

# Sherwood Anderson's Use of Biblical Typology in *Winesburg, Ohio*:

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While most critics of *Winesburg, Ohio* (1919) examine its themes of loneliness, repression of sexual desires, or various neuroses, they neglect Sherwood Anderson's employment of Logos and biblical typology as a commentary on the status of Puritanism and Christianity. Of those who do acknowledge the presence of Christianity in the work, some scholars, such as Julius W. Friend,<sup>1</sup> Martin J. Fertig, and William A. Sutton, become absorbed in Anderson's own stance toward religion rather than in the text's presentation of it, while others, such as Joseph Dewey, Rosemary Laughlin, and John O'Neill, wisely focus on how the Winesburg citizens exemplify the oppressive nature of the Calvinistic creed but limit their discussion primarily to the sequence "Godliness." In comparison to these critics, Irving Howe seems decidedly off-key in emphatically declaring that Anderson "had not the slightest interest in religion" (96).<sup>2</sup> Rather than simply using the Bible to

<sup>1</sup>Julius W. Friend describes Anderson's general philosophy as mysticism but "not the Christian or Buddhist variety which denies the world and the senses in favor of an ineffable version of God. It might be better called an earth

study writing, as Howe claims, however, Anderson uses it to illustrate one of the book's central themes—the contest between Christianity and paganism.

Anderson's choice of this central theme for *Winesburg* may well be a reflection of the reexamination of Puritanism that was taking place in the first few decades of the twentieth century. Although Puritanism found staunch support from the likes of Stuart P. Sherman, who described it as a "formative spirit, an urgent, exploring and creative spirit" (19), and "one of the vital, progressive, and enriching traditions" of America (29), it suffered greatly in the hands of such formidable critics as Van Wyck Brooks and H. L. Mencken, who lambasted Puritanism for being devoid of artistic value. According to Mencken, the free exchange of ideas has been severely hampered in America because of the Puritan's "utter lack of aesthetic sense, his distrust of all romantic emotion, his unmatchable intolerance of opposition, his unbreakable belief in his own bleak and narrow views, his savage cruelty of attack, [and] his lust for relentless and barbarous persecution" (201-02). As an associate of both Brooks and Mencken, Anderson undoubtedly was exposed to this vilification of Puritanism and may have chosen to weigh in on the discussion through his short-story cycle.

Although in *Winesburg* Anderson does seem to address all denominations of Christianity, he makes particular use of the Puritan influence, as evidenced in the strong work ethic, sexual repression, and sense of guilt in the *Winesburg* citizens. To illustrate what he sees as the waning of Puritanism (and Christianity) and the deterioration of

<sup>2</sup>Howe indicates the extent to which he will acknowledge that religion has an influence in *Winesburg* when he says, "In the book's best stretches there is a tension between its underlying loose oral cadences and the stiffened superimposed beat of a prose almost Biblical in its regularity" (108). Like Laughlin and O'Neill, N. Bryllion Fagin astutely observes the definite presence of Puritanism in *Winesburg*: "Through the life of the people in *Winesburg*, through the thoughts, hopes, and sorrows, we see what has happened to the inner life of America. *Winesburg* is the reaction, the protest against provincialism, against Puritanism, against the sham of our community life, against the vul-

the signifying power of Logos, Anderson uses the very same hermeneutic tool which the Puritans used to give their lives meaning—typology. Anderson employs and transfigures biblical typology in “The Book of the Grotesque,” “Godliness,” “Tandy,” and “The Strength of God” to show that Logos, what used to signify for the Puritans, no longer signifies and that Christianity will need a new means to succeed in the wake of a shift from a Puritan agrarian society to a more secularized industrial society.

The Puritans based their use of biblical typology on the Johannine concept of Logos, the belief that the Word is the conclusive signifier of Truth in life and that through the Word God makes Himself known to man. As J. N. Sanders and B. A. Martin point out, “In the theology of the Fourth Gospel, God is unknown and unknowable unless and until he is made known by his Logos, his agent not only in revelation, but also in the creation of the world and the salvation of mankind” (19). Calvin believed that the Bible, as the Word of God, is a “fundamental and primary witness to Christ’s presence and is the ultimate authority of the church” (Wolosky 138). This belief accounts for the Puritans’ heavy reliance upon a “typological exegesis of the biblical text,” which first entails asserting a correspondence between the people and happenings of the two Testaments and then extends it to the individual and to God’s providential plan for the universe (138).<sup>3</sup>

Because the Puritans believed they could find eternal truths in studying past events and the lives of great men, they held the writing

<sup>3</sup>Approaching the Scriptures typologically means interpreting people and events (antitypes) in the New Testament which have been prefigured by analogous counterparts (types) in the Old Testament as part of a prophetic fulfillment of God’s providential design. Perhaps the best example of a type and antitype found in the Old and New Testaments is that of Adam and Christ; as an Old Testament type, Adam gains further significance retroactively because he is thought to anticipate Christ, his New Testament antitype—Christ being the new Adam. Although early Puritans tended to restrict their examination of typology to the Old and New Testaments, the second and third generations of Puritans read contemporary events as the fulfillment of cer-

of history in high esteem and were especially interested in a typological approach to it. Emory Elliott comments on the distinct relationship with typology of American Puritans:

What makes the function of typology in early American thought and writing unusual, if not unique, is, however, that the special experiences of the New England Puritans seem to have provided a remarkable continuous analogy of biblical events. Thus, in the imaginations of seventeenth-century American preachers and writers, typological interpretations of Scripture provided a basis for shaping a powerful cultural vision. (204–05)

Because these Puritans did not see typology as a static or inflexible system, they did not limit its use simply to an “intra-scriptural” study; rather, they looked on their own experiences as antitypes to biblical types in order to justify a confidence in their election—the clearest example being their belief that the journey across the Atlantic Ocean corresponded with the Exodus and that the New World constituted the Promised Land. For them, establishing a type was akin to establishing a truth of God. Peter Conn observes that the “Puritans dealt with their history as if it were a third Testament, fulfilling the promises of both the Old and New Testaments and approaching the end of secular history” (30). Thinking that all events were a part of the fulfillment of God’s divine plan, they also endowed happenings around them with a sense of significance. Puritans had a special fascination for keeping journals and diaries and charting the events (blessings and misfortunes) of their daily lives because they believed that through these means they could discover whether they were in God’s favor or disfavor and thus give import to their lives.

This same Puritan fascination with daily events appears in *Winesburg, Ohio*. George Willard as a reporter for the *Winesburg Eagle* fills the position of a Puritan historian in the community. Just as early Puritans believed that their “collective affairs were worth preserving and passing on,” and thus contributed simple truths to their historians’ files (Conn 25), many townspeople seek out George Willard, al-

most in the form of supplication, and feel quietly compelled to tell him the stories of their lives. As grotesques, they look upon George as their hope for approval in life or as a possible source for a "spiritual" healing. To the grotesques he is, as Howe indicates, not only a reporter-messenger "bringing news of a dispensation which will allow them to re-enter the world of men," but also a "young priest who will renew the forgotten communal rites by which they may again be bound together" (102). It is then George's task to write stories about them for circulation among the other citizens, just as early Puritans wrote spiritual autobiographies and histories to encourage others in the faith, the publication of their personal narratives symbolizing the Puritanical endowment of meaning to ordinary lives. George must scrape together these fragments of stories and synthesize them into a cohesive whole in the newspaper, thus shaping Winesburg lives into some kind of symbolic significance analogous to the Puritan belief that all aspects of life work together as parts of God's divine plan for the universe.

The significance that George can give to these encounters with the grotesques, however, is not quite the same kind as Puritan historians used because his understanding of them is limited. Thus, he endows the encounters with an aesthetic value rather than a spiritual value. He cannot easily create any transcendent meaning out of them because the grotesques have no common spiritual or religious foundation: unlike Puritans, who found cohesion and harmony with each other and within themselves by basing their lives on an absolute truth—the Word of God—Winesburg citizens find themselves in division and alienation because they lack commonality in their views of life and truth. Because each adopts a single truth and excludes all others, these grotesques lack the vital community connections that Puritans had.

At the very outset of *Winesburg*, Anderson prepares the reader for the displacement of the Christian concept of Logos as the ultimate source of truth. In the book's first story, the narrator (perhaps George himself) talks about a writer who penned "The Book of the Grotesque." Because of the particular placement of this story—it comes as the first and only story before the map of the town—the

book as a whole might also be considered “The Book of the Grotesque.” From the start, Anderson’s language, rhythm, and syntax establish a typological connection between this work and the Bible: in his Gospel John writes,

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God; all things were made through him, and without him was not anything made. In him was life and the life was the light of men. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it. (John 1:1-5)

Anderson paraphrases this to:

That in the beginning when the world was young there were a great many thoughts but no such thing as a 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. (23)

In the New Testament, “the Word” stands for Christ, God incarnate. John describes Christ, the Word, as the supreme Creator of all things. Making it explicitly clear that Christ is the one who provides all men with life, he states that only in Him can men have the light that dispels darkness. It is important to note that as the Logos, Christ represents life and truth: in John 1:14, the apostle says, “And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth.” As revealed in John 8:32 and 14:6, knowing Logos, this absolute Truth and ultimate signifier, will set men free from darkness (falsehood) and provide them with a life of transcendent meaning.

Although Anderson mimics the cadences of John 1:1-5, he does so only to point to the waning effectiveness of Puritan hermeneutics. Whereas Puritans believed that the signification of life, or revelation of God, could be found either in the Scriptures or through a typological examination of the world around them, Anderson shows that for the secularized world, the idea of Logos no longer signifies as it once did for Puritans; it has become logos with a lower case “l.” Overturn-

ing the significance of the biblical "type" and substituting a secular "antitype," the old writer in "The Book of the Grotesque" asserts that in the beginning of the world truth did not exist. Anderson appears to suggest that modern man has taken over the position of Logos and made his own truth from a fabrication of indefinite or dubious thoughts. The old writer's assertion that all of these truths were beautiful may serve to imply that all "truths" were of equal value, or equally valid, thus calling into question the meaning of John 14:6, in which Jesus said, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father, but by me." In Anderson's version of the beginning of the world, then, man preempts or occupies God's position as creator or maker of meaning (truth). The fact that the writer mentions that these truths, which were created by man, were all beautiful until people came along and, snatching them up for themselves, became grotesques, suggests both that truth is self-created and specific to individuals and that there is not a moral arbiter outside of oneself. While *Winesburg* may not suggest that the act of embracing these preformed truths is positive, Anderson seems to endow his collection with a moral dimension by taking truth *and* the Bible as subject matter and by placing tales into the hands of George Willard, who, resembling the Puritan historian, must judge what stories to include or discard and decide how to make those selected seem meaningful. In place of Logos and Puritan hermeneutics, however, George's position and artistry suggest that, as Walt Whitman prophesied in the "Preface" to *Leaves of Grass*,

There will soon be no more priests. Their work is done. They may wait awhile . . . perhaps a generation or two . . . dropping off by degrees. A superior breed shall take their place. . . [T]he gangs of kosmos and prophets en masse shall take their place. A new order shall arise and they shall be the priests of man, and every man shall be his own priest. (24-25)

While the citizens of Winesburg seem influenced by Puritanism in that they still try to examine the events of their daily lives for meaning, what they find is not God's approval or disapproval but complete subjectivism. Instead of relying on the absolute Truth of the Old and

New Testaments, they try to give their lives importance by creating their own truth—thus figuratively usurping the role of Logos—but their truth lacks the power of signification. The writer in “The Book of the Grotesque” talks about each of these persons adopting or making up a truth, which instead of freeing them or helping them discover the meaning of life, makes them grotesques. In devising their own truths, they also seem to imply that Logos no longer satisfies them or that they can no longer gain access to it through the same means that Puritans used.

Of those critics addressing the function of religion in *Winesburg*, most center their attention on the four-part story of “Godliness.” In terms of typology, this story of Jesse Bentley and David Hardy has perhaps the most readily discernible connection with the Old Testament “types” of Jesse and David, Abraham and Isaac, and David and Goliath. Although “Godliness” is not a strict representation of any of these biblical tales, it does combine enough distinctive elements from each to function as a kind of distorted biblical antitype. Just as Abraham had to wait a long time before producing a rightful male heir, so too must Jesse Bentley wait a long time to “produce” a male heir, his grandson David. Both the historical and fictional characters take their heirs with them into the wilderness with the intention of making a sacrifice to God. The key difference between these two figures, however, involves their motivations for wanting to make a sacrifice. Because Abraham, who hears God prompting him to sacrifice his cherished son, desires to honor God by obeying Him, God spares his son and promises to bless Abraham and multiply his descendants as the stars of the heavens (Gen. 22:16-18). Conversely, Jesse Bentley, hearing not God but silence (the absence of Logos), desires to please himself (demanding that God “expand his tent”) and ends up losing his only heir. He self-consciously invokes this typological comparison in declaring, “Look upon me, O God, and look Thou also upon my neighbors and all the men who have gone before me here! O God, create in me another Jesse, like that one of old, to rule over men and to be the father of sons who shall be rulers!” (70). The god he seeks is not one of ultimate Truth but of property and materialism, and, as Laughlin notes,

“the ‘truth’ that makes a grotesque of Jesse was one of the informal tenets of Calvinism (as well as of ancient Judaism), that is, the belief in material prosperity as the sign of divine favor” (100). In using this typological reference between Abraham and Jesse Bentley, Anderson demonstrates the extent to which the twentieth-century figure has warped the idea of original Truth to make his own truth, consequently distancing himself from God. The narrator notes that “being a prayerful man [Jesse] spoke of the matter aloud to God and the sound of his own words strengthened and fed his eagerness” (70). Calling Jesse a “prayerful man” is ironic because instead of directing his prayers inwardly toward the residing God of Truth (as does the Jesse of I Samuel), he directs them outwardly and is filled with the sound of his own words rather than Logos, the Word. Henry Idema explains the effects of this character’s distancing himself from God:

With Jesse Bentley, secularization interfered with what we have called the paternal function of religion (providing values, steering a clear path in life, etc.), thus leaving this ‘man born out of his time’ more anxious, more insecure, more repressed—and less inner-directed. (94)

In worshipping the truth that he has created, Jesse becomes his own god, the modern man who searches for a life of meaning but either discovers nothing or finds only emptiness within himself.

Anderson’s incident involving Jesse and David in the wilderness also provides a twisted typological reference to the Old Testament story of David and Goliath. Before David Hardy was even born, Jesse often thought the entire stretch of country surrounding his land should have come into his possession. One day, as he attempts to justify his greed, the idea that his neighbors are Philistines and enemies of God seizes him. In contrast to his biblical counterpart, however, Bentley hears nothing from God about sending his son to fight the Philistines and save the nation of Israel; rather, he demands that God send him a son to defeat the “Philistines,” thereby enabling him to accumulate more

property, all under the guise of proper stewardship of God's gifts. Jesse receives his "son" David, but in causing this David to enact the part of the historical/biblical David (so that in turn he can enact the part of the biblical Jesse), he brings about his own defeat. When David "kills" his grandfather by hitting him squarely in the forehead with the use of a stone and sling, Anderson ironically shows Jesse to be Goliath, the godless Philistine. Instead of hearing God speak to him through the offering of a sacrificial lamb, Jesse finds God silent and the lamb running away from him. God's silence is noteworthy because it points to the absence of Logos and suggests that the Puritans' implementation of biblical typology is no longer a sufficient means for experiencing absolute Truth. Although Jesse reads the Bible while at school studying to be a minister and still prays to God, his plans fail because he looks through other people's former visions to gain access to God, unable to see that in a world shifting from a Puritan agrarian society to an expanding secularized society he needs a new vision of Christianity in order to experience the revelation of God in his life. The narrator's comment that in Jesse's time "men labored too hard and were too tired to read. In them was no desire for words printed upon paper" lends credence to the interpretation that this new revelation of God may not necessarily have come from the written Word ( 7 1 ) .

This same idea of Christianity's needing a new means to succeed resurfaces in "Tandy." Contrary to Howe's assertion that "'Tandy' is so bad that its omission would help the book" (106), this story is significant because through it Anderson subtly offers another typological reference. The narrative involves a little girl whose father, Tom Hard, neglects her to spend his time thinking of religion. As a self-proclaimed agnostic, he becomes so absorbed with ways to eradicate his neighbors' ideas of God that he never recognizes the manifestation of God in his own daughter. One evening while the two of them are sitting outside with a young George Willard, a stranger sits down next to them and delivers a prophecy concerning the child. Functioning somewhat as an antitype to John the Baptist in seeming to prepare for a new "truth," the stranger betrays weaknesses to drink and to a love

he has not yet found. Significantly, he declares his destruction inevitable because he has not yet found anything to love (144), the implication being that if he finds it, he will have secured everlasting life—calling to remembrance John 3:16 (“For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life”). Anderson seems to have created the little girl as an antitype of Christ, perhaps having John 1: 29–31 in mind as the basis of her story:

The next day John [the Baptist] seeth Jesus coming unto him, and saith, Behold the Lamb of God, which taketh away the sin of the world. This is he of whom I said, After me cometh a man which is preferred before me: for he was before me. And I knew him not: but that he should be made manifest to Israel, therefore am I come baptizing with water.

Juxtaposing a few passages from “Tandy” with its “type” in the New Testament illuminates Anderson’s assessment of modern Christianity:

“There is a woman coming,” [the stranger] said, and his voice was now sharp and earnest. “I have missed her, you see. She did not come in my time. You may be the woman. . . . I know about her, although she has never crossed my path,” he said softly. “I know about her struggles and her defeats. It is because of her defeats that she is to me the lovely one.” (145)

The “struggles” and “defeats” the stranger mentions parallel the temptations Christ endured and the physical torment and death he suffered at the Crucifixion. Establishing this connection between Christ and Tandy seems further justified when the stranger says that “out of her defeats has been born a new quality in woman” (145)—probably a reference to Christ’s Crucifixion and Resurrection as the means for bringing about the rebirth of humanity. In the presence of her father and beneath a tree, Tandy, like Jesus, gives herself over to grief, hardly able to bear the vision given her. Anderson’s use of twisted typology

in this story suggests that modern man's hunger for signification has not been satisfied by the Christianity the Puritans knew, but that something is coming which will give people ultimate meaning in life. The stranger's encouraging Tandy to "be something more than man or woman" identifies her as an embodiment of that transcendent quality (145). "Tandy" shows that just as the employment of biblical typology helped Puritans experience Logos, so too might an encounter with the physical representation of a divine presence enable modern man to experience transcendent truth.

Like "Tandy," "The Strength of God" shows a modification of the Puritan means of signification in depicting another example of biblical typology. Reverend Curtis Hartman has been pastor of Winesburg's Presbyterian church for ten years, but apparently his sermons have never roused much enthusiasm among worshippers. The ineffectiveness of his words troubles him so much that he questions whether the "flame of the spirit" really burns within him. He greatly desires to be charged by a "strong sweet new current of power" coming to his soul and then manifesting itself through him to his congregation (148). On a Sunday morning one summer, Hartman looks out of the church bell tower window and, to his surprise, sees Kate Swift lying partially naked on her bed, reading a book, and smoking. He thinks about her sinfulness, and during his sermon he puts aside his own troubles and concentrates on reaching her soul with his words. Then the minister experiences a lengthy struggle. The narrator observes that in wanting to reach the ears of Kate Swift and "through his sermons . . . delve into her soul, [Hartman] began to want also to look again at the figure lying white and quiet in the bed" (150). Because his desire to see her body again has no connection with reaching her soul, it seems motivated by lust after the flesh. Hartman shows a willful determination to sin a second time when he picks up a stone to break the window in order to see Kate Swift on her bed. Finally, he submits to temptation a third

<sup>4</sup>Hartman's giving in to temptation three times (and then praying but not understanding why he keeps repeating his actions) may also serve as a reference to the apostle Peter's denial of Jesus thrice, which likewise resulted in confusion for this once stalwart follower.

time by creeping out of his house to sit in the darkness of the bell tower and gaze on Kate Swift on her bed, though he later walks and prays in the streets (152).<sup>4</sup>

The story of Hartman and Kate Swift seems to function as an anti-type to the biblical story of David and Bathsheba in II Samuel 11–12:15. Both David and Hartman are considered men of God, yet both encounter similar temptations to submit to their carnal desires for women. Like David, who walked upon the king's roof and spied a beautiful woman bathing, Hartman is in a high tower when he looks down upon the attractive form of Kate on the bed. While David commits adultery physically, Hartman seems to commit adultery mentally when he slips into his "odd land of fantasy" (155). The outcome in Anderson's narrative, however, deviates markedly from its Old Testament type: what brings David's moral, though temporary, downfall brings Hartman's deliverance. During the ordeal of Hartman's temptations, a Bible—Logos—lies open before him on his desk, although its presence does not deter him from "thinking the blackest thoughts of his life" (154)—possibly indicative of the growing secularization which has thwarted the power of the Word to signify as it once did for Puritans. Notably, at the moment when Hartman does experience a deliverance from temptation, the Bible is *closed*, having fallen to the floor. With the Bible open, he stares into the darkness, but after it has fallen off his desk, he says he has found the light. Anderson here suggests that in the modern world one can experience the revelation of God and truth without Logos. In breaking through the windowpane to look upon the reality of Kate as "an instrument of God, bearing his message of truth" (155), Hartman is delivered from his old way of thinking that Logos is the only source of signification. His comment that the picture window "will have to be wholly replaced" (156), possibly symbolic of the need to replace the Puritans' use of biblical typology, indicates his realization that the old lens through which he saw the world darkly will have to be wholly replaced either by a new vision or by a new means of signification.

Still seeming to look through the old Puritan lens of biblical typology, Willard himself appears unable to fathom this new means of signi-

fication. He is tellingly silent when Hartman bursts into the *Eagle* office to tell him about his experience with Kate; George's reaction indicates that as a Puritan historian he cannot make sense out of the minister's deliverance, as even the second and third generations of Puritans might have because, as Hartman tells him, "the ways of God are beyond human understanding" (155). George is unable to give the minister's experience a transcendent or spiritual value, though as a writer he can later give it an aesthetic value. If George could have understood Hartman's deliverance, then Anderson's portrayal of the modern ineffectiveness of the Puritans' employment of biblical typology would have been undermined. In "The Strength of God," Anderson thus suggests that in an expanding secularized world, the means to achieving signification involve not recycled truths with analogous biblical antecedents but the continuing revelation of a personal truth.

These typological references force one to see *Winesburg, Ohio* not just as a short-story cycle about one Midwestern village but as a commentary on the inadequacies of Puritan hermeneutics to find meaning in a secular society. As a distortion of biblical typology, Anderson's "rewriting" of Scripture becomes a treatise on the waning of Puritanism, which may have lost its power to signify. In their domain of deprivation, the grotesques have been on a nebulous search to discover truth but have failed to find meaning because they merely attach themselves to recycled truths. Just as Puritans made a third testament through the employment of biblical typology in their own histories, what Anderson offers to the twentieth century through *Winesburg* can be seen as a third or even fourth testament—one not espousing Logos as the sole source of transcendent truth but signifying, instead, the idea that each person must discover a personal revelation of truth in order to find ultimate meaning in a secularized world.

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