets the tone for the relationship between George and his mother and shows the kind of restlessness that George has inherited from her. As one can see from this exchange, Elizabeth’s feelings are, to say the least, mixed. But her love for her son gives more than it takes (a giving symbolized by the $800 with which she unsuccessfully attempts to finance George’s exodus from Winesburg); for in George’s stated purpose, to “go away,” Elizabeth seems to see some sort of vicarious resolution for her own girlhood restlessness;
in George’s escape, she too—like her husband—will enjoy a “reprieve” from the stagnation of their lives.

In spite of Elizabeth’s concern for George’s freedom of action, her concern for George is one expression of concern for herself, for the satisfaction of her own desires. Like those other townspeople who burden George with their problem and presences, there is something vampiric about Elizabeth’s relationship with her son. Like any form of possessiveness, it must finally demand for its love object what it wishes for itself. Only in Elizabeth’s death will George find complete release from whatever domination she has held over him. Like Elizabeth, Tom Willard the father is parasitical too, for like her, he also wishes for George what he had wished for himself—fame and glory. Both parents wish nothing more than to create, or re-create, in George the realization of their own image of what he ought to be.

As long as he remains in Winesburg, George Willard is the recipient of the confidence of the townspeople. Through these confidences he is slowly impressed with the private agonies that go on inside the hearts of even the most hardened types in the town. George, however, in playing the part of a Miss Lonelyhearts, will only go on playing that part to the extent that he is able to stand up under the constant assaults on his increasingly raw and hyperactive sensibilities. But he cannot go on like this indefinitely; when he reaches the point where he can no longer stand the town and the stunted souls who inhabit it, he will leave. Unlike Nathanael West’s Miss Lonelyhearts, also a news reporter, George will not be—indeed, is incapable of making himself—the Christ figure for the burdens of others. For in fleeing the town George will save himself from the kind of Christlike immolation—another aspect of the “grotesque”—that West’s character eventually submits to. In wishing to flee
the "buried lives" of his fellow townsmen, George also wishes to flee those lives because they are constant irritants, constant reminders of his own buried life. He will occasionally bear the unburdening of these sick souls, and will even help them to alleviate their burdens. (Perhaps this is one way he can keep from becoming a "grotesque" himself.) But he can only continue to do so at the risk of dissipating his own energies, energies he will need for his own break out from Winesburg and the struggle with the world beyond it.

There is at least one way in which George Willard expands his knowledge of the world—apart from his experience—and that is through books. This bookish knowledge may be seen as something that will permit him to impose some sort of pattern on his life and even, perhaps, on the lives of those around him. Some of these books tell of the Middle Ages—a flight back into the past. But this is only the reverse of his later escape, into the future. His interest in the Middle Ages at this stage suggests that the nature of George's escape is an inverted one—for the moment. Significantly enough, his interest in the Middle Ages suggests another facet of George's evolving personality—his romanticism. Yet the mooning romantic reading and dreaming about the Middle Ages must sooner or later break out into the world that he inhabits, the world that offers living experience. It must draw George out of the world of boyhood that he still, dreamlike, lives in, to thrust him into manhood.

In "An Awakening" we view a partial initiation of George from boyhood into manhood. In this episode one of these minor, or partial, initiations will start the machinery of George's escape mechanism moving and will prove to be the beginning of his explicit attempt to escape the town. This initiation comes about through the humiliation young Willard suffers at the hands of Ed Handby, the local bartender. It is this experience
that brings George to one of the critical junctures of his "awakening"—the beginnings of true manhood—to the knowledge of his own limitations. In George’s attempt to experience an adult sexual relationship with Belle Carpenter, a woman of the town, he is paradoxically made aware that he is still very much a boy. For Ed Handby, who unceremoniously breaks in upon that attempt, does not even deign to fight with George to assert his rights over Belle (who is only using the innocent young Willard as a pawn in her battle to bring back the jealous Handby to her). Handby not only will not dignify young Willard by challenging him to a fight, he thrusts George aside like a whipped puppy:

The bartender did not want to beat the boy, who he thought had tried to take his woman away. He knew that beating was unnecessary, that he had the power within himself to accomplish his purpose without using his fists. Gripping George by the shoulder and pulling him to his feet, he held him with one hand while he looked at Belle Carpenter seated on the grass. Then with a quick wide movement of his arm he sent the younger man sprawling. (pp. 225–26)

Ed Handby picks Belle Carpenter up off the grass and "marches" her away, having proven his own manhood in the face of young Willard’s impotence. Thus, this incident, perhaps more than any other, paradoxically brings George to the beginnings of manhood—by convincing him that he is still a boy with a boy’s limitations. He finds neither physical nor romantic love in the Winesburg of his youth, for he is too puny to battle a full-grown man, and he is too timid to make love to a mature woman. As for Helen White, his sweetheart, she is still the object of Willard’s boyish crush that may later develop into something more substantial but at this time is still in its idyllically romantic stage.
When George arrives back in town after the humiliating incident, he runs along a street of frame houses and begins to realize something he had never quite sensed before: for the first time he sees how squalid, miserable, and hopeless these streets and houses are. In this moment, through these "objective correlatives" of frame houses, the meanness and the futility of the town are crystalized for George. The houses now seem to bring out all of the meanings that heretofore had lain hidden from him. Not only do they crystalize the meaning of the town for George, but they appear as symbols of all the closed doors of his life.

This sprint along a street of squalid frame houses will be the beginning of something that will not cease until George has finally succeeded in running from the town itself. And when he does, his escape from Winesburg will be not merely a running away from, but a running toward, something—life, love, fame, adventure, anything, everything—that the town has (almost maliciously, it seems) denied him.

Elizabeth Willard dies of a paralytic stroke. Like her life, her death can only show itself as the paralysis so symbolic of all the paralyzed lives of this town. But if she has lived and died in one form of paralysis or another, her son George will at least act to break out of this grip on his life. Thus, with the death of his mother, George grows up in a hurry. For he is barely out of adolescence when Elizabeth dies, in the same month that George reaches his eighteenth birthday. But because there is still much of the boy in George, vestigial traces of innocence still cling to him. In spite of the experience he has undergone by this time, and in spite of Elizabeth Willard's death, George's innocence, though steadily diminishing, is still strong enough to act as a protective shield against the harsh facts of life and death. For though Willard is not exactly shocked by his mother's death, he finds it difficult to believe.
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Not only can he not seem to realize the fact of that death but, even more significantly, he cannot seem to realize the fact of death itself. This death in the family is still too unreal to register fully upon his consciousness. George may appear to be too callously detached, but that state of mind is induced by the unreal reality of the situation rather than by his lack of sensitivity:

The young man went into his own room and closed the door. He had a queer empty feeling in the region of his stomach. For a moment he sat staring at the floor and then jumping up went for a walk. Along the station platform he went, and around through residence streets past the high school building, thinking almost entirely of his own affairs. The notion of death could not get hold of him and he was in fact a little annoyed that his mother had died on that day. (pp. 280—81)

Although he is much older than the Nick Adams of Hemingway's "Indian Camp," George, like Nick, is unable to face the reality of death, or to see any reference or suggestion that one human being's death is only part of a recurrent pattern that foreshadows one's own death. Like Nick, George is still young enough to feel "quite sure that he would never die"—though that feeling will not last much longer. Thus, as yet unable to consciously accept the fact of death, George turns aside to seek some other answer. He must look forward to tomorrow, signifying life and rebirth, rather than back into yesterday, signifying death, literally and figuratively.

In the episode "Death," George decides to leave Winesburg; it is Elizabeth Willard's death that has impelled George to make that inevitable decision:

Again [George] thought of his own affairs and definitely decided he would make a change in his life, that he would leave Winesburg. "I will go to some city. Perhaps I can get a job on
some newspaper," he thought and then his mind turned to the girl with whom he was to have spent this evening and again he was half angry at the turn of events that had prevented his going to her. (p. 282)

The last episode, "Departure," in which George takes his leave of the town, places him on the borderline of manhood, but not completely across it into full maturity. At this time, there lies within George the potentiality for a full—or fuller—maturity. When it comes, his departure is both the precondition and the end result of a process of initiation and maturation for which all of his previous life in the town had merely been preparation.

George's departure from the town is not only a rebirth but a burial of the old self. Yet the death here is never really a complete death of that old self; for the mixture of memory and desire will keep George tied to the past, no matter how delicate or tenuous the attachment may be. Nostalgia dies hard; and it is not the big things but the small events of daily life, the seemingly unimportant minutiae, that hold George captive in a way to the past, a young man "on parole," so to speak, from that past. The small, carelessly overlooked details will stand out now that George must take his leave of them.

He thought of little things—Turk Smallet wheeling boards through the main street of his town in the morning, a tall woman, beautifully gowned, who had once stayed over night at his father's hotel. Butch Wheeler the lamp lighter of Winesburg hurrying through the streets on a summer evening and holding a torch in his hand, Helen White standing by a window in the Winesburg post office and putting a stamp on an envelope.

The young man's mind was carried away by his growing passion for dreams. One looking at him would not have thought him particularly sharp. With the recollection of little things occupying his mind he closed his eyes and leaned back in the car seat. He stayed that way for a long time and when he aroused
himself and again looked out of the car 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. (p. 303)

Thus, in "Departure," we are given what amounts to George's first and last significant act in the context of the book—his departure from the town and the journey into the world that now awaits him.

Significantly, George Willard, like Theron Ware before him but not necessarily for similar reasons, leaves Winesburg on a spring morning one month after Elizabeth Willard's death, an action that more than suggests the vernal quality of this ritual of passage; for Willard is at not only the season of spring in the world but in his life. He leaves town, one might say, at the instance, or instant, of his mother's death, the better that he may be reborn into the new life that awaits him; for it is as a young man scarcely out of boyhood—in his eighteenth year—that George leaves Winesburg. It is also fitting that he should leave in the spring of his manhood and in the spring season; in both, metaphorically speaking, the season is one of the rebirth of hope, a feeling George is certainly filled with as the train pulls out of the Winesburg depot.

Like so many escapers in the modern American novel, Willard is a type who both looks backward to the escapers who have preceded him and ahead to those who will follow. Like George, these escapers—the Huck Finns, Theron Wares, Frederic Henrys, and John Andrewses—are generalized types, characteristic of so many escapers in American fiction. They are fleeing not merely a set of untenable circumstances (which all of them, in one way or another, do) but also something within their former selves that must be fled if they are to come to greater maturity. En partant, nous mourons un peu—in parting, we die a little; and the parting that George undertakes, like
all such partings, indeed betokens a kind of death—not only of George’s younger self but of the town he has left behind. Of course, in parting we also experience a rebirth of sorts too. Thus, his journey to the city is no simple geographical journey; it is a journey into life itself. Paradoxically, in spite of the suggestions of mutability and mortality in George’s departure, the town begins to live again in his memories of it.

Willard’s escape from Winesburg is, in short, a “revolt from the village,” involving all the implications of that phrase; it is an escape from a petrified world and a present that has overnight become a dead past. With his departure from Winesburg, George has taken his first step into the future, and the town has, accordingly, taken its place in his past.


4. Within the context of Winesburg, George is only relatively more articulate than his fellow townsmen. For in moments of high emotion, George’s interior monologues tend to become a sequence of emotion-tinged pep-talks: his chronic need to take walks, when he cannot give a lucid answer to a difficult question (“Mother”), or the notion that he “must be orderly . . . must get into touch with something orderly and big that swings through the night like a star” (“An Awakening”).