



An Analysis of Winesburg, Ohio from the Perspective of Fromm's Alienation Theory

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ABSTRACT

Winesburg, Ohio is Sherwood Anderson's representative collection of short stories, and it occupies an important position in the history of American literature. Since the publication of this collection, many foreign critics have analyzed and interpreted it from various perspectives. Guided by Fromm's alienation theory, this paper discusses the alienation phenomenon in *Winesburg, Ohio* from three aspects: self-alienation, alienation of interpersonal relationships, and alienation of the relationship between people and society.

Keywords: Sherwood Anderson; *Winesburg, Ohio*; alienation; Fromm's alienation theory

Sherwood Anderson is a distinguished writer in the history of American literature and has a great influence on modern literature. In 1919, his collection of short stories, *Winesburg, Ohio*, aroused great interest in the literary field as soon as it was published, and it established Anderson's position in American literature.

Critics from home and abroad have made various studies about *Winesburg, Ohio*. Epifanio San Juan (1963) thoroughly interpreted the way that Sherwood Anderson described the inner world of the grotesques. Rosemary M. Laughlin's (1967) essay *Godliness and the American Dream in Winesburg, Ohio* focused on the tale, *Godliness*, to explain the social background of *Winesburg, Ohio* and he maintains that this collection of short stories not only unfolded another part of the *Winesburg* vision but also the larger one deeply rooted in American bones. James M. Mellard (1968) stated Sherwood Anderson's narrative forms in *Winesburg, Ohio*, and Ralph Ciancio(1972) in his article named "*The Sweetness of the Twisted Apples*": *Unity of Vision in Winesburg, Ohio* illustrated the inner reasons why people in *Winesburg* became grotesques and he argues that the grotesques have a positive impact on George, the leading character.

Based on the review of the research about *Winesburg, Ohio*, this paper attempts to interpret this book from Fromm's alienation theory and aims at providing a new perspective for its interpretation.

Fromm maintains that alienation is ubiquitous, and it permeates all aspects of social life in modern society, which has caused the most profound restriction on the development of modern people's mental health. It not only induces the abnormal evolution of modern society and, but also causes serious psychological distortion in human beings. According to Fromm, there are mainly three different kinds of alienation existing in modern society: self-alienation, alienation of interpersonal relationships, and alienation of the relationship between individuals and society.

1. Self-alienation

Self-alienation, the alienation of the relationship between man and self, is the core of Erich Fromm's alienation theory. Fromm describes self-alienation as "a mode of experience in which the person will experience himself as an alien" (Fromm, 2002). The alienated person feels that he is alienated from himself and the outer world. He does not consider himself as the core of his personal world or the creator of his actions, but only the slave of his actions and consequences.

Meanwhile, Fromm emphasizes that the self-alienated person does not feel he is the bearer of his powers, and he is separated from these powers. In Fromm's idolatry, the man who is mainly motivated by his lust for somebody or something does not experience himself as the active bearer of his own

powers and richness but becomes a slave to one partial power in him, which is projected into external aims (Fromm, 2002).

Fromm also points out that the neurotic is a completely self-alienated person, whose actions are not his own; he imagines that he is doing what he wants to do, but in fact, it is the force separated from himself that drives him to do so. What he is experiencing is not the real things that are happening, and unconscious forces distort his experience of others and himself. He is no longer the center of his own experience, and to some extent, he has lost himself.

2. Alienation of Interpersonal Relationship

As Fromm said in *The Sane Society*, in modern society, the relationship between man and man is becoming more and more alienated, which is a kind of relationship that exists between two abstractions, and two living machines. Moreover, there is distance, indifference, and much subtle distrust involved in the alienated relationships. This kind of alienation appears in all kinds of relationships, including love and sex.

The relationships between people are closely related to interests. For example, employers exploit employees by making them work harder to generate more profit for them; businessmen exploit customers to make more money. In alienated sexual relationships, men and women simply experience sexual pleasure without any spiritual love.

The alienation of interpersonal relationships will lead to the loss of public emotions and general social bonds. Because of this alienated interpersonal relationship, each person only cares about his own affairs and is indifferent to the affairs of others. Everyone cares about the private parts of his life, not the social, general issues that connect them with their fellow citizens. Therefore, people will gradually be alienated from others and lose their social emotions.

3. Alienation of the Relationship between Individuals and Society

In Winesburg, the relationship between individuals and society has become increasingly indifferent and alienated. Fromm uses “unconscious” to help explain the alienation between individuals and society. The unconscious is a psychological structure that society requires its members to suppress. Every society has established a common social subconscious for all its members, through which society restricts the thoughts and feelings of its members. Individual unconsciousness is mainly determined by social unconsciousness, which regulates and governs the personality of the individual. So the behaviour of the individual must be adapted to the requirements of cultural and social conditions. (Fromm, 2002) Therefore, under the repression of social unconsciousness, people gradually lose their sense of self and feel that they are not part of society. Besides, in one’s private life as an individual, he suffers from isolation and loneliness, which is the necessary result of this separation.

Alienation in Winesburg, Ohio

1. Self-alienation in Winesburg, Ohio

Self-alienation is the most important part of Fromm’s theory of alienation. In self-alienation, man and self are separated and alienated. According to Fromm, the self-alienated person does not consider himself the master of his own actions and power but is submissive to his own actions and powers.

In the story *Adventure in Winesburg, Ohio*, Alice Hindman is a typical self-alienated person. Alice's self-alienation is mainly reflected in her isolation from others and out-of-control behaviour.

Alice falls in love with Ned Currie, a young man, when she is 16 years old, but within a year he leaves Alice for Cleveland to make a career. Alice stays in Winesburg, keeping in mind the vow with Ned that "now we will have to stick to each other, whatever happens, we will have to do that" (Anderson, 1999, p. 97). Alice also works very hard in a dry goods store in Winesburg, waiting and expecting her lover to return. Alice keeps her loyalty to Ned for eight years, and she becomes more and more lonely and scared so she rejects and hates to contact anyone around her, which shows that she begins to be isolated from others. "She became attached to inanimate objects, and because it was her own, she could not bear to have anyone touch the furniture of her room" (ibid p. 98).

The desire to be loved grows wildly in her heart. Finally, on a stormy night, she does a crazy thing-streaking. On that night, "a passionate restlessness took possession of Alice" (ibid., p. 101). Alice goes back home alone and takes off all her clothes. "Without stopping to think of what she intended to do, she ran downstairs through the dark house and out into the rain" (ibid., p. 102). Her desire to be loved takes possession of her, and she completely loses control of herself, which shows that she has become the slave to her partial power of desire. And this is precisely the most obvious characteristic of a self-alienated person.

In another story, *Loneliness*, Enoch Robinson is a fully alienated person who is addicted to his fantasy according to Fromm's alienation theory. Enoch has been a lonely person since he is a child. He is endowed with extraordinary artistic talent but lacks the ability to communicate with others. "He couldn't make people understand him and he couldn't make people understand him" (ibid., p. 153).

When he is 21 years old, Erich goes to New York to pursue his art education, hoping to learn from the art masters there. He invites artists to his room to discuss art, but he fails to express his opinions about paintings and ends by saying nothing every time. He feels frustrated communicating with others. "In a half indignant mood, he stopped inviting people into his room and presently got into the habit of locking the door" (ibid., p. 155). He no longer keeps contact with real people in reality and turns to his imaginary friend. "With quick imagination, he began to invent his own people to whom he could really talk and to whom he explained the things he had been unable to explain to living people" (ibid., p. 155-156). "And so Enoch stayed in the New York room among the people of his fancy, playing with them, talking to them, happy as a child. They were an odd lot, Enoch's people" (ibid., p. 158). He loses almost all sense of self and no longer feels that he is the subject of his experience.

2. Alienation of Interpersonal Relationships in *Winesburg, Ohio*

Fromm points out that alienation exists in the relationship between individuals. With the development of society and civilization, people become more and more alienated from each other. Everyone only thinks about their own affairs and keeps indifferent to others. This alienation occurs in all social relations, including family relations and sexual relations. Especially in sexual relations, men and women are very unfriendly to each other and even hate each other.

(i) Alienation of the Relationship between Jesse and Others

In the story, *Godliness*, Jesse Bentley, the owner of Bentley Farm, is alienated from his workers. He is very unkind and strict to everyone who works for him on the farm. "He made everyone on the

farm work as they had never worked before and yet there was no joy in the work.” (Anderson, 1999, p. 49). Everyone on the farm is a working machine without any emotional communication with each other.

Meanwhile, Jesse is also indifferent to his family. He has been blind to the fact that his young wife is doing a strong woman’s work even after she becomes large with a child and that she is killing herself in his service. When he hears the news that his brothers were killed in the Civil War, he just sighs and forgets them. Even facing the death of his father, “he shrugged his shoulders and dismissed the old man from his mind” (ibid., p. 50). Fromm states that everyone only cares about their own affairs and is indifferent to the people around them, which is shown by Jesse.

(ii) Alienation of the Relationship between Men and Women

Still in the story, *Godliness*, Louise Bentey, has been treated coldly by her father, the farm owner Jess since childhood, so she hates all men, including her father, her son and her husband, John Hardy. When John Hardy reproached her for her cruelty to her little son, she laughs. ‘It is a man’s child and will get what it wants anyway,’ she says sharply. ‘Had it been a woman’s child there was nothing in the world I would not have done for it’.(ibid., p. 78) As for her husband, she hates him very much. Sometimes, “she swore and cried out in her anger. She gets a knife from the kitchen and threatens her husband’s life” (ibid., p. 55). As for her father, she mocks him every time she meets him.

And Bella, in the story, *An Awakening*, also hates men very much. “When dark thoughts visited her, she grew angry and wished she were a man and could fight someone with her fists” (ibid., p. 164). She has an affair with George and Ed at the same time. When they have a big fight for her, she is very satisfied and happy. She has no true love for men, and only makes use of them to gain satisfaction and happiness.

Men look down upon women while women hate men. Many men in Winesburg don’t have any affection for women. Wash Williams, in *Respectability*, doesn’t like women at all. “First of all, he hated women. ‘Bitches,’ he called them. His feeling toward men was somewhat different. He pitied them. ‘Does not every man let his life be managed for him by some bitch or another’” (ibid., p. 105).

3. Alienation of the Relationship between Individuals and Society in Winesburg, Ohio

In modern society, people become more and more alienated from society. In modern life, we have to obey certain institutions, customs and ideas. When our nature is at odds with these rules or some of our thoughts go beyond their limits, then we get caught up in the struggle of the mind.

Wing Biddlebaum is a typical example who is alienated from society. When he is a young teacher in a small town, he has a habit of touching the boys in the school with his hands. But people in the town suspect him of being a homosexual and drive him out of the town. From then on, he hides his hand behind him. Later, he moves to Winesburg and couldn’t fit in with anyone in Winesburg. “Wing Biddlebaum, forever frightened and beset by a ghostly band of doubts, did not think of himself as in any way a part of the life of the town where he had lived for twenty years” (Anderson, 1999, p. 6). He desperately suppresses his desire to express his thoughts with his hands, but this makes him nervous all day long. He obeys social unconsciousness while suppressing his real self so that he is always in a state of confusion and misery.

Seth Richmond, in *The Thinker*, feels very lonely because of his alienation from society. In the eyes of people in Winesburg, he is the “deep one”. When he is chatting with his partners, “he stood

quietly at one side. With calm eyes, he watched the gesticulating lively figures of his companions” (ibid., p. 118). When he is huddled in the chattering crowd, he just finds their rude jokes annoying him. He has no interest in anything so he feels he will be alone in this world forever. “He was lonely and had begun to think that loneliness was a part of his character, something that would always stay with him” (ibid., p. 117). His loneliness is absolutely the feature of a person who is totally isolated from society.

Conclusion

Sherwood Anderson, with an acute perception, describes not just one person or one thing, but the epitome of the whole society. In *Winesburg, Ohio*, he depicts a group of grotesque images at a loss in the 19th century, profoundly revealing the depression, gloomy prospects and abnormal mental state that the grotesques suffer. It fully reflects his sympathy for people struggling in the American social transformation era and demonstrates the impact of industrial civilization on people’s lives in Winesburg-not only does it change people’s lifestyle but also frustrates people’s sense of identity and existence value

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