Winesburg, Ohio

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF SHERWOOD ANDERSON

Born in the small farming town of Camden, Anderson drew on his own childhood experiences of rural midwestern life to write *Winesburg, Ohio*. With an alcoholic father, Anderson and his six siblings had a difficult upbringing rife with financial strife and frequent moves around Ohio. After finally settling in Clyde, Anderson left school at 14 and worked odd jobs in order to help support his family but remained a voracious reader who frequented the local school's library. Much like Elizabeth's death inspired George to leave his hometown in *Winesburg, Ohio*, Anderson left Clyde following the death of his own mother. After spending several years attempting different business ventures while writing on the side, Anderson suffered a mental breakdown that led him to pursue writing full-time. He moved to Chicago where he became a successful author and an influential figure in the city's literary movement. Anderson went on to publish nine novels as well as several short story collections, poems, and essays.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Published just after the end of World War I, the listless, melancholic atmosphere of *Winesburg, Ohio* echoes the general social climate in the wake of this brutal war that was unprecedented in its scale and magnitude. Writers and artists during this time period were nicknamed the "Lost Generation" due to the aimless sense of emptiness that they felt and expressed in their works. The collective societal trauma of World War I is clearly reflected in desolate stagnation that plagues the community of Winesburg. Just as the West sought to rebuild a cohesive identity and sense of purpose after this colossal tragedy, so do Anderson's characters struggle to find themselves and create meaning in the wake of their personal traumas and failures.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Winesburg, Ohio is widely considered to be one of the earliest works of American Modernism. Written between World War I and World War II, works in this literary movement often explored crises of mind, body, and spirit and featured characters who struggled to find themselves in the midst of psychological or external turmoil. Modernist novels such as F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* and John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath* are thematically similar to *Winesburg, Ohio* as they tackle themes of existential meaninglessness, madness, and economic challenges. Anderson's novel also draws heavily on the Southern Gothic genre epitomized by William Faulkner, as it offers an explicit portrayal of life's disturbing, grotesque realities amidst a bleak landscape.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** *Winesburg, Ohio*
- **When Written:** 1915-1916
- **When Published:** 1919
- **Literary Period:** Modernism
- **Genre:** Short story cycle
- **Setting:** The fictional small town of Winesburg, Ohio
- **Climax:** After the Winesburg County Fair, George Willard has an epiphany of maturation as he overlooks the town with Helen White.
- **Antagonist:** Winesburg
- **Point of View:** Third person omniscient, first person singular

EXTRA CREDIT

Will the Real Winesburg Please Stand Up. While Winesburg, Ohio is a real place, it is distinct from the eponymous fictional town in Anderson's novel and did not serve as its inspiration. Instead, the stories in *Winesburg, Ohio* are based loosely on Anderson's childhood growing up in the tiny town of Clyde, Ohio.

Pop Culture Icon. *Winesburg, Ohio* has withstood the test of time to appear in several contemporary television shows. Characters on *Fear the Walking Dead*, *Pretty Little >Liars*, and *Orange is the New Black* have all been spotted with copies of the novel.

PLOT SUMMARY

Winesburg, Ohio is a collection of loosely interconnected short stories that focus on the troubled inhabitants of a small midwestern town. Although each of the 25 stories focuses on a different character, the novel's central plot arc is protagonist George Willard's gradual coming-of-age.

In "The Book of the Grotesque," an elderly writer in town has a dreamlike vision of a grotesque figure, which he records in a book. The writer believes that truth is man-made and that becoming possessed by any one singular principle will lead to the corruption and destruction of the individual, a revelation he incorporates into a book of "grotesques" (or people who are deformed by obsession).

In "Hands," Wing Biddlebaum is alienated from the Winesburg community due to his strange habit of relentlessly moving his **hands**. After absentmindedly reaching out to touch George Willard during one of their conversations, Wing is horrified, as many years ago he was driven out of his old life as a schoolteacher in Pennsylvania after he was accused of molesting a student. Wing now leads a broken, lonely existence after losing his reputation.

In "Paper Pills," Doctor Reefy is possessed by a search for intellectual truth, constantly scribbling down his thoughts onto scraps of paper that he then rejects and leaves crumpled in his pockets or strewn around his office. Reefy courts a much younger woman who comes to his medical practice because she has accidentally become pregnant. The woman miscarries and she and Reefy are soon married. Reefy spends that winter happily sharing his philosophical musings with his new wife, but she tragically dies the following spring. After her death, he isolates himself and spends his days grieving alone in his office.

In "Mother," George Willard's parents, who have a dysfunctional marriage, own the New Willard House hotel in town. His mother Elizabeth is chronically ill and largely bedbound, while his father Tom resents his wife and their deteriorating life. Elizabeth's isolation and resentment over her lost youth leads her to become extremely possessive over George, and she plots to stab Tom when he suggests that their son should get serious about his life and possibly move away from Winesburg.

In "The Philosopher," Doctor Parcival has become embittered by his wild life full of loss, failures, and mistakes. He attempts to mentor George Willard by imparting the same sense of hatred that he feels toward life. After a little girl is killed in a buggy accident, Parcival refuses to help other doctors in town and fears that this will cause him to be hanged. He pleads with George to write the book that he may never get to write, asking him to remember that "everyone in the world is Christ and they are all crucified."

In "Nobody Knows," George has sex with Louise Trunnion, a local teenage girl. After the act, George is ashamed, but he reassures himself that no one knows about their encounter.

In "Godliness, a Tale in Four Parts," a four-part saga shifts the narrative back several generations to tell the story of Jesse Bentley, the owner of a farm outside of Winesburg. Jesse has a greedy motivation for wealth, but is also possessed by a prophetic vison of himself as an Old Testament figure who must serve God, to the detriment of his family. His daughter Louise has a troubled childhood and feels trapped in her role as a wife and mother, resulting in her son David going to live on the Bentley farm with his grandfather. Jesse views David as the son he never had and hopes that he will help him fulfill his prophecy, but his attempts to forge a righteous path for his grandson ultimately result in David fleeing the Bentley farm.

In "A Man of Ideas," Joe Welling is a source of annoyance for many people in Winesburg, as he has an irritating habit of cornering people and going on long, philosophical diatribes. Joe starts a baseball team and begins a relationship with Sarah King in hopes of gaining more respect from the townsmen. Although Sarah comes from a sinister, potentially dangerous family, Joe is able to win over her father and brother through his outgoing nature.

In "Adventure," after Alice Hindman is abandoned by her teenage lover Ned Currie, she spends the next decade deteriorating mentally and becoming completely isolated. When joining a local church does not give Alice the meaning she craves, she decides that she needs a spontaneous adventure. Alice decides to strip off her clothes and run outside into the rain, but quickly regrets her actions, resigning herself to being one of the many people who are destined to "live and die alone."

In "Respectability," Wash Williams has become deeply misogynistic since his wife cheated on him. When he sees George Willard kissing Belle Carpenter, he takes it upon himself to warn George about the dangers of trusting women. Though he hopes to inspire the same hatred in George, the young man is only left feeling sickened and disturbed by Wash's ranting.

In "The Thinker," after the death of his father, Seth Richmond's behavior becomes erratic and his mother struggles to rein in her teenage son. Seth feels alienated from his peers and wants to get out of Winesburg to start a new life. When George Willard tells him that he wants to fall in love with Helen White, Seth becomes jealous and goes to see Helen himself. Seth is disappointed when Helen encourages him to leave Winesburg instead of urging him to stay. Seth reflects that while George will likely find love, he is fated to be alone forever.

In "Tandy," the young daughter of an atheist is given a prophecy by a drunken stranger who wanders into town. He tells the little girl that she could grow up to be the great woman he has foreseen and he encourages her to be Tandy, the name by which he refers to the qualities of bravery, strength, and openness to love. The stranger's vision gives the young girl a newfound sense of purpose amidst her nihilistic environment and she demands to be called "Tandy" thereafter.

In "The Strength of God," Reverend Curtis Hartman experiences a crisis of faith after he sees the schoolteacher Kate Swift reading and smoking a cigarette in her bedroom. He is thrown into a sexual obsession with Kate that culminates in him surrendering to sin and waiting for a glimpse of her in the church bell tower across from her bedroom window. Hartman is shocked to see Kate naked and praying, a sight that leads Hartman to a spiritual epiphany. He runs out of the church, exclaiming to George Willard that Kate is an instrument of God.

"The Teacher" retells "The Strength of God" from an alternative

point of view, focusing on the events of George Willard's life leading up to Reverend Hartman's proclamation. George has entered into a relationship with his former schoolteacher Kate Swift that leaves both of them confused over their gap in maturity. George has just had a fight with Kate when Hartman bursts into the *Winesburg Eagle* office and tells George that she is a divine instrument, a proclamation that leaves George even more confused.

In "Loneliness," Enoch Robinson moves away from Winesburg to New York City in order to attend art school. His egocentric, childlike nature prevents him from fully connecting with others and he creates imaginary friends to talk to in lieu of stable relationships. Enoch eventually leaves his wife and children and has a mental breakdown at the loss of his imaginary "shadow people." Enoch, left distraught and alone, returns to Winesburg and shares his life story with George Willard.

In "An Awakening," George Willard is casually dating Belle Carpenter, a young woman who is only interested in George because it makes her suitor Ed Hanby jealous. One night, George goes out walking and has the profound revelation that the same laws exist at all levels of the universe, and that becoming a man means incorporating himself into this natural order. George's newfound confidence inspires him to pursue Belle more assertively, which works in his favor until Ed spots them together and attacks him. George is left humiliated and vows that he will hate Belle for the rest of his life.

In "Queer," Elmer Cowley is the son of a family that is alienated from the Winesburg community due to their peculiar nature and the equally peculiar store that they own. As a newcomer, Elmer has failed to make any friends and feels a deep sense of alienation. He arbitrarily blames his loneliness on George Willard, who he believes epitomizes the town that ostracizes him. In an act of rebellion, Elmer robs his father's store, beats up George, and flees Winesburg on a train, reassuring himself that he "ain't so queer."

In "The Untold Lie," Ray Peterson and Hal Winters, laborers on a farm outside of Winesburg, are both conflicted about what their paths in life should be. While Ray is in the midst of an existential crisis about the opportunities he missed out on to get married and have children, Hal comes to the older man for advice about what he should do after accidentally getting a girl pregnant. Ray initially wants to warn Hal that getting married and having a family will trap him in a life he does not want. Ray realizes, however, that this would be a lie as he is truly fulfilled by the love he feels for his wife and children.

In "Drink," a young man named Tom Foster moves with his grandmother to Winesburg after his parents die. Although his upbringing in Cincinnati was fairly troubled, he is a sweet (albeit irresponsible) boy who keeps to himself and is well-liked by the townspeople. Tom comes to view his innocence as a detriment to his growth and decides that he must get drunk in order to gain a better understanding of other people and the sorrows they face. After a drunken night in which he is looked after by George Willard, Tom believes that the experience has taught him a valuable lesson.

In "Death," Elizabeth Willard begins to see Doctor Reefy for her chronic illness, and the two become fast friends. Elizabeth and Reefy bond over the fact that they are both alienated, misunderstood souls who are similarly paralyzed by the losses they have experienced in life. Reefy encourages Elizabeth to be open to the "divine accident" of love, but Elizabeth dies before the two can fully begin a romantic relationship.

In "Sophistication," after Elizabeth Willard's death, George is thrown into a crisis wherein he becomes acutely aware of his own mortality and feels that he must move on from his childhood in order to truly cross "the line into manhood." Feeling a deep desire for connection and understanding, he seeks out Helen White, whom he has dated off and on throughout his adolescence. George and Helen spend a meaningful night together looking out over the empty grounds after the town fair, each coming to terms with their maturation and gaining a better understanding of their complementary roles as a man and a woman.

In "Departure," George's mother's death and his meaningful last night with Helen White allow George Willard to fully move on from his childhood and embrace his newfound independence. George departs from Winesburg on an early morning train in hopes of starting a new life and finding a job on a city newspaper. While George is initially nostalgic, his ambivalence fades away as he feels ready to "paint the dreams of his manhood" on the distant background of his hometown.

CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

George Willard – The protagonist of *Winesburg, Ohio*. George Willard's coming-of-age from an adolescent boy to a man serves as the central plot arc, and his interactions with the novel's myriad characters link the interconnected stories together. The son of Tom and Elizabeth Willard, George is a reporter for the local *Winesburg Eagle* newspaper. This role, combined with the tendency of older townsmen to seek him out as an endeared confidante, gives him a rich knowledge of the town and its people. A sense of uncertainty and confusion plagues George throughout much of the novel as he matures and navigates a variety of personal and interpersonal challenges. He has many friends and casual acquaintances in Winesburg, as several of the town's older men (such Wing Biddlebaum, Doctor Parcival, and Wash Williams) attempt to mentor George and impart their beliefs about life and love onto him. Younger peers like Seth Richmond and Elmer Cowley are envious of George's sense of purpose and the status he holds in the Winesburg community. George also has a number of

romantic relationships throughout his adolescence that range from shallow and purely sexual (as with Louise Trunnion and Belle Carpenter), to confusing (as with Kate Swift), to deep and meaningful (as with Helen White). Throughout the narrative, George struggles with whether or not to branch out and leave Winesburg to start a new life. He has an especially complicated relationship with his mother Elizabeth, a depressed, sickly woman who is extremely possessive of him. Elizabeth dies just as George turns eighteen and this trauma solidifies George's decision to embark on "the adventure of life" in a new city. The novel ends on a note of optimistic possibility for George's future as he finds closure, matures into a grown man, and leaves his past in Winesburg behind.

Elizabeth Willard – George Willard's mother. Elizabeth inherited the New Willard House hotel from her father, and it is now run by her husband Tom Willard. Elizabeth is chronically ill with a depressive demeanor and spends her days sick and isolated in her bedroom. As a young girl, Elizabeth was an adventurous free spirit who had several lovers and longed to escape Winesburg. She settled on an unfulfilling marriage with Tom and has spent her adult life haunted by the regrets of her failed aspirations and broken dreams. As a result of her own mistakes, Elizabeth has a complicated and unhealthy relationship with her son George. She is ambivalent toward George's future—hopeful that he will lead a meaningful life, afraid that he will leave her, and resentful that he may succeed while she never will. Elizabeth is possessive of George to the point that she plots to stab her husband Tom when he encourages their son to grow up and be a man. Her only other close relationship is Doctor Reefy, with whom she develops a deep connection that nearly blossoms into a romantic affair. Elizabeth succumbs to her illness and dies when George is eighteen years old. Elizabeth's death has a profound impact on George and pushes him to gain independence and leave Winesburg behind for a more meaningful life.

Doctor Reefy – A local doctor who is plagued by tragedy and subsequently haunted by grief and loneliness. Reefy is deeply introspective and poetic, constantly scribbling down thoughts on scraps of paper as he tries obsessively to make sense of life's meaning. As a middle-aged man, Reefy falls in love with a young girl who comes to him as a patient when she accidentally becomes pregnant. The girl has a miscarriage and marries Reefy but dies a few months later. After her death, Reefy largely neglects his medical practice and resigns himself to a solitary existence in his cluttered office above the Paris Dry Goods Company store. Doctor Reefy finds solace in the company of Elizabeth Willard, the only person who commiserates with the sense of alienation that he feels. Elizabeth starts out as one of Reefy's patients and the two develop a close friendship based around deep conversations about their lives. He believes that Elizabeth prays to the same contrived "gods" that he has created for himself and is able to perceive the youthful beauty hidden beneath her downtrodden exterior. Reefy and Elizabeth almost begin a romantic affair that is cut short when Elizabeth dies of her ongoing illness.

Tom Willard – George Willard's father. Tom is ashamed of the "shabby" New Willard House hotel that he took over after the death of his wife Elizabeth's father. He is also resentful and embarrassed of his wife's sloppy appearance and sullen presence as she remains bedbound in the hotel by her chronic illness. His encouragement of their son George to "wake up" and get serious about his life and career enrages Elizabeth. Tom spends most of his time engaged in local politics, where he is a vocal Democrat in the majority-Republican town.

Doctor Parcival – A doctor who claims that he no longer wants patients. Parcival has a disheveled, off-putting appearance and lives in a tiny, filthy room above a local diner. He seeks out George Willard and tells him the long (and likely embellished) story of his life. Parcival tells George about his difficult upbringing and chaotic family life, even insinuating that he may have had a criminal past. Before becoming a doctor, he worked as a newspaper reporter and trained to be a minister. The older man hopes to inspire George not to make the same foolish mistakes he did. Parcival's dark past has left him with a resentful, self-victimized attitude to the point that he refuses to help the other doctors in town when a little girl is killed in a buggy accident.

Jesse Bentley – The owner of a prosperous farm outside of Winesburg several generations before the novel's contemporary stories take place. Jesse takes over the Bentley family farm after his brothers are killed in the Civil War and is quickly swept up in a prophetic vision of himself as an Old Testament figure and a servant of God. He becomes obsessed with the farm's prosperity at all costs, encouraging his wife to work so hard that she dies during the birth of their daughter Louise Bentley. Jesse has a strained relationship with Louise, forever resenting the fact that he was not blessed with a son to help fulfill his divinely ordained destiny. When Jesse is an old man, his grandson David Hardy comes to live with him on the family farm in hopes of escaping his troubled home life. Jesse views David's presence as God blessing him with the son he always wanted, but David is terrified by Jesse's fervent religious outbursts. Jesse is concerned about forging a proper life path for David and believes he must present God with a sacrifice in order to receive an answer about David's destiny. When he tries to sacrifice a lamb in David's presence, his grandson flees the Bentley farm and is never seen by his family again. Jesse views this loss as a punishment for the greed he has exhibited over the years.

Louise Bentley – The only child of Jesse Bentley. Jesse resents Louise for being female, as he wanted a son instead of a daughter to help him fulfill his prophetic mission of serving God. As a result, Louise is neglected growing up and craves love and acceptance. She goes to live with Albert Hardy and his

children John, Mary, and Harriet as a teenager so that she can attend Winesburg High School. She is ostracized by Mary and Harriet and is just as unhappy in Winesburg as she was on the Bentley farm. Louise decides to form a connection with John Hardy, hoping that a relationship with him will give her the affection and understanding she has always wanted. Louise and John Hardy begin a passionate love affair as teenagers and marry out of fear that Louise may be pregnant. When it turns out that the pregnancy was a false alarm, Louise becomes resentful of John and her behavior becomes erratic and violent. After she has their son David, she neglects him because she is unsure whether she wants to be a mother. Louise believes that David's maleness alone will grant him everything he wants in life. When David is twelve years old, she allows him to go live with his grandfather Jesse on the Bentley farm because she believes her son is better off without her.

Helen White – The primary love interest of George Willard. The daughter of a wealthy banker, Helen has a privileged upbringing and is the object of several boys' affections, including George's close friend Seth Richmond. Despite having a childhood crush on Seth, she gradually forms a connection with George after he decides he wants to fall in love with her. When they are eighteen years old, Helen and George experience a profound sense of mutual understanding and respect for each other. Her presence helps George understand the nature of adult relationships and the complimentary roles of men and women. Helen has gone off to college in Cleveland and has grown into a mature young woman when she returns to Winesburg for the county fair. Just before George departs from Winesburg to start his adult life, he spends a meaningful night with Helen that serves as the affirmation of his transition from childhood to manhood.

Wing Biddlebaum / Adolph Meyers – A strange, socially-isolated field laborer whose only friend is George Willard. Wing gets his name from his uncontrollably restless **hands** that move incessantly like the wings of a caged bird. A former schoolteacher in Pennsylvania, Wing is full of boundless ideas and would often deliver impassioned lectures to his male students while touching their heads and shoulders. As a result, Wing was accused of molestation, run out of town, and fled to Winesburg under a new name. Wing's soiled reputation and hyperactive hands create a deep sense of shame that alienates him from the rest of the town.

John Hardy – The son of the Hardy family who Louise Bentley goes to live with as a teenager. He has a love affair with Louise and marries her when she fears she may be pregnant. After the pregnancy turns out to be a false alarm, Louise feels trapped in the marriage and grows resentful of John. As an adult, John becomes a successful banker in Winesburg. When he and Louise have their son David, John is upset by the way Louise neglects him. He agrees to let David go live with his grandfather Jesse Bentley at twelve years old. A few years later, John spends part of his amassed wealth trying to find David after he runs away from the farm and disappears.

David Hardy – The son of Louise Bentley and John Hardy, David has a troubled childhood due to his parents' strained marriage. His mother behaves erratically and is only affectionate toward David on one occasion when he tries to run away from home. At twelve, David goes to live with his grandfather Jesse Bentley on the family farm. David's rough upbringing has left him timid and afraid of nearly everything, but his presence brightens the lives of everyone on the Bentley farm. David stays on the farm until he is fifteen, when he is traumatized by Jesse's attempted sacrifice of a lamb. He hits Jesse with a slingshot and, believing that he has killed his grandfather, flees the Bentley farm and never sees his family again.

The Writer – An unnamed elderly writer who only appears in the novel's introductory story. The writer has a prophetic vision of disturbing figures whom he writes about in "The Book of the Grotesque." In this book, the writer warns that becoming possessed by a singular truth will in turn make that truth meaningless and lead to the destruction of the individual. This is a fate that ironically befalls many of the characters throughout the novel such as Wing Biddlebaum, Doctor Reefy, and Wash Williams, who all cling to preconceived notions with a conviction that erodes any sense of happiness and fulfillment.

Joe Welling – The Standard Oil agent in Winesburg. Joe is a tiny, highly energetic man who regularly accosts people to tell them about his wild, ranting ideas. Wanting to earn the respect of other men in town, Joe starts a successful baseball team as well as a love affair with Sarah King. The pair's disparate appearances make their relationship a bizarre spectacle for the rest of the town. Although Sarah's family is rumored to have a dangerous reputation, Joe wins over her father and brother with his typical "tidal wave of words."

Alice Hindman – A twenty-seven-year-old clerk at Winney's Dry Goods Store. When Alice was a teenager, she had a passionate love affair with a man named Ned Currie who promised to stay with her forever. Ned eventually moves to Cleveland (and later Chicago) to pursue his career and at first writes Alice almost daily, but soon forgets about her and his life in Winesburg. Alice is crushed and never able to move on from Ned or find meaning in her life without him. She convinces herself that she is one of many people who is destined to "live and die alone."

Wash Williams – Winesburg's telegraph operator. Wash is a filthy, obese man who does not associate with other men in town and is notoriously misogynistic. Seeing George Willard kiss Belle Carpenter inspires Wash to warn George about the perils of trusting women. Cheated on by his wife, Wash has come to the conclusion that all women are "bitches" who only manipulate and betray men. His story does not convince George, who is left feeling physically ill at the overwhelming

resentment Wash expresses.

Belle Carpenter – One of several young women whom George Willard dates. At sixteen years old, Belle works as a milliner in a women's hat store. She is being courted by the local bartender Ed Hanby but continues to casually date George as a means of releasing sexual tension. After a night of deep introspection and personal epiphany, George goes for a walk with Belle that she only agrees to in hopes of making Ed jealous. Belle responds positively to George's newfound masculine confidence and does not resist his advances. Their night is interrupted when Ed comes upon the pair and attacks George, leaving him humiliated and vowing to hate Belle for the rest of his life.

Seth Richmond – A close friend and peer of George Willard. After the death of his father, Seth is raised by a struggling single mother who is unable to discipline him. Although the townspeople view Seth as stoic and wise, he feels lonely and adrift. He is envious of the status and sense of purpose that George's newspaper job awards him. Seth grows even jealous when George announces his interest in Helen White, in whom he is also interested. He shares his plans to leave Winesburg with Helen in hopes that she will tell him not to go, but she encourages him to gain independence and leave their hometown. Seth does not achieve the sense of growth or resolution that George does by the novel's conclusion and is left feeling as though George will find love but that he never will.

Tandy Hard – Tom Hard's seven-year-old daughter. Tandy experiences the loss of her mother and is neglected under the care of her atheistic father. A drunk stranger who comes to Winesburg shares a mysterious prophecy with the little girl, telling her that a woman is coming who will transcend the flaws of humanity and that she could grow up to be that woman. He explains a quality that he calls "Tandy"—a courageous strength and willingness to be loved. The stranger encourages the girl to "be Tandy" by embodying these principles, endowing her with a new name and a renewed sense of purpose that directly conflicts with her father's apathetic mindset. From then on, she rejects her given name and demands to be called Tandy.

Reverend Curtis Hartman – The forty-year-old pastor of the Presbyterian Church of Winesburg. Hartman is "quiet and unpretentious" and is a dedicated minister who is well-liked by the townspeople. Despite this, he feels limited in his role at the church and wishes that he could connect more freely and openly with God. Hartman develops an obsession with the young schoolteacher Kate Swift and is thrown into a crisis of faith over his sexual temptation. After deciding that he will give himself over to sin, he has a change of heart when he sees Kate naked and praying in her bedroom. This experience results in a spiritual epiphany for Hartman, who declares to a confused George Willard that Kate is an "instrument of God."

Kate Swift – A local schoolteacher who is known for her cold, unhappy demeanor. Kate lives with her aunt across from the Presbyterian Church of Winesburg. Reverend Hartman can see into Kate's bedroom the church bell tower and the minister develops a sexually-fueled obsession with her that culminates in a spiritual epiphany when he sees her naked and praying. Kate has an emotional relationship with George Willard (her former student) which teeters on the edge of romance and confuses both of them due to their age gap and the frustration she feels at George's perceived immaturity. She represents sexual confusion and temptation for both Hartman and George.

Enoch Robinson – Enoch returns to his hometown of Winesburg after living in New York City for fifteen years and confides in George Willard about his life. He senses a "youthful sadness" in George to which he can relate. Enoch's childlike, selfish, egocentric nature makes it extremely difficult for him to get along with people and function normally. As a result, he creates imaginary friends whom he can fully control. After going to art school, he got married and had a family but was incapable of fulfilling his role as a husband and father. He met another woman who he scares away, and his imaginary friends disappear along with her. Back in Winesburg, he is distraught that he is all alone after losing everyone in his life.

Elmer Cowley – A newcomer in town, Elmer is a young merchant whose family owns the Cowley & Son's store in Winesburg. The Cowley family is branded as "queer" due to the bizarre array of things they sell in their store as well as their strange behavior and manner of dress. Elmer is an awkward teenager who is tall and lanky with protruding teeth. He feels ostracized by the townspeople of Winesburg and blindly pins his frustrations on George Willard, whom he views as representative of the town that alienates his family. George wants to befriend him, but Elmer is convinced that he is "condemned to go through life without friends." Elmer's loneliness drives him to steal money from his father, senselessly attack George, and run away from Winesburg.

Ray Pearson – A laborer who works on a farm outside of Winesburg with fellow farmhand Hal Winters. He is a stoic, responsible man with a wife and six children. When Hal accidentally gets a girl pregnant and comes to Ray for advice, he begins to question his own marriage and suddenly feels that God tricked him into a life he never wanted. After reflecting on all the experiences he missed out upon to be with his wife, Ray resolves to warn Hal against getting married and having children. But when Hal tells him that the girl does not want to marry him anyway, Ray thinks fondly of his own children and realizes that what he was planning to say to Hal would have been a lie.

Tom Foster – A sixteen-year-old boy from Cincinnati who moves to Winesburg with his grandmother. Despite having a rough upbringing and losing both of his parents, Tom is a soft-spoken, observant boy who is easily made happy and is well-liked by everyone in town. His shy, sweet nature makes him

lonely and somewhat naïve, and he is resistant to sex and other adult aspects of life. Tom gets drunk for the first time in an attempt to connect with the suffering that he sees in other people. George Willard helps Tom during his drunken stupor and Tom claims that he slept with George's love interest Helen White. He later admits that this is not true, but that he feels as though he did sleep with Helen and that getting drunk has taught him valuable life lessons.

Hal Winters – A farmhand who works with Ray Pearson. Hal is an irresponsible young man who was a troublemaker in his youth and now has careless sexual relationships with women. When he accidentally gets a girl pregnant, he goes to Ray for advice and unknowingly sends the older man into an existential crisis about his own role as a husband and father.

Ed Hanby – A thirty-year-old bartender who lives above the local saloon where he works. Ed is courting Belle Carpenter, a young girl who is also casually dating George Willard in attempts to make Ed jealous. Though much older and more experienced than Belle, Ed struggles to express his feelings for her due to his immaturity, impulsivity, and hot temper. When he sees George and Belle together, Ed beats up and humiliates George.

The Narrator – The unnamed speaker of the stories in *Winesburg, Ohio*. The narrator does not directly appear in any of the stories but is implied to be a townsperson living amongst the characters in the novel. This speaker frequently provides perceptive commentary the events of the narrative as well as characters' inner motivations.

Albert Hardy – A vehicle merchant in Winesburg who is a friend of Jesse Bentley. Jesse sends his daughter Louise to live with Albert and his children John, Mary, and Harriet so that she can attend Winesburg High School. Albert is adamant about the importance of books and learning despite not being educated himself.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Harriet Hardy – Daughter of Albert Hardy with whom Louise Bentley is sent to live as a teenager. She and her sister Mary resent, ostracize, and mock Louise for her intelligence. Their cruelty drives Louise to pursue their brother John Hardy, who eventually becomes Louise's husband.

Mary Hardy – Daughter of Albert Hardy with whom Louise Bentley is sent to live as a teenager.

Tom Hard – Tandy Hard's neglectful father. A devout atheist who argues against the existence of God with his neighbors in Winesburg.

The Stranger – A drunk man who wanders into town, befriends the atheist Tom Hard, and delivers a prophecy to Tom's young daughter Tandy. The stranger is the one who gives the little girl her name and encourages her to be strong, brave, and open to love.

Will Henderson – The owner and editor of the local *Winesburg Eagle* newspaper and George Willard's boss. Will frequents a local saloon in the afternoons and is often drunk.

Louise Trunnion – A teenage girl with whom George Willard has his first sexual experience.

Ned Currie – The former lover of Alice Hindman who abandons her for a new life in Chicago.

Sarah King – A "lean, sad-looking woman" who is courted by Joe Welling and looks "ridiculous" alongside the tiny man. She is the daughter of an intimidating, potentially dangerous family with a notorious reputation in town.

Henry Carpenter The father of Belle Carpenter. He tries to control his daughter, but is increasingly unable to do so as she grows older.

TERMS

Grotesque – A strange or disturbing figure whose appearance or character traits evoke both sympathy and disgust. Grotesque figures appear widely in classical mythology, art, and architecture, as well as Gothic literature, and are often used to explore dark and painful themes. Many of the characters in *Winesburg, Ohio* seem to be the real-life, humanized versions of the demonic grotesques that appear in the writer's "The Book of the Grotesque." **Wing Biddlebaum**'s hands, **Doctor Reefy**'s similarity to a twisted apple, and **Elizabeth Willard**'s shabby appearance are all examples of grotesque qualities that are simultaneously off-putting and sympathy-evoking.

THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.

COMING OF AGE, INDEPENDENCE, AND MANHOOD

As the protagonist of *Winesburg, Ohio*, George Willard is the common link among the novel's interconnected stories. George, full of youth and potential, is continually confused by the mixed impressions he receives from his loved ones and acquaintances about what it truly means to be a grown man. Though several older men in town feel compelled to mentor George, confide in him, and impart their notions of life onto his impressionable mind, George is only able to mature and gain the confidence to leave Winesburg through his own personal experiences and

introspection. Through George's journey from a young boy to an adult departing his hometown and beginning his life, Anderson suggests that breaking free from small-minded circumstances and establishing independence are essential to manhood.

As George serves as an endearing confidante for many of the older men in Winesburg, the sense of youthful energy and possibility that he exudes contrasts the downtrodden, cynical attitude that seems to plague these men and envelop their hometown. Doctor Parcival, a former reporter and minister who is now a careless doctor with a dwindling medical practice, takes a liking to George and shares life lessons stemming from his dysfunctional family and questionable past. He befriends George in hopes that the young man will not become "just such another fool" and make the same mistakes in his life. Parcival's jaded, self-victimized outlook is a blatant contrast to George's naivete and open-mindedness. Wash Williams is another example of the many older men who try to take George under their wing. When he sees George kissing Belle Carpenter, Wash (who was cheated on and jilted by his wife), warns George about the manipulation and betrayal that "bitches" inflict upon men. Wash's bitterness and misogyny is so aggressive that George feels "ill and weak" during their conversation, suggesting that the epidemic of disillusionment in Winesburg has the potential to corrupt George's relatively innocent mindset.

In addition to the men who see their young selves reflected in George, other people in Winesburg resent him for the imminent success they see in his future and attempt to influence his notions of manhood by discouraging or sabotaging his plans. The envy that George's mother Elizabeth Willard, as well as his peers Seth Richmond and Elmer Cowley, exhibit toward George highlights the hopelessness of life in Winesburg and the necessity of George's maturation and independence in order to live a meaningful life. George's mother Elizabeth is one of the most influential sources of confusion and discouragement that he faces as a young man on the cusp of independence. While Elizabeth wants her son to achieve his dreams (as she did not achieve hers), she is also furious with her husband Tom for encouraging George to grow up and leave Winesburg. Elizabeth's open mockery of George's desire to move on from his childhood home reflects her fear of being left behind and forgotten as her son fulfills his potential.

Seth Richmond and Elmer Cowley, two teenagers in Winesburg, are also envious of the promise that George's future holds and insecure that they do not measure up in comparison. While Seth is jealous of George's budding relationship with Helen White, Elmer resents George as a symbol of the ostracization he feels as a newcomer in the community. The indignation and mixed messages that George receives from his family and friends leave him confused, challenging his ability to think for himself and reaffirming the necessity of escaping his small-minded hometown to become an independent man.

Despite the external influences and opposition that George faces, he ultimately prevails and set out to fulfill his dreams at the end of *Winesburg, Ohio*. Through George's introspective maturation at the end of the novel and subsequent departure from his hometown, Anderson demonstrates the importance of thinking independently and taking control of one's own destiny in order to make the transition from boy to man. Just before leaving Winesburg, George attends the county fair with Helen. Looking out over the town, he "shudders at the thought of the meaninglessness of life" that would await him if he stayed. At the same time, George feels endearment for the neighbors he has grown up alongside, leaving him conflicted and guilty. This moment is the culmination of the mixed signals about his future that George has received from his peers and elders. He ultimately decides to leave town and relegates his childhood memories to "but a background on which to paint the dreams of manhood." Wanting more from his life, George refuses to be influenced by the failure and bitterness around him, rejecting the mediocre fate that has befallen his parents and many other elders in Winesburg. By ending the novel with George's coming-of-age and departure from Winesburg to "meet the adventure of life," Anderson emphasizes the importance of overcoming external influences and developing an independent, mature sense of intuition and wisdom in order to make the transition from childhood into manhood.

ALIENATION

Winesburg, Ohio follows the inhabitants of a small midwestern town through a series of interconnected stories about their daily lives. Throughout these vignettes of rural American life, Anderson subverts the stereotype that small towns are idyllic, close-knit communities built on strong relationships. There is a distinct lack of human connection in Winesburg despite the townspeople's close proximity to one another, with nearly every major character spending their days alone and feeling isolated from their neighbors. This alienation challenges the traditional perception of quaint agrarian communities and acts as an eroding force in the lives of Winesburg's citizenry, resulting in widespread dissatisfaction and even mental instability.

Throughout the novel, alienation tends to come about as the result of tragedy, failure, and other unforeseen life events—particularly for Wing Biddlebaum and Doctor Reefy. This persistent and often self-imposed loneliness creates a sense of paralysis and prevents characters from moving on from their difficult pasts. Wing, who was once a schoolteacher in Pennsylvania, was run out of town and fled to Winesburg after a student accused him of molestation. Twenty years later, the shame Wing now feels about his controversial past and

infamously restless **hands** leads him to isolate himself from the townspeople. This lack of integration with the community causes Wing to feel as though he is not "in any way a part of the life of the town where he had lived for twenty years," suggesting the deep and lasting effects that alienation can create. Doctor Reefy similarly isolates himself after the death of his young wife, neglecting his medical practice to spend his days alone in a stuffy, cobweb-filled office above the Paris Dry Goods Company store. Although many years have passed since his wife died, his choice to lead a solitary existence causes him to stagnate and stay fixated on his grief rather than moving past it in a healthy, constructive manner.

While the majority of *Winesburg, Ohio*'s characters are trapped in a collective plight of alienation, younger people in town pick up on this seemingly contagious meaninglessness and ennui of their elders. The widespread loneliness that the young reporter George Willard witnesses throughout Winesburg creates a desire to escape and ultimately drives him away from his hometown. Raised by his mother Elizabeth who is chronically ill and wholly isolated from the rest of the town, George has a clear example of the lonely, ghostly presence he could become if he does not branch out and form relationships. After George's father Tom encourages him to "wake up" and get serious about his career and life trajectory, he has his mind set on lofty dreams of getting out of Winesburg, falling in love, and reinventing himself. George's innocence and impressionability make him a confidante for many older men in town, who often come to him with stories of their mistakes and the subsequent loneliness they have suffered. These encounters, in combination with witnessing his mother's lifelong alienation, expose the dark reality of small-town life and solidify George's aspiration to escape the stagnation that would await him if he were to stay in Winesburg.

Beyond fostering passive misery and causing people to flee, isolation also has the ability to foster madness in the minds of the chronically lonely. Elizabeth Willard and Enoch Robinson, two characters who are detached from the people around them, are driven to episodes of insanity by the alienation they experience. Elizabeth is largely bedridden by both physical illness and the shame that she carries over her broken dreams and "shabby" appearance. As a result of being left alone to fester in depression and obsessive thoughts, Elizabeth develops and unhealthy possession over her son George to the extent that she plots to stab her husband Tom when he encourages George to grow up and move away from Winesburg. In the story aptly titled "Loneliness," Robinson experiences a similar isolation-induced mental breakdown. Enoch returns to his hometown of Winesburg after moving away to New York City and recounts his dismal life story to George. Immaturity and lost love have driven Enoch to perpetual loneliness and madness as he hallucinates imaginary "people of his fancy." Elizabeth and Enoch's descents into insanity reflect the ability of social alienation to degrade the human mind to the point of violence and self-destruction. By interweaving these diverse portraits of alienation throughout the novel, Anderson examines the wide-reaching and destructive effects of loneliness and creates a melancholic backdrop that disrupts romanticized stereotypes of life in early 20th century rural America.

GRIEF

The townspeople of Winesburg are plagued by death, tragedy, and failure, all of which lend themselves to the community's pervasive melancholic atmosphere and sense of hopelessness. Anderson uses *Winesburg, Ohio*'s extensive cast of characters to explore the toll that loss can take on the human psyche. Whereas some of Winesburg's inhabitants become passive and stagnate in the wake of grief, others react with resentment, revenge, and escapism. Anderson portrays these varying methods of coping with loss in order to demonstrate the significant psychological impact of trauma and the complexity and fluidity of human emotions.

After losing their respective partners, Doctor Reefy and Alice Hindman are paralyzed by their bereavement. Reefy, whose young wife dies soon after they are married, retreats to a life of solitude in her absence. He is able to find solace and understanding only in the company of Elizabeth Willard, who also dies before they are able to begin a romantic relationship. This debilitating isolation indicates the profound and lasting toll that loss can take on a loved one's life. Although Alice's former lover Ned Currie did not die, but rather left of his own volition, she is similarly affected by grief after he abandons her. After Ned leaves Winesburg to pursue a new life in Chicago, Alice remains fixated on him and cannot imagine a future with anyone else. She attempts to "force herself to face the fact that many people must live and die alone," suggesting that her life is irrevocably damaged by the loss of Ned. The experiences of Reefy and Alice reflect the tendency of grief to persist and damage the lives of those affect long after the person is gone.

Unlike those who process their grief passively, characters like Doctor Parcival and Wash Williams react to the tragedies and failures of their lives outwardly. Parcival and Wash allow bitterness and resentment to overtake them and manifest onto others as they seek revenge on humanity itself for their suffering, suggesting loss's ability to corrupt and shift the moral fabric of those affected. Before coming to live in Winesburg, Parcival has endured the loss of his father along with a chaotic past rife with mistakes and personal failures. He is embittered to the point that he does not want patients at his medical practice and refuses to help the other doctors in town when a little girl is killed in a buggy accident. Parcival's negative life experiences have affected him to the point of debasing his worldview wherein he views himself and everyone else as

hopeless victims, telling George Willard that "everyone in the world is Christ and they are all crucified." Wash Williams is another character whose personal loss manifests outwardly in his attitudes and behavior. After the dissolution of his marriage, Wash adopts a misogynistic attitude that escalates from anger at his ex-wife who cheated on him to feeling sickened and even homicidal toward women in general. This resentment reflects the powerful emotional hold that grief can exert over its sufferers and the tendency for people to be embittered by romantic betrayal and marital loss.

Whereas most characters in *Winesburg, Ohio* are negatively affected by loss, the death of Elizabeth Willard near the end of the novel acts as a positive catalyst effect in her son George's life. Motivated to create a better life for himself than Elizabeth had, the complex emotions that George feels in the wake of his mother's death culminate in maturation and self-development that facilitate George's decision to leave Winesburg. Immediately after Elizabeth passes, George has "but little sense of the meaning of her death" and feels empty and numb in her absence. He soon passes through several different stages of grief and is thrown into a tumult of emotions ranging from nostalgia, to uncertainty of the future, to fear of his own mortality. George's rapidly shifting reactions to his mother's death are a testament to the mysterious complexity of grief. The shock of Elizabeth's death, however, does not debilitate nor embitter George. Rather, it serves as a pivotal moment of closure that allows him to fully dissociate from his childhood as he reaches his eighteenth birthday. Experiencing the loss of his mother creates a sense that "death is calling" and gives George the final push he needs to leave Winesburg and begin his adult life on his own. Through his exploration of these different reactions and coping mechanisms in response to loss, Anderson vividly portrays the long-lasting effects of trauma and the ramifications of allowing negative life events to overtake one's thoughts and actions. The novel's conclusion of George leaving Winesburg offers an alternative message of optimistic healing as the young man is able to remain positive in the wake of his mother's death, ultimately showing the widely variable effects of grief on the human psyche.

FAITH, FATE, AND MEANING

Whereas small, rural towns are commonly associated with a strong religious foundation, there is a distinct lack of faith in the community of Winesburg. The novel begins with a cautionary tale about becoming possessed and corrupted by singular beliefs, a fate that ironically befalls many characters throughout the novel. Rather than trusting in God or destiny, several characters obsessively search for truth and try in vain to take fate into their own hands or create contrived purpose in their lives. By contrast, those who actually succeed in finding meaning stumble upon it when they least expect it. By making this distinction, Anderson emphasizes the detriments of blindly searching for truth and meaning and shows the importance of trust in a higher power and acceptance of humanity's limited capacity for knowledge and control.

Winesburg, Ohio begins with the story of an elderly writer who has a dreamlike vision that he goes on to write about in "The Book of the Grotesque." He warns his readers that truth is beautiful and universal, but that people can become grotesque when they narrowly fixate on a single principle for guiding their lives. This warning proves apt for Doctor Reefy, Wing Biddlebaum, and Jesse Bentley, whose attempts to seek meaning and build themselves up as prophetic figures result in self-sabotage.

Doctor Reefy is a clear example of this, as he constantly constructs and deconstructs "pyramids" of truth that he compulsively scribbles onto scraps of paper. Despite this obsession with intellectual self-development, he is unable to move past the deaths of his wife and later of Elizabeth Willard to find lasting happiness. Reefy describes himself as having "invented gods and prayed to them" amidst his grief, but his man-made deities lack any real substance or grounding in a higher power. Reefy's fixation on these beliefs of his own creation ultimately doom him to an unfulfilling life. Wing Biddlebaum is another character who is similarly possessed by his own perceptions of truth, envisioning himself as a wise figure whose purpose is to enlighten the minds of young men. Blindly focusing on this singular purpose results in Wing crossing inappropriate boundaries with his male students and soiling his reputation. His fanatical devotion, first to his own intellectual vision and subsequently to his shame, leaves him imitating "a priest engaged in some service of his church," worshipping the miniscule pleasures of his isolated life in lieu of a meaningful belief system.

Anderson further develops his critique of self-possessed ideology as the narrative shifts back several generations to the story of Jesse Bentley, the owner of a prosperous farm near Winesburg. While people in this era were generally more religiously devout, Jesse fids it increasingly difficult to "get back to the old feeling of a close and personal God" as he becomes obsessed with wealth and productivity. Jesse's devotion to God is perverted by greed and an aggrandized vision of himself as an Old Testament figure, a perspective that ultimately leads to pain, disappointment, and loss for himself and his loved one and highlights the importance of relinquishing control and accepting fate.

In contrast to these examples of blind devotion to empty principles, the story of Tandy Hard's name exemplifies the random, arbitrary nature of fate, while Reverend Curtis Hartman's fixation on the beautiful schoolteacher Kate Swift culminates in a surrendering of control that leads to a meaningful epiphany. Through these experiences, Anderson reinforces the importance of faith in a higher power and

accepting the limitations that humans face in controlling their own destinies. Tandy, the young daughter of the devout atheist Tom Hardy, is approached by a drunk stranger who kisses her **hands** and delivers his prophecy of a woman named Tandy who will be "something more than man or woman." The stranger encourages her to become this woman and to dare to embody bravery, strength, and openness to love. Though seemingly nonsensical, this encounter has a profound impact on the little girl, who from then on rejects her given name and insists on being called Tandy. The event creates a sense of purpose that allows Tandy to transcend the death of her mother and her father's neglectful treatment of her. By trusting in a higher power rather than succumbing to the narrow, apathetic mindset that her father sets forth, Tandy is able to find lasting meaning.

Reverend Hartman has a similarly random yet impactful experience when his sexually-fueled obsession with Kate Swift culminates in him deciding that he will give into sin and stop his temptation to peer into the woman's bedroom window. He is shocked when he sees Kate naked and praying in her bedroom. Hartman has been tortured into a lengthy crisis of faith by the temptation he feels for the young woman, and seeing her in her most raw, vulnerable form delivers an epiphany to him that Kate is "an instrument of God, bearing the message of truth." The minister is thusly able to free himself from sinful obsession and comes to value Kate as a spiritual being rather than a physical object. Rather than attempting to force himself into the hypocritical duality of preaching purity but yearning for Kate, Hartman's decision to accept his human flaws and trust in God leads to true enlightenment.

The deeply meaningful experiences of Tandy and Hartman are a stark contrast to the stories of Reefy, Wing, and Jesse who fall into the tragic archetype laid out by the writer in "The Book of the Grotesque." By showing the pitfalls of becoming too intellectually or materially possessed, Anderson highlights the importance of accepting one's limits and finding purpose internally rather than searching for external meaning.

SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.

HANDS

Throughout *Winesburg, Ohio*, characters' hands serve as outward manifestations of their life experiences and internal struggles. Like Wing Biddlebaum's erratic behavior and tarnished past, his hands move uncontrollably and likewise become a source of grotesque shame in his life. Doctor Reefy's hands similarly reflect his past, as his huge knuckles resemble the sweet "twisted apples" that the narrator likens to the sweetness of Reefy's love affair with his young wife before she passes away. Finally, the drunk stranger who delivers a prophecy to Tandy Hard makes a point of kissing her hands, a gesture that symbolizing the deep magnitude of his words and the sustained sense of purpose and meaning his encouragement bestows upon her. Together these examples suggest the ways in which one's environment and experiences therein forever shape—and, in many cases, gnarl and warp—an individual's entire identity.

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Signet edition of *Winesburg, Ohio* published in 1993.

1. The Book of the Grotesque Quotes

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.

Related Characters: The Narrator (speaker), Wing Biddlebaum / Adolph Meyers, Jesse Bentley, Doctor Reefy, The Writer

Related Themes:

Page Number: 4

Explanation and Analysis

Winesburg, Ohio begins with a vignette about an elderly writer in town who has a prophetic, dreamlike vision of disturbing figures. This occurrence inspires him to write a book entitled "The Book of the Grotesque" in which he explores the nature of truth and its impact on the human soul. The writer concludes that the principles humanity considers to be deep truths are entirely man-made, and that they are omnipresent and beautiful. He cautions, however, that people are made grotesque and morally corrupted when they become possessed by any one truth. This piece of wisdom serves as a central theme throughout the other stories and prophesizes the fates of many characters in the novel. In their respective stories, characters such as Wing Biddlebaum, Doctor Reefy, and Jesse Bentley attempt to take control of their fates by attaching themselves to singular principles on which to guide their lives. This results in disappointment, loss, and internal degradation, thereby manifesting the grotesque archetype.

2. Hands Quotes

In Winesburg the hands had attracted attention merely because of their activity. With them Wing Biddlebaum had picked as high as a hundred and forty quarts of strawberries in a day. They became his distinguishing feature, the source of his fame. And they made more grotesque an already grotesque and elusive individuality.

Related Characters: The Narrator (speaker), Wing Biddlebaum / Adolph Meyers

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 8

Explanation and Analysis

Wing Biddlebaum is one of many characters throughout the novel who is socially isolated from the Winesburg community. Wing, who was driven out of his old life in Pennsylvania after being accused of molestation, has a disturbing habit of relentlessly moving his hands. This compulsive tendency is an outward manifestation of the internal turmoil he experiences and further compounds the shame he feels toward the loss of his former reputation as a schoolteacher. Wing often engages in philosophical diatribes, and these rants are when he tends to lose control of his hands and thus appear grotesque (that is, both off-putting and sympathy-evoking) to onlookers. His infatuation with his own intellectual and philosophical musings destroys his ability to engage with other people in a healthy manner and alienates him socially. Wing thereby fulfills the prophetic vision of the writer in the novel's first chapter, becoming a grotesque figure who is corrupted by his fixation on his own principles.

"You must try to forget all you have learned," said the old man. "You must begin to dream. From this time on you must shut your ears to the roaring of the voices."

Related Characters: Wing Biddlebaum / Adolph Meyers (speaker), George Willard

Related Themes:

Page Number: 10

Explanation and Analysis

Wing Biddlebaum is socially ostracized from most of the townspeople in Winesburg, his only friend being George Willard, the novel's young protagonist. George, a reporter for the local *Winesburg Eagle* newspaper, is an adolescent boy who is sought out by Wing (and many of the other older men in town) as a confidante. Wing delivers a diatribe to George about the boy's future and the nature of life, much like the impassioned lectures he used to give as a schoolteacher in Pennsylvania before he was accused of molestation and run out of town. Despite his troubled past and questionable judgment, Wing abounds with life advice for George, encouraging the boy to stop isolating himself and to trust his own intuition rather than relying on the opinions of other people. His intense focus on his own philosophical musings causes him to involuntarily reach out and touch George, which horrifies Wing and evokes memories of his past mistakes as a schoolteacher. This incident between George and Wing causes George to avoid asking the older man about his infamously restless hands and distances the two, further solidifying Wing's social alienation.

In the dense blotch of light beneath the table, the kneeling figure looked like a priest engaged in some service of his church. The nervous expressive fingers, flashing in and out of the light, might well have been mistaken for the fingers of the devotee going swiftly through decade after decade of his rosary.

Related Characters: The Narrator (speaker), Wing Biddlebaum / Adolph Meyers

Related Themes:

Page Number: 13

Explanation and Analysis

When Wing Biddlebaum sees a group of berry pickers laughing with one another as they return from the field, he experiences a deep sense of loneliness. Longing for the company of his only friend George Willard, Wing defeatedly returns to his house and has a meal of honey spread on slices of bread. After finishing, he kneels down on the kitchen floor to eat the crumbs he left behind "with unbelievable rapidity." The disturbing, pathetic nature of this scene further adds to Wing's embodiment of the grotesque. By drawing a comparison between the image of Wing eating crumbs off the floor and that of a priest knelt in prayer, the narrator's commentary serves to emphasize the fact that Wing is a servant to his own empty principles rather than a

devotee of a meaningful belief system. The loss of his old life and reputation, combined with the social ostracization he now experiences in Winesburg, has relegated Wing to a hollow life of self-imposed loneliness.

3. Paper Pills Quotes

❝ Little pyramids of truth he erected and after erecting knocked them down again that he might have the truths to erect other pyramids.

Related Characters: The Narrator (speaker), Doctor Reefy

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 15

Explanation and Analysis

Like many other characters in the novel, Doctor Reefy is fixated on a search for philosophical truth at the expense of leading a normal life and forming relationships. Reefy, who spends his days in his dirty, stuffy office above the Paris Dry Goods store, is deeply lonely in his self-imposed isolated lifestyle. He is obsessed with writing ideas on scraps of paper that he then balls up and stuffs in his pockets. Reefy is utterly consumed by this compulsive intellectualism, constantly creating "little pyramids of truth" that he rejects, dissects, and hoards in hopes of finding a deeper meaning somewhere in the mess of thoughts. In doing so, he embodies the grotesque archetype set forth by the old writer in the novel's first story. By fixating intensely on intellectual principles from which he believes he will eventually gain purpose and direction, Reefy ironically robs his own life of those qualities and instead becomes a figure who appears disturbing and pitiful to the rest of the community in Winesburg.

❝ On the trees are only a few gnarled apples that the pickers have rejected. They look like the knuckles of Doctor Reefy's hands…Only the few know the sweetness of the twisted apples.

Related Characters: The Narrator (speaker), Elizabeth Willard, Doctor Reefy

Related Themes: 

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 17-18

Explanation and Analysis

After the death of his young wife, Doctor Reefy resigns himself to a solitary life that is largely devoid of happiness or meaning. The narrator delves into Reefy's backstory in order to portray a more rich, holistic representation of his character. The narrator describes Reefy's courtship of his now-deceased wife as a memory that is similar to the "twisted apples" that are rejected by pickers at the orchard in Winesburg but that have a sweet, delicious center. Reefy is one of several characters whose hands are explicitly mentioned in order to draw a symbolic parallel between their inward struggles and outward appearance. In this instance, Reefy's hands are likened to the twisted apples, a simile that reflects the disparity between the town's outward perception of Reefy (whom they think of as pathetic and downtrodden) with his true intellect and personality. Reefy is later revealed to have a sensitive, poetic soul, the value of which is only truly recognized by Elizabeth Willard throughout their friendship.

4. Mother Quotes

❝ The hotel was continually losing patronage because of its shabbiness and she thought of herself as also shabby. Her own room was in an obscure corner and when she felt able to work she voluntarily worked among the beds, preferring the labor that could be done when the guests were abroad seeking trade among the merchants of Winesburg.

Related Characters: The Narrator (speaker), Tom Willard , George Willard, Elizabeth Willard

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 23

Explanation and Analysis

Elizabeth Willard, George Willard's mother, inherited the New Willard House hotel from her father when he died. The hotel is now run by her husband Tom, who is embarrassed by the "shabby" condition of both the building and his wife. The struggling, run-down hotel reflects Elizabeth herself, who is chronically ill and has a depressive temperament, both of which lead her to feel ashamed and thus isolate herself away from the hotel guests and the rest of the community. This shame and subsequent alienation are rooted in the deep sense of loss and failure that Elizabeth feels toward her life, as she was once a free-spirited young

woman who had love affairs and dreamt of adventure. After squandering her potential to marry Tom and relegating herself to a life in her hometown, Elizabeth is overcome with a depressive paralysis that prevents her from attaining satisfaction or connecting with other people.

❝ George Willard had a habit of talking aloud to himself and to hear him doing so had always given his mother a peculiar pleasure. The habit in him, she felt, strengthened the secret bond that existed between them. A thousand times she had whispered to herself of the matter. "He is groping about, trying to find himself," she thought. "He is not a dull clod, all words and smartness. Within him there is a secret something that is striving to grow. It is the thing I let be killed in myself."

Related Characters: Elizabeth Willard, The Narrator (speaker), George Willard

Related Themes:

Page Number: 23

Explanation and Analysis

Elizabeth Willard, who is alienated from everyone around her, finds solace in her relationship with her son George. As a result of the chronic illness and depression that she faces, Elizabeth's only regular visitor is George and she believes that they share a "secret bond" and understanding. When she is confined to her bed with a bout of illness and George does not visit her for several days, Elizabeth becomes worried and listens at her son's bedroom door. She hears George engaged in his regular habit of talking to himself and realizes that George is growing up and trying to make sense of who he is. In this moment of reflection, Elizabeth draws a parallel between herself and her son wherein she recognizes the same spirit of adventure in George as the one she used to possess but "let be killed." As a result, she becomes both hopeful and resentful of her son in his journey toward manhood and becomes a confusing influence for George as he attempts to form his adult identity and gain independence.

5. The Philosopher Quotes

❝ "If something happens perhaps you will be able to write the book that I may never get written. The idea is very simple, so simple that if you are not careful you will forget it. It is this—that everyone in the world is Christ and they are all crucified. That's what I want to say. Don't you forget that. Whatever happens, don't you dare let yourself forget."

Related Characters: Doctor Parcival (speaker), George Willard

Related Themes:

Page Number: 38

Explanation and Analysis

Doctor Parcival is one of several men throughout the novel who seek George Willard out in order to mentor him. Perceiving the sense of innocence and potential that George embodies, Parcival tells the young boy his life story in order to prevent George from making the same preventable mistakes. Parcival, who has been embittered by his dysfunctional upbringing and troubled path in life, reacts to this sense of failure by becoming resentful and cynical toward the world. As a result, he does not want patients at his medical practice and refuses to help other doctors in Winesburg when a little girl is killed in a buggy accident. No one notices Parcival's absence, but he is nevertheless terrified that he will be hanged for his negligence. He implores George to write the book that he "may never get written" if he is killed, outlining his thesis that every person embodies an oppressed, crucified archetype. This mentality epitomizes the self-victimized attitude that Parcival has adopted in response to his personal hardships, which he seeks to impress upon George as he approaches adulthood.

7. Godliness, Part I Quotes

❝ As time passed and he grew to know people better, he began to think of himself as an extraordinary man, one set apart from his fellows. He wanted terribly to make his life a thing of great importance, and as he looked about at his fellow men and saw how like clod they lived it seemed to him that he could not bear to become also such a clod.

Related Characters: The Narrator (speaker), Jesse Bentley

Related Themes:

Page Number: 50

Explanation and Analysis

At this point in the novel, the narrative has shifted back in time to tell the story of Jesse Bentley, a farmer who lived several generations before the contemporary storyline of *Winesburg, Ohio*. The main struggle Jesse faces is coming to terms with his human limitations, as he is torn between his deep religious faith and his insatiable desire to be the best

farmer in Ohio. Rather than trusting in God and allowing his fate to take shape organically, Jesse attempts to carve out his own path based on a prophetic vision of himself as an Old Testament figure. He is convinced that, although he is merely a man, he has been chosen by God as a faithful servant who is somehow superior to those around him. Possessed by this sense of pious self-importance, Jesse ironically neglects his personal life and family in the pursuit of making his life "a thing of great importance."

❝ In our day a farmer standing by the stove in the store in his village has his mind filled to overflowing with the words of other men. The newspapers and the magazines have pumped him full. Much of the old brutal ignorance that had in it also a kind of beautiful childlike ignorance is gone forever. The farmer by the stove is brother to the men of the cities, and if you listen you will find him talking as glibly and as senselessly as the best city man of us all.

Related Characters: The Narrator (speaker), Jesse Bentley

Related Themes:

Page Number: 52

Explanation and Analysis

Jesse Bentley's story occurs many years before the early twentieth century (which is when the rest of the novel's narrative takes place), and there is a sharp contrast between the cultures of these different time periods. The narrator comments on the cultural divide between Jesse's time and the modern era, noting that men in the past lived simpler lives centered around religion and manual labor while men in the present day have been robbed of this "beautiful childlike ignorance." This observation serves as a critique of the modern tendency to become preoccupied with intellectualism, mass media, and outside influences rather than leading quiet, insular lives centered around churches and local communities. The contrast between these two worlds further emphasizes the sense of meaninglessness that many of the townspeople in Winesburg experience, as they have departed from a more traditional, pastoral way of life and retreated into a world that rejects spirituality for intellectualism and materialism.

8. Godliness, Part II Quotes

❝ The beginning of the most materialistic age in the history of the world…when men would forget God and only pay attention to moral standards, when the will to power would replace the will to serve and beauty would well-nigh forgotten in the terrible headlong rush of mankind toward the acquiring of possessions, was telling its story to Jesse the man of God as it was to the men about him.

Related Characters: The Narrator (speaker), Jesse Bentley

Related Themes:

Page Number: 62

Explanation and Analysis

Throughout the four-part story of "Godliness," Jesse Bentley attempts to reconcile his devotion to God with his desire for wealth and prosperity. The struggle Jesse experiences is indicative of a cultural shift that occurred during the Industrial Era of the early-to-mid 19th century. The narrator puts forth the idea that this time period was "the most materialistic age in the history of the world" and that men in this era abandoned their deep religious faith in favor of empty moral platitudes and a newfound obsession with materialism. Jesse, who views himself as an Old Testament figure with a prophetic vision of serving God, still struggles to maintain his faith and resist the temptation to focus on material success. This dilemma exemplifies the collective crisis of faith experienced by the Western world during this time. In forgoing God amidst his obsession with wealth and prosperity, Jesse (as well as those close to him) ultimately suffer and he fails to attain a lasting sense of meaning.

9. Godliness, Part III: Surrender Quotes

❝ It seemed to her that between herself and all the other people in the world, a wall had been built up and that she was living just on the edge of some warm inner circle of life that must be quite open and understandable to others. She became obsessed with the thought that it wanted but a courageous act on her part to make all of her association with people something quite different, and that it was possible by such an act to pass into a new life as one opens a door and goes into a room.

Related Characters: The Narrator (speaker), Mary Hardy , Harriet Hardy, Albert Hardy, John Hardy, Jesse Bentley, Louise Bentley

Related Themes:

Page Number: 73

Explanation and Analysis

When Jesse Bentley's daughter Louise is a teenager, she is sent to live with their family friend Albert Hardy so that she can attend Winesburg High School. Jesse, who wanted a son to help fulfill his prophetic vision, has resented and neglected Louise since her birth. Louise finds similar treatment from Mary and Harriet, Albert's daughters, who resent Louise's intelligence and subsequently mock and alienate her. Louise desperately wants to find love and understanding and believes that Albert's son John can give her the human connection she desires. Louise's perception of herself as living "on the edge of some warm inner circle of life" reflects the deep sense of alienation that many of the other townspeople in Winesburg experience throughout the novel. The ostracization that Louise faces is the driving force behind her "courageous act" of beginning a sexual relationship with John and eventually entering into a marriage she does not truly want, showing the destructive potential that loneliness can have on the human spirit.

11. A Man of Ideas Quotes

"Let's take decay. Now what is decay? It's fire. It burns up wood and other things…This sidewalk here and this feed store, the trees down the street there—they're all on fire. They're burning up. Decay you see is always going on…The world is on fire. Start your pieces in the paper that way. Just say in big letters *'The World is On Fire.'* That will make 'em look up."

Related Characters: Joe Welling (speaker), Wash Williams, Doctor Parcival, George Willard

Related Themes:

Page Number: 90-91

Explanation and Analysis

Joe Welling, the Standard Oil agent in Winesburg, is envious of George Willard's job as a local reporter, believing that he is more suited to the role. Joe, who is infamous for accosting people on the street and engaging them in long diatribes, confronts George about the fact that he perceives things that the young reporter does not notice. Joe points out the decay (both literal and figurative) that he sees all around them, telling George that everything they see is "on fire" and being gradually destroyed. This statement reflects the novel's ongoing motif of the grotesque, wherein many characters in Winesburg experience hardship and alienation that seems to decay them physically, emotionally, or morally until they are distorted versions of their former selves. For instance, the disheveled, off-putting appearances of Doctor Parcival and Wash Williams are outward manifestations of the inward moral degradation and self-imposed ostracization that they have experienced.

12. Adventure Quotes

"What is the matter with me? I will do something dreadful if I am not careful," she thought, and turning her face to the wall, began trying to force herself to face bravely the fact that many people must live and die alone, even in Winesburg.

Related Characters: Alice Hindman, The Narrator (speaker), Ned Currie

Related Themes:

Page Number: 105

Explanation and Analysis

When Alice Hindman, a young store clerk, was a teenager, she had a passionate love affair with a man named Ned Currie. Despite promising that they would stay together forever, Ned gradually forgets about Alice after he moves to the city to advance his career prospects. For years afterward, Alice pines after Ned, rejecting other men and avoiding any new relationships because she believes that he will one day return to her. This emotional turmoil culminates in Alice having a breakdown in which she strips off her clothes and runs outside into the rain. Horrified by her lapse of judgment, Alice returns inside and reflects that she should accept her fate as a solitary person rather than doing something she may further regret. Alice's story is one of the clearest examples of grief and alienation in the novel, as the loss of Ned causes Alice to completely stagnate and stay paralyzed in her loneliness rather than moving on and finding her own happiness.

15. Tandy Quotes

The stranger arose and stood before Tom Hard. His body rocked back and forth and he seemed about to fall, but instead he dropped to his knees on the sidewalk and raise the hands of the little girl to his drunken lips. He kissed them ecstatically. "Be Tandy, little one," he pleaded. "Dare to be strong and courageous. That is the road. Venture anything. Be brave enough to dare to be loved. Be something more than man or woman. Be Tandy."

Related Characters: The Stranger, The Narrator (speaker), Tom Hard, Tandy Hard

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 132-133

Explanation and Analysis

Having lost her mother at a young age, seven-year-old Tandy Hard is now raised by her father Tom. Tom, who is a prominent atheist in Winesburg and often debates others on existence of God, is a cynical, apathetic man who largely neglects his daughter. When an alcoholic stranger comes to town and befriends Tom, he approaches Tandy and delivers a prophecy to her. He tells the little girl that a woman is coming who will exceed humankind in her capacity to love, and that this woman will embody a quality of bravery and openness that he calls "Tandy." The stranger encourages her to become this woman named Tandy, who will be "something more than man or woman." This moment, though bizarre, has a profound impact on the little girl, who up until this point has lived without a sense of purpose. After this instance, she rejects her given name and insists upon being called Tandy.

17. The Teacher Quotes

"If you are to become a writer you'll have to stop fooling with words," she explained. "It would be better to give up the notion of writing until you are better prepared. Now it's time to be living. I don't want to frighten you, but I would like to make you understand the import of what you think of attempting. You must not become a mere peddler of words. The thing to learn is to know what people are thinking about, not what they say."

Related Characters: Kate Swift (speaker), George Willard

Related Themes:

Page Number: 150

Explanation and Analysis

Winesburg, Ohio is largely centered around George Willard's journey from adolescence to manhood. Throughout the novel, he engages in several romantic and sexual relationships with different young women as he tries to make sense of his personal identity alongside his role as a man in society. Along with dating young women his age, George enters into a confusing relationship with his former schoolteacher, Kate Swift. Kate is an older woman whose greater life experience is a source of both intrigue and frustration for George. Kate, similarly frustrated, is attracted to George's burgeoning manhood yet exasperated at his relative immaturity and inexperience. In trying to impart wisdom onto George and advising him to write deeply rather than superficially, she encourages him to become emotionally involved in his craft as well as in his personal relationships. This sentiment reflects an ongoing dilemma throughout the novel, as many characters struggle in their search for meaning between external influences and their own intrinsic wisdom and intuition.

18. Loneliness Quotes

His room began to be inhabited by the spirits of men and women among whom he went, in turn saying words. It was as though everyone Enoch Robinson had ever seen had left with him some essence of himself, something he could mould and change to suit his own fancy, something that understood all about such things as the wounded woman behind the elders in the pictures.

Related Characters: The Narrator (speaker), George Willard, Enoch Robinson

Related Themes:

Page Number: 157-158

Explanation and Analysis

Enoch Robinson, a man who moved away from Winesburg and lived in New York City for fifteen years, returns to his hometown and shares his life story with George Willard. Enoch, who is extremely immature and egocentric, has struggled throughout his life to connect with other people. After feeling misunderstood and unable to communicate with the friends he makes in art school, Enoch socially isolates himself and instead creates imaginary friends whom he can control. Although he cannot effectively express himself to people, Enoch desperately wants to connect with others and this unfulfilled desire spirals into madness. Enoch's inability to form normal relationships leads to the dissolution of his marriage and he is left completely alone in the world. George's conversation with Enoch leaves a significant impression, as George is quickly approaching adulthood and views the older man as a harrowing example of the madness that can result from loss and social alienation.

19. An Awakening Quotes

"There is a law for armies and for men too," he muttered, lost in reflection. "The law begins with little things and spreads out until it covers everything. In every little thing there must be order…I must myself be orderly. I must learn that law. I must get myself into touch with something orderly and big that swings through the night like a star. In my little way I must begin to learn something, to give and swing and work with life, with the law."

Related Characters: George Willard (speaker), Kate Swift

Related Themes:

Page Number: 170-171

Explanation and Analysis

As George Willard grows up and toes the line between adolescence and adulthood, he becomes increasingly introspective and interested in making sense of life in all of its complexity. Having been encouraged by Kate Swift to experience the world deeply and gain a better understand of people, George is intent on developing himself into a wise man. One night, after listening to the shallow, lewd conversations of his friends at the town pool hall, George goes on a walk through the streets of Winesburg and becomes lost in deep thought. He playfully pretends that he is a soldier and this thought leads to the epiphany that the order of the universe exists at all levels, and that maturity is contingent upon incorporating oneself into that order. This realization endows George with a deep, intrinsic sense of meaning and connectivity with the world that serves as the foundation for his coming-of-age and departure from Winesburg.

23. Death Quotes

"I had come to the time in my life when prayer became necessary and so I invented gods and prayed to them…Then I found that this woman Elizabeth knew, that she worshipped also the same gods. I have a notion that she came to the office because she thought the gods would be there but she was happy to find herself not alone just the same."

Related Characters: Doctor Reefy (speaker), Elizabeth Willard

Related Themes:

Page Number: Page 211

Explanation and Analysis

Since the death of his wife, Doctor Reefy has lived a solitary existence, unable to find a solid sense of purpose or meaningful relationships. This changes for Reefy when he begins to treat Elizabeth Willard for her chronic illness. Reefy finds solace in the company of Elizabeth, who has led a similarly isolated, unfulfilled life, and the two quickly begin to have deep conversations about their lives and form a close friendship. He realizes that, like him, Elizabeth has experienced loss and failure that have left her desperately searching for fulfillment. Reefy reflects that he has attempted to create meaning for himself through artificial "gods," referencing his obsessive tendency to record his thoughts and search for philosophical truth. Seeing himself reflected in Elizabeth allows Reefy to recognize the detriments of his tendency to focus on intellectualism and an external search for meaning rather than placing trust in intuition and faith.

"Love is like a wind stirring the grass beneath trees on a black night," he had said. "You must not try to make love definite. It is the divine accident of life. If you try to be definite and sure about it and to live beneath the trees, where soft night winds blow, the long hot day of disappointment comes swiftly and the gritty dust from passing wagons gathers upon lips inflamed and made tender by kisses."

Related Characters: Doctor Reefy (speaker), Tom Willard , Elizabeth Willard

Related Themes:

Page Number: Page 211

Explanation and Analysis

Doctor Reefy, who has spent many years of his life suffering with grief and alienation, forms a friendship with Elizabeth Willard. In his old age, Reefy has become a deeply introspective, poetic soul who constantly searches for philosophical truths and principles to guide his life. Realizing the error of his ways in isolating himself away from other people and attempting to exert control over his own fate, Reefy tells Elizabeth to resist the temptation to "make love definite" as she had done with her own marriage to her husband Tom. He urges her to relinquish the sense of control that they have both tried to exert over their lives. Instead, Reefy tells Elizabeth to embrace the "divine accident of life" and approach relationships without expectations or certainty. Reefy and Elizabeth go on to form

a deep bond that culminates in an emotional kiss but are unable to begin a romantic relationship before Elizabeth succumbs to her chronic illness and dies.

24. Sophistication Quotes

The eighteen years he has lived seem but a moment, a breathing space in the long march of humanity. Already he hears death calling. With all his heart he wants to come close to some other human, touch someone with his hands, be touched by the hand of another. If he prefers that the other be a woman, that is because he believes a woman will be gentle, that she will understand. He wants, most of all, understanding.

Related Characters: The Narrator (speaker), Helen White, Elizabeth Willard, George Willard

Related Themes:

Page Number: 224

Explanation and Analysis

The death of George Willard's mother Elizabeth is a poignant event for the young man in his journey from an adolescent to an adult. The trauma of the loss throws George into a confusing tumult of emotions from denial, to anger, to sorrow. In contrast with the many characters throughout *Winesburg, Ohio* who are paralyzed by their grief, George transforms his pain into a learning experience that pushes him forward toward maturation. Reflecting on the failures and lifelong loneliness of his mother, he decides that he must leave his hometown to pursue new relationships and experiences. Heeding the advice of the many men who confided in him throughout his teenage years, George resolves to escape the town's propensity to foster isolation and paralysis. Elizabeth's death has created a sense that "death is calling" for George, and this perspective serves as the driving force behind his decision to seek out Helen White and connect with her before he leaves Winesburg and sets out on his adult life.

There is something memorable in the experience to be had by going to a fair ground that stands at the edge of a Middle Western town on a night after the annual fair has been held. The sensation is one never to be forgotten. On all side are ghosts, not of the dead, but of living people…One shudders at the thought of the meaninglessness of life while at the same instant, and if the people of the town are his people, one loves life so intensely that tears come into the eyes.

Related Characters: The Narrator (speaker), George Willard

Related Themes:

Page Number: 229-230

Explanation and Analysis

Just before his departure from Winesburg, George Willard has a night of deep reflection about his past, present, and future. Having grown up in Winesburg all his life, he is torn between nostalgia and a newfound sense of detachment from his childhood home and the people he knows and loves. The death, decay, and stagnation that plagues the town makes a significant impression upon George as he observes the events of the Winesburg County Fair from afar. This reflection, combined with the recent death of his mother, leaves George feeling directionless and conflicted as to what his next step in life should be. He is struck by the "meaninglessness of life" alongside the personal meaning that he finds amidst his friends and acquaintances in town. Ultimately, this moment solidifies George's conviction to escape the limitations of his hometown in spite of his affection toward it, and he leaves Winesburg soon after.

He began to think of the people in the town where he had always lived with something like reverence. He had reverence for Helen. He wanted to love and be loved by her, but he did not want at the moment to be confused by her womanhood…In that high place in the darkness the two oddly sensitive human atoms held each other tightly and waited. In the mind of each was the same though. "I have come to this lonely place and here is the other," was the substance of the thing felt.

Related Characters: The Narrator (speaker), Helen White, George Willard

Related Themes:

Page Number: 230-231

Explanation and Analysis

When the Winesburg County Fair comes to town, George is in the midst of an existential crisis about his life and future plans. He skips the fair and observes the festivities from afar, acutely aware of his own insignificance and meaninglessness alongside his deep desire for connection. This confusing mix of emotions leads George to go to his love interest Helen White's house and spend the night

walking and conversing with her as they look out over the empty fairgrounds. Amidst George's newfound sense of masculinity, he becomes acutely aware of Helen's womanhood and has a revelation about the complementary roles of men and women. While his romantic relationships thus far have been rife with confusion and sexual frustration, George feels at peace in Helen's company. As they are both on the cusp of maturity, the two teenagers feel completed and understood by one another, a bond that gives both George and Helen the confidence to leave their childhoods behind and embrace adulthood.

25. Departure Quotes

❝ 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.

Related Characters: The Narrator (speaker), Helen White, George Willard

Related Themes:

Page Number: 236

Explanation and Analysis

After his profound experience of introspection and maturation on his final night with Helen White, George makes the decision to leave Winesburg and try to find a job on a city newspaper. On the morning of his departure, George wakes up early and walks to the edge of town as he had done many times throughout his childhood and feels ambivalent about leaving his old life behind. Many of his friends and acquaintances come to see him off at the train station, and George contemplates the small but meaningful moments he has shared with his fellow townspeople. As the train pulls away, George's nostalgia fades and he feels at peace with his decision to move on from his childhood and begin his solo journey as an adult man. As the central plot arc of George's coming-of-age comes to a close, this moment serves as a sense of optimistic closure for the novel.

SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

1. THE BOOK OF THE GROTESQUE

In the small town of Winesburg, Ohio, an elderly writer hires a carpenter to raise his bed so that he can awaken to see the trees out of the high windows in his house. The carpenter has a plan to raise the bed onto a platform, but the two old men fall into a conversation about the carpenter's life—his service as a soldier in the Civil War, his time in prison, and his brother who starved to death. The carpenter becomes emotional at the memory of his dead brother and forgets about raising the bed until a later date.

Though the carpenter is ostensibly hired to raise the bed, the writer seems to be more concerned with the carpenter's personal story than with what he's been hired to do. The carpenter's emotional reaction to his brother's death reflects a deep sense of loss that continues to negatively affect his life. This struggle with grief is one that paralyzes many characters throughout the novel.

The writer often lies awake in bed, preoccupied by the idea that his heavy smoking will kill him unexpectedly. He is not alarmed by this notion—rather, it makes him feel more alive. Despite being an old man, the writer feels young and invincible at heart. He imagines this youthful presence within himself as a young woman protected by "a coat of mail like a knight." The writer reflects on the women who were in love with him as a young handsome man and the people he believed he knew on a uniquely intimate level as a writer.

Whereas Winesburg, Ohio *is primarily focused on the journey from boyhood to manhood, the writer's dismissive attitude toward his age disputes the notion that a man can ever fully leave his youth behind. The writer paradoxically feels invincible yet accepting of his mortality and looks back on his life fondly, grateful that his vocation has allowed him to experience the deep complexities of life.*

One night, the writer has a dreamlike vision in which the youthful presence within him is leading a procession of grotesque figures in front of him. The vision lasts for an hour, with the grotesques varying in appearance from disturbing to amusing to beautiful as they pass by. The writer is deeply affected by this bizarre fantasy and decides to write about it in a book titled "The Book of the Grotesque." The narrator comments that "The Book of the Grotesque" was never published, but that it left a significant impression upon him the one time he saw it. The narrator believes that the book allowed him to understand people and things in a new way.

The writer is the first of many characters throughout the novel who are guided by a mysterious prophecy. This is the sole instance in the book when the narrator breaks into a first-person point of view, telling the reader that they were personally impacted by "The Book of the Grotesque" in which the writer records his strange vision of the grotesque figures.

The narrator distills "The Book of the Grotesque" into its main idea: that human truths are manmade composites of different thoughts, and that those truths are all-encompassing and beautiful. Each figure in the book dedicates themselves totally to a truth, becomes possessed by it to the point of becoming a grotesque, and each truth thus becomes a falsehood. The narrator points out the irony of the writer's dedication to writing hundreds of pages on this idea, the subject possessing the writer's mind to the point that he risked becoming a grotesque himself. The narrator concludes by commenting that he only mentioned the carpenter in the story of the writer to embody "very common people" and the qualities that make the grotesques in the writer's book "understandable and lovable."

The writer's conviction that truth is entirely man-made reflects the crisis of faith that society experienced after World War I. The collective principles and values of the West lost their significance in the wake of the most violent conflict the world had ever seen. As a result, society struggled to find a meaningful belief system and generally came to view lofty values (such as truth, beauty, and morality) as man-made rather than divinely ordained. The narrative of "The Book of the Grotesque" asserts that people are destroyed rather than strengthened when they commit themselves to singular truths, a fate that prophetically befalls many characters throughout Winesburg, Ohio.

2. HANDS

Wing Biddlebaum paces on the porch of his dilapidated house, watching a wagon of his fellow berry pickers return from a day of work in the fields. One of the young girls in the group yells across the field to mock Wing, telling him to comb the hair falling into his eyes even though he is an old, bald man.

Wing Biddlebaum is introduced as a character who is isolated from the rest of Winesburg. Although he works in the fields berry picker, he is socially isolated from the other workers who mock him on their way back into town.

Wing, who is haunted by self-doubt, does not feel like he fits in with the other townspeople who live in Winesburg. His only friend is George Willard, a young man who works as a reporter for the local newspaper, the *Winesburg Eagle*. George sometimes walks along the highway to spend the evening with Wing, and his company allows Wing to come out of his shell and face the world with less timidity and fear. When talking with George, Wing's **hands** are noticeably expressive.

Wing is drawn to the blank slate of George Willard's young mind, seeking him out as his sole conversational partner. George is the only solace that Wing experiences from his social isolation and the young man's presence allows Wing to express himself comfortably without his usual trepidations.

The narrator states that Wing's story is "a story of **hands**." Their constant erratic movement is similar to that of a caged bird, which is how Wing got his name. Wing is ashamed of his restless hands, trying to keep them hidden and envying men who are able to keep their hands still while they work and go about their day. Wing finds it easier to hold a conversation with George while beating his fists on the nearest surface.

Wing's habit of relentlessly moving his hands, combined with his solitary nature, further alienate him from the townspeople. This leads Wing to feel resentful of other people who are able to function normally without this disruptive habit. George is the only person in Winesburg who is willing to befriend Wing and converse with him, letting him be himself.

When Wing arrived in Winesburg, his **hands** attracted attention because their constant motion allowed him to pick high volumes of strawberries as a field laborer. The narrator notes that Wing's hands made him grotesque yet somewhat endearing to the townspeople. George is curious about the hands, sensing that there must be a hidden reason for their "strange activity."

Wing's hands are a concrete example of the grotesque archetype outlined by the elderly writer in the novel's previous chapter. Their restless movement is a source of both shame and endearment as they ostracize him socially but make him a more productive worker. Despite George's young age, his natural intuition allows him to perceive a deeper, more painful significance to Wing's hands.

George had almost reached the point of asking Wing about his **hands** once before. The two were walking in the fields when Wing began beating on a fence and yelling at George that he isolated himself too much and was too worried about other people's opinions. Wing then became inspired by a vision of a "pastoral golden age" where young men gathered to listen at the feet of an old man in a countryside garden. Wing encourages George to forget what he has learned and ignore outside influences, caressing George's shoulders as he speaks. Realizing he has touched George, Wing is horrified and abruptly leaves. George decides not to ask him about his hands, sensing that they have something to do with why Wing is afraid of everyone.

Like the writer in the previous chapter, Wing holds a sense of prophetic wisdom that influences his thoughts and perceptions. He is convinced that the status quo of society is misguided and that young boys are meant to learn from the teachings of wise older men and to think for themselves. Wing becomes so possessed by this singular vision of truth that he loses control of his actions and absentmindedly reaches out to touch George and is immediately horrified at what he has done. Witnessing Wing's strong reaction confuses George and leads him to conclude that the mysterious backstory behind his friend's hands is what causes him to fear other people.

The narrator shifts to tell the story of Wing's **hands**. Twenty years ago, Wing had been a schoolteacher in Pennsylvania where he was known as Adolph Myers. Wing cared for his students on an inappropriate level, often fondling the boys' shoulders and heads as he delivered impassioned lectures that he hoped would "carry a dream" into their young minds. One of Wing's students became enamored with him and accused him of molestation, which the other boys corroborated. The small town was scandalized, and Wing was beaten up and driven out of Pennsylvania to Winesburg, Ohio.

Before Wing's lonely, unfulfilling life in Winesburg, he was a young man whose role as a schoolteacher gave him a deep sense of purpose. His misstep with George is revealed to be a behavioral pattern, as many years prior his preoccupation with spreading philosophical truths led him to cross boundaries with his male students. Wing's true intentions are unknown, as the novel does not imply guilt or innocence in regard to his student's accusation. This scandal is the underlying source of shame for Wing that causes him to abandon his old life and retreat into solitude.

Twenty years later, in the present, Wing is still living in Winesburg. After pacing on his porch, Wing goes back into the house and eats slices of bread spread with honey. He is lonely and still longs for the presence of George, who is "the medium through which he expressed his love of man." After his meal, Wing ravenously eats the bread crumbs left on his kitchen floor. In this position, Wing looks like a priest knelt in devotion, his nervous hands resembling a rosary prayer.

This scene further emphasizes just how broken and defeated Wing has become in the aftermath of losing his reputation. Though he longs for social connection and an outlet to express himself intellectually, he is relegated to a solitary life in which eating takes on a perverse sort of pleasure. The image of Wing eating crumbs on the floor as a priest might kneel in prayer highlights the degradation of Wing's spirit as he has become a grotesque, distorted version of his former self.

3. PAPER PILLS

Doctor Reefy is an old man who was once affluent and well-known in Winesburg. In his younger days, Reefy married a beautiful, wealthy girl who had been left a farm after the death of her parents. The townspeople of Winesburg questioned why the girl would marry the doctor, and a year after the marriage she died.

Doctor Reefy is established as a character who is judged and perceived as mysterious by other people in Winesburg, as they wonder why a wealthy and beautiful young girl would settle down with a much older man.

Forgotten by the town of Winesburg in the wake of his wife's death, Doctor Reefy now leads a lonely, solitary existence in his empty office above the Paris Dry Goods Company store. Reefy has a disheveled appearance, having worn the same threadbare suit for ten years. He is obsessed with thinking up and rejecting ideas, relentlessly scribbling "truths" onto scraps of paper that he balls up into his jacket pockets.

The death of his young wife has a profound effect on Reefy, who has since lost all sense of purpose and now spends his days isolated in his office. In lieu of meaningful relationships, Reefy is possessed by intellectualism and obsessively records his thoughts in attempts to work out philosophical truths. Similar to the writer's ideas about truth in "The Book of the Grotesque," principles arise in the doctor's mind, consume him, then fade away. This habit leaves Reefy lost and empty rather than leading him to any meaningful conclusions.

The narrator likens Doctor Reefy to the delicious, sweet twisted apples that are rejected by the pickers in Winesburg's orchards. The enormous knuckles of Reefy's **hands** are also similar to the gnarled, twisted apples. When Reefy was forty-five, the woman he married first came to see him because she had gotten pregnant by one of the suitors who pursued her after her parents died and left her a sizable inheritance. She quickly fell in love with Reefy and they were married after she had a miscarriage. Throughout that winter, Doctor Reefy read her the thoughts he wrote down and kept stuffed in his pockets, and the following spring she died.

Much like the overlooked twisted apples in Winesburg's orchard, Reefy's knuckles reflect his deceptively sweet inner nature. The fact that Reefy shared his philosophical musings with his wife before she died further emphasizes Anderson's ongoing argument that an outward search for meaning cannot save people from the reality of their human limitations.

4. MOTHER

Tom Willard, George Willard's father, is the proprietor of the New Willard House hotel that had originally belonged to his wife Elizabeth Willard's father. Elizabeth Willard is often ill and spends her days drifting around the hotel, and Tom is embarrassed of his sickly wife and the shabby building. He spends his time getting involved with Winesburg's politics, stirring up conflict as a Democrat in the majority Republican small town.

George Willard's parents are both deeply unsatisfied with their lives and feel resentful of each other. Elizabeth's chronic illness leaves her largely bedbound and she is more of a burden for the family than a traditional maternal figure. Unable to confront the painful reality of his ailing wife and floundering business, Tom finds his sense of purpose in local politics.

Elizabeth believes that she and her son George share a deep bond, and she wants to see her lost dreams re-created through him. Elizabeth is conflicted in her wishes for George, praying that he leads a meaningful life yet not wanting him to become "smart and successful." George often visits Elizabeth in her bedroom during her bouts of illness and they people-watch out the window together. One night when Elizabeth is alone, she watches a fight between the baker and a cat out her window and weeps because she feels that the conflict "seemed like a rehearsal of her own life."

Elizabeth's deep, prolonged alienation leads her to become extremely possessive over George. Although Elizabeth loves her son and wants him to be happy, he is her only companion and she is terrified that he will abandon her. In likening herself to the cat who is attacked by the baker, Elizabeth establishes a perception of herself as an oppressed figure who has been victimized by life.

Elizabeth, who has been ill for several days, is worried that George hasn't visited her. She sneaks out of her room, afraid that the hotel guests will be turned off by her shabby appearance. Elizabeth listens under George's door and hears him engaged in his usual tendency of talking to himself. She feels that this habit strengthens the bond between them because it gives her insight to the intelligence and potential George has that she let die in herself.

The deep bond that Elizabeth perceives between herself and George is somewhat of a delusion, as a great deal of Elizabeth's connection with her son takes place in her own mind. In reality, George's relationship with his mother is a source of confusion for the young man. Elizabeth's recognition of George's potential highlights her own failures and disappointments that have led her to becoming sad, lonely, and resentful over the years.

On the way back to her bedroom, Elizabeth realizes that George had not been speaking to himself, but to Tom. She overhears a conversation in which Tom, who wants George to succeed in life, lectures their son to "wake up" and take responsibility for himself. This enrages Elizabeth, who perceives Tom as an evil threat to George. In a fit of jealous rage, she decides she will stab Tom with a pair of scissors.

Hearing Tom encourage George to grow up and become independent causes Elizabeth to project the resentment she feels toward her life onto her husband. Her resolution to stab Tom reflects the profound effects that disappointment and alienation have had on her psyche, as she is driven to madness at the thought of George leaving home.

Before she married Tom, Elizabeth was a restless young girl who longed to join one of the theater companies that often passed through Winesburg. She spent time with the traveling men who stayed at her father's hotel and once scandalized the town by riding a bicycle down Main Street while dressed in men's clothing.

Elizabeth's backstory as a free-spirited young girl further emphasizes her lost youth and current state of stagnation. The motivations for her resentment of Tom become clearer as it is revealed that she had other love affairs and interactions with men that were more fulfilling than her current partnership.

After deciding that she is going to stab Tom, Elizabeth imagines a theatrical vision of the murder and decides that she must look beautiful when she confronts him. She applies old stage makeup and resolves to attack Tom "as a tigress whose cub has been threatened." Her plan is interrupted when she suddenly loses the strength from her body, collapsing on the floor. George then enters Elizabeth's bedroom to tell her that he will be leaving home within a year or two at his father's encouragement. Elizabeth is inwardly joyful but outwardly mocking of her son's aspirations.

Elizabeth's need to look attractive while attacking her husband is an absurd conviction that highlights the deep-seated sense of loss she feels over her squandered potential as a beautiful young woman. The grief she feels over her lost potential translates into resentment, which she expresses outwardly to George when he confirms that he will be leaving home. In this moment, Elizabeth's greatest fear of being abandoned by her son has come to fruition.

5. THE PHILOSOPHER

Doctor Parcival, an unkempt man with an off-putting appearance, takes a liking to George Willard. When George's boss Will Henderson goes out to the saloon in the afternoons, Parcival makes a habit of stopping by the *Winesburg Eagle* office to share stories of his life with George. Parcival, who was once a young newspaper reporter like George, admits that he wants the young man to admire him. George looks forward to these visits because he believes that Parcival's lessons are deeply meaningful. Although Parcival is a doctor, he tells George that he does not want patients, taking only a few who cannot afford better care.

Like Wing Biddlebaum, Doctor Parcival is an older man who picks up on the innocence and potential that George Willard's youth grants him. Parcival sees his younger self in the boy and hopes to impart wisdom onto the young man before he makes irreparable mistakes. George, who is somewhat naïve, is constantly trying to gain a deeper understanding of the world around him and is enthralled by the wild stories that Parcival tells.

Doctor Parcival moved to Winesburg five years ago from Chicago, immediately got into a drunken fight, and now lives in a filthy office above a local diner. George sometimes thinks that Parcival's wild stories must be fabricated, but that they also contain "the very essence of truth." Parcival tells George that he grew up poor with a troubled home life, a selfish older brother, and an "insane" father. He hints that he may have been a thief or a murderer in his younger days. Parcival also says that he studied to become a minister and traveled to bless his father's body after he died in an insane asylum. He shares his cynical outlook on humanity with George, wanting to "fill him with hatred" so that he will triumph over other men and not make foolish mistakes.

Parcival's unsavory demeanor alienates him from other people in town and he further isolates himself by neglecting his medical practice. The doctor's difficult upbringing and past mistakes have imbued a sense of failure and loss that leads him to resent life itself. Rather than inspiring George to overcome life's obstacles with a positive outlook, Parcival wants to impart a similar sense of hatred onto the young man so that he will be motivated to succeed.

One day, a little girl is killed in a buggy accident. While the other three doctors in Winesburg rush to the scene, Parcival refuses to leave his office. No one notices his absence, but George finds the doctor shaking and terrified that the "useless cruelty of his refusal" will cause the townspeople to hang him in outrage. Parcival asks George to write the book that he may never get to write if he is hanged, pleading with George to never forget the simple idea that "everyone in the world is Christ and they are all crucified."

Parcival's refusal to help the little girl indicates just how deeply his resentment permeates. His inflated sense of self-importance is reflected in his assumption that the townspeople will be so enraged by his refusal that they will have him hanged. In reality, people don't even notice that he isn't there—they are much more concerned with the tragedy at hand than they are with Parcival. The doctor's attitude of self-victimization is further underlined by his plea with George to remember than everyone in the world is as unfairly oppressed as Christ.

6. NOBODY KNOWS

One night, after a day of work at the *Winesburg Eagle*, George Willard hurries nervously out of the office. He has been deliberating all day about whether or not to go through with an "adventure" that he has been planning but has not reached a conclusion. Running through town, George resolves to stop overthinking and simply act.

Whereas George Willard is usually plagued by a quintessentially adolescent sense of self-doubt, his resolve to pursue this adventure without overthinking marks George's first steps toward taking risks and challenging himself.

George arrives at the house of Louise Trunnion and calls out to her. He had received a letter from Louise that read "I'm yours if you want me." The two meet outside and, though Louise is hesitant and George is nervous, he persuades her to have sex with him by assuring her that no one will find out. Walking back into town, George is paranoid that he hears a voice calling his name. He laughs it off and assures himself that Louise "hasn't got anything on me" because no one knows about their encounter.

George's encounter with Louise Trunnion is, presumably, his first sexual experience with a girl. His all-consuming desire for Louise is paired with a nagging sense of guilt and fear that people will view him differently if they find out that he slept with her. Rather than valuing Louise as an individual and respecting that she may have changed her mind since inviting him to pursue her, George is only concerned with what she can offer him in the short term.

7. GODLINESS, PART I

The narrative of *Winesburg, Ohio* shifts back in time to the late nineteenth century to tell the story of Jesse Bentley, who owns a prosperous farm outside of Winesburg. Jesse and his four older brothers follow in the traditional footsteps of their family, who had been poor farmers in Northern Ohio for several generations. Jesse is the "odd sheep" of his family and leaves home at eighteen to become a scholar and minister. But after his brothers are all killed in the Civil War and his sick mother suddenly dies, Jesse returns home to help his father Tom Bentley on the farm.

By shifting the narrative to a bygone era, Anderson adds an additional layer to the rich narrative of Winesburg, Ohio. *Jesse Bentley's decision to leave home for intellectual and spiritual pursuits sets him apart from his brothers who are on a more pragmatic path of farm work and military service. The death of his brothers and mother forces Jesse to return to the family farm become the de facto head of household.*

Jesse takes over the family farm and runs it with uncompromising authority, instilling fear in his farmhands and even letting his wife Katherine overwork herself to the point that she dies in childbirth. Jesse approaches his leadership role with religious fanaticism, ignoring his family to spend his days planning how he can cultivate the most successful farm in Ohio. He comes to view himself as an Old Testament figure and believes that he was chosen as a servant of God to do holy work.

In his newfound role as the overseer of the Bentley farm, Jesse takes on the persona of a traditional patriarch. His hyper-focus on the success of the farm causes him to neglect his familial duties as a son, husband, and father. Jesse's vision of himself as a heroic biblical figure suggests a self-aggrandized belief that he can overcome his limitations as a mortal man to take control of his own destiny.


The narrator comments that modern men and women may find it hard to understand Jesse Bentley. Whereas men in Jesse's era lived simple, pastoral lives centered around religion, those in the early twentieth century (when the other stories in *Winesburg, Ohio* take place) are influenced by industrialized urban culture. Jesse epitomizes this generational difference, focusing solely on God and interpreting every life event as a divine omen. On a walk in the countryside just before his wife gives birth, Jesse comes to the conclusion that he is "the true servant of God." He believes that all of the other farmers in Ohio are "Philistines" and "enemies of God," and that he deserves to take possession of their land. Jesse prays that his wife will give birth to a son named David who will help him fulfill his biblical prophecy of building a holy kingdom on Earth.

Whereas the characters in the contemporary storyline of the novel live in a more industrialized, interconnected world, men in Jesse's time were not inundated with modern influences such as mass media and urbanized culture. Jesse is solely focused on his perceived role as a servant of God and what is under his immediate control. Ironically, Jesse's conviction that other farmers in town are "enemies of God" contradicts most interpretations of Christianity which espouse the intrinsic worth of all human beings.

8. GODLINESS, PART II

The story shifts two generations into the future to tell the story of Jesse's daughter Louise Bentley, her husband John Hardy, and their son (Jesse's grandson) David Hardy. David's childhood has been unhappy thus far, as Louise's bad temper, erratic behavior, and rumored substance abuse problem take a toll on his parents' marriage. He attempts to run away to his grandfather's farm, the only place where he feels safe and content. When David returns home, Louise is uncharacteristically affectionate toward him, holding him in her arms and weeping.

Although Jesse Bentley has been portrayed as a severe, pious man up until this point in the novel, his grandson David feels so lonely and mistreated at home that he views his grandfather's farm as an oasis. Though not outright explained, it is implied that Jesse's daughter Louise has lived a troubled life that has embittered her and caused her to resent motherhood.


When David is twelve years old, Jesse demands that his grandson come live with him on the Bentley farm. Louise surprisingly allows David to go without a fight. She comments that David will be better off without her and that although the farm was "like poison" to her and Jesse never wanted her there when she was growing up, it will be a good place for her son. David's departure creates a "sharp break" in Louise's life and John is content that his wife's temper has calmed down in their son's absence. David's presence lightens the farm's oppressive atmosphere, particularly for David's great-aunt who becomes his caretaker.

Louise's reflection that the environment of the Bentley farm was "like poison" implies the negative effects that her father's influence had on her upbringing. Despite her mistreatment of David, Louise's willingness to let him live with his grandfather is a selfless act. Rather than being distraught over the loss of her son, his absence ultimately creates a healthier atmosphere for both Louise and David.

At fifty-five, Jesse has been an extremely successful farmer and has acquired most of the land in the valley, but he still feels discontented. He regrets the years he spent making his farm more productive and instead longs for more noble, meaningful pursuits that would glorify God. Jesse recognizes that he is possessed by greed and finds it increasingly difficult to focus on his personal relationship with God. His faith is only renewed when David comes to live on the Bentley farm. Jesse has spent most of his adult life disappointed that his only child is a daughter and feels that his grandson's arrival has finally answered his prayers for a son.

Despite gaining wealth and prosperity over the years, Jesse's greed prevents him from being satisfied with what he has. While Christianity traditionally condemns gluttony and envy, Jesse struggles to overcome his insatiable desire to expand the farm. As a result, he struggles to maintain a close connection with God. The newfound presence of Jesse's grandson David is his only hope for restored faith, as he believes that the curse of having a daughter as his only child has finally been broken.

Jesse soon becomes fixated on his old vision of serving God. One day, he brings David out into a clearing in the woods that reminds him of where the biblical figure of David tended sheep. Jesse beings to fervently pray and plead with God to make His presence known. David is terrified by this outburst, believing that his grandfather has been possessed by a dangerous force. In his panic, David falls and cuts his head. On the buggy ride home, Jesse is upset and questions why God does not approve of him.

The relationship between Jesse and David parallels the biblical figures of the same name—Jesse was a farmer and shepherd and his son David was a king who killed Goliath, the champion of the Philistines. As Jesse Bentley views the other farmers in Ohio as philistines and traitors, he hopes that David will take over his legacy and conquer those he perceives to be enemies of God. While Jesse is wholly possessed by a perception of himself and David as holy servants, his expression of this vision only serves to confuse and terrify his grandson. Rather than seeing the error of his ways and reevaluating his outlook, Jesse assumes that God must be punishing him.

9. GODLINESS, PART III: SURRENDER

The narrative shifts back to the time period between the events of "Godliness, Part I" and "Godliness, Part II" to focus on Jesse Bentley's daughter Louise. Her father's strict demeanor and resentment of her for being female causes her to become a neurotic, moody child who never receives the love she craves. Louise is sent to live with her father's friend Albert Hardy and his three children so that she can attend Winesburg High School. Albert's daughters Mary and Harriet resent, mock, and ostracize Louise because she outperforms them in school and earns the praise of their education-obsessed father. Louise is just as unhappy in Winesburg as she was on her father's farm.

While Jesse Bentley believes that his wholehearted commitment to God will bring him enlightenment, his singular obsession leads him to neglect his daughter Louise. As a result, she is left feeling lonely and unloved, which is only compounded by the poor treatment she receives from Mary and Harriet Hardy. Rather than being judged for her character, Louise is disliked for things she cannot control—her father resents her for being born a girl and the Hardy sisters resent her for her intelligence.

Alienated by the Mary and Harriet, Louise decides she will befriend their brother John Hardy. Louise becomes obsessed with the idea of connecting with the young man, believing that opening herself up to people will revolutionize her life and allow her to find the love and understanding she has always sought. Young women in Winesburg are judged on purity rather than social class—a girl is either "nice" (chaste) or "not nice." Although she is attracted to John, Louise's desire to connect with him is not consciously related to sex.

Having never found the companionship or understanding she craves, Louise is convinced that forming a deep relationship with someone is what will give her lonely life meaning. Her decision to befriend John is somewhat arbitrary, as his similar age and proximity to Louise is what draws her to him. The narrator's aside about girls' purity standards in Winesburg foreshadows the fact that Louise's interest in John may progress to become sexual.

After John acknowledges Louise while dropping off firewood in her room, she calls out to him out her bedroom window and becomes convinced that he is pining for her in the orchard outside. Louise leaves her room and stumbles upon Mary and a young man kissing. She decides to send John a note instead, writing that she wants someone to love her and to love in return and asking him to meet her under her window. After a few weeks pass with no response, Louise goes on a date with a young farmhand but is so distraught over John that she has an angry outburst and steals the farmhand's buggy.

Louise's ostracization from those around her makes her hyperaware of any potential social connection. This leads her to believe that John is pining for her when, in reality, he is likely uninterested. By sending John a note, Louise hopes that she will finally find relief from the lifelong loneliness she has felt. When he does not respond, Louise is left feeling even more alienated and rejected.

A few days later, John finally comes to Louise's window and the two have sex. John and Louise become lovers over the next few months and get married when they fear that Louise might be pregnant. But after the pregnancy turns out to be a false alarm, Louise feels trapped, unsatisfied, and unsure of what she wants. When their son David is born, she is ambivalent toward him and unsure of whether or not she wants to be a mother. When John confronts her about this neglect, Louise tells him that she would have done anything for a daughter but that their son "is a man child and will get what it wants anyway."

The sexual relationship between Louise and John is passionate and impulsive. While this connection fulfills Louise at first, it loses its excitement when she and John fear that she may be pregnant and hastily decide to get married. While this is an ostensibly mature, responsible decision, Louise is still young and unsure of what she wants out of life. Forced into adult roles as a wife and mother, Louise mourns her lost youth and becomes resentful of the male authority she believes has oppressed her throughout her life.

10. GODLINESS, PART IV: TERROR

As the narrative returns to where "Godliness, Part II" left off, David Hardy is fifteen years old and still living with his grandfather Jesse Bentley on the family farm. Jesse is mocked by neighboring farmers for purchasing a stretch of swampland, but the crops he plants on it are plentiful and earn him enough money to buy two more farms, equipment, and gifts for his family. David recognizes that he is almost a man but still spends most of his time playing with a slingshot in the woods like a young boy.

Much like Christ and other biblical figures are judged but ultimately vindicated, the deeply religious Jesse Bentley is mocked for decisions that ultimately reap great rewards for the farm and his family. As Jesse continues to build his family legacy, David resists his burgeoning manhood in favor of his innocent childhood hobbies.

After the satisfaction of a successful growing season wears off, Jesse returns to thinking of biblical "old days" and decides that he must perform a sacrifice so that God will tell him what the right path in life is for David. One day, Jesse brings David out to the same woodland clearing where his ardent plea to God had scared his grandson a few years prior. He believes he must ceremonially put the lamb's blood on David's head, but the boy and the lamb become terrified and run away when Jesse approaches them with a knife. David hits Jesse in the head with a rock flung from his slingshot and assumes that he has killed him when the old man falls to the ground.

Although David wants to stay a child, Jesse is concerned with his grandson's imminent adulthood and hopes to ensure that David is set up to lead a righteous, meaningful life that glorifies God. His attempt to involve David in the sacrifice of a lamb reflects the all-consuming nature of his faith and the ultimate futility of trying to turn life's mysteries into certainties. The failure of this gesture solidifies Anderson's ongoing argument that one cannot find meaning through external validation.

David believes that he has killed "a man of God" and must now become a man himself. After this "adventure," he flees Winesburg and is never seen by his family again. Jesse is not surprised by David's disappearance, believing that God has taken him away as a punishment for Jesse's greed. Eventually Jesse and Louise both die. David's father John becomes rich, trying and failing to find his son using his wealth.

Jesse's obsession with his prophetic vision of himself and David as biblical figures is ultimately what leads to his own downfall, as his beloved grandson is driven away by his antics. Rather than ushering in an honorable life path for David, the incident in the woods causes the boy to impulsively abandon his family and enter adulthood before he is truly ready.

11. A MAN OF IDEAS

Winesburg, Ohio shifts back to the present day (the early twentieth century). Joe Welling, the Standard Oil agent in Winesburg and the surrounding towns, is manically possessed by ideas and often "pounces" on random bystanders to talk. Despite his small size, the townspeople find his annoying presence overwhelming and impossible to ignore. After Joe's mother dies, he comes to live at the Willard family's New Willard House hotel. Joe believes his true destiny is to be a reporter and he is jealous of George Willard because he works for the *Winesburg Eagle*. He points out the physical decay around town that he is sure George has not noticed, exclaiming that the world is on fire.

Joe Welling's peculiar nature and off-putting habit of engaging people in long diatribes causes him to be somewhat of a pariah in Winesburg. Rather than forming deep connections with people, he is merely tolerated as his bothersome presence is difficult to avoid. As a result, he is envious of the respected role that George Willard holds in the community. Joe's conviction that everything around them is decaying reflects the deep and seemingly contagious sense of loss, paralysis, and deterioration that afflicts many townspeople in Winesburg.

Hoping to earn the townsmen's respect, Joe decides to start a baseball club and coaches the team to a string of victories. He also begins a love affair with a woman named Sarah King that strikes the townspeople as "forced" and "unnatural." The King family is ostracized in Winesburg due to their dangerous reputation, and Joe and Sarah's relationship quickly becomes the foremost topic of gossip around town.

Joe's newfound involvement in the community and his relationship with Sarah King are attempts to be genuinely respected by other men, since up until this point the people of Winesburg have largely dreaded his presence. Joe proves to be an effective baseball coach but his relationship with Sarah has the opposite effect that he intended, as the disparity between the two is an oddity that makes Joe even more bizarre in the eyes of the town.

Joe meets with Sarah King's brother Tom and her father Edward at the New Willard House. George is terrified of the Kings, but Joe manages to win the men over by sweeping them off their feet "with a tidal wave of words" as he does with everyone else. Joe talks endlessly about a hypothetical doomsday scenario in which all the world's crops are destroyed while he, Tom, and Edward leave the hotel to meet up with Sarah at the King house.

While Joe seems to win over Sarah's father and brother, the connection he makes with them is no different than his relationship with other people in Winesburg. Tom and Edward are powerless to resist Joe, but they do not truly respect him or value his company.

12. ADVENTURE

Alice Hindman, a clerk at Winney's Dry Goods Store, lives with her mother and stepfather in Winesburg. At sixteen, Alice had a love affair with a reporter at the *Winesburg Eagle* named Ned Currie. The two fell in love, but Ned refused to let Alice follow him when he moved to Cleveland for a city newspaper job. After having sex, Ned assured Alice that "now we will have to stick to each other" and that he would come back for her when he got a good job.

At sixteen, Alice Hindman's relationship with Ned Currie is the center of her life. Ned's assurance that they will stay together forever only makes his absence that much more difficult for Alice, who is devastated when Ned leaves for Cleveland but sure that he will soon return to spend the rest of his life with her.

Ned did not succeed at getting a job in Cleveland and moved onto Chicago instead. At first, he wrote Alice almost every day but gradually forgot about her and his old life in Winesburg. Alice clung onto the hope that either Ned would return to her or that she would save enough money to travel to Chicago and win him back. She denied the advances of other men, convinced that still belonged to Ned although she was increasingly lonely and afraid that he would never return. At twenty-two years old, she decided to join the Winesburg Methodist Church because she was afraid that her isolated lifestyle would make her unattractive to Ned if he came back for her.

Although Ned Currie continues living his life after forgetting about her, Alice's reaction to the loss of her true love is one of all-consuming grief. Unable to move on from the memory of Ned and the nagging thought that he may still return one day, she closes herself off from other relationships. Alice's decision to join the Winesburg Methodist Church suggests that she is desperate to find an external source of meaning to replace the love she lost.

In the present day, twenty-seven-year-old Alice decides to have an "adventure" that scares and confuses her but also fills her with "youth and courage." Overcome with the impulsive desire to run naked through the street, she strips off her clothes and runs out of the house into the rain. In her wild desperation, Alice calls out to an old man who is passing by but immediately falls to the ground in fear over what she has done. She goes back inside and resigns herself to the fact that she is one of "many people who must live and die alone."

Similar to her motivations behind joining the church, Alice suddenly becomes convinced that a risky adventure will somehow endow her lonely life with meaning. Her decision backfires, only serving as a reminder of how isolated she is. Afraid of making an irreparable mistake, Alice convinces herself that she is doomed to "live and die alone."

13. RESPECTABILITY

Wash Williams, the telegraph operator of Winesburg, is described by the narrator as a "beast in a cage" who is ugly, obese, and unclean. Wash hates life, refusing to associate with other men in Winesburg and decrying women as "bitches." People generally ignore him, but a few men in town respect him because he openly conveys the same misogynistic resentment that they feel but are too afraid to express.

Wash Williams is one of many residents in Winesburg whose external appearance mimics his inward emotional and moral decay. As a result, Wash receives the isolation he desires, as he is perceived by the narrator and the townspeople to be beastly and unapproachable.

One evening, Wash spots George Willard out walking with Belle Carpenter. After seeing the two teenagers kissing, he decides to take George out and tell him his "story of hate" in order to prevent the young man from repeating Wash's same mistakes. As an attractive young man, Wash had married a woman in Dayton, Ohio. Completely absorbed with his love for his wife, Wash was crushed when she cheated on him. This betrayal convinced Wash that all women are merely tricks who stand in the way of men's happiness.

Although Wash generally does not want to associate with other men, his hatred toward women takes priority. When he sees George and Belle kissing, Wash perceives his younger, more vulnerable self in George. Consumed by the bitterness that has overtaken him in the aftermath of his wife's betrayal, Wash does not want the young man to be similarly slighted by future romantic partners.

Wash continues on with his tale, telling George about his early days of marriage in Columbus, Ohio when he and his wife were happy. After the affair, he said nothing, gave his wife the last of his money, and sent her away. Wash was sad rather than angry and wanted his wife back. But when his mother-in-law attempted to reunite the couple by presenting his naked wife to him, he struck her with a chair. George is both frightened and fascinated by Wash's story, feeling a chill as if an illness has come over him.

While Wash wishes to impart the same sense of resentment that he feels toward women, George is left feeling disturbed and sickened by Wash's story rather than inspired. This reaction reflects George's innocence and untainted sense of morality relative to Wash and the many other men in town who have been embittered by loss.

14. THE THINKER

Seth Richmond, a teenage boy in Winesburg, lives in a large house with his mother that was once the grandest place in town but whose glory is now "somewhat dimmed." After his father is killed in a street fight, Seth finds that his inheritance has been lost in bad investments. He and his mother Virginia must now survive on the income she makes as a court stenographer. Virginia is a timid, naïve woman who finds herself unable to discipline Seth even when he runs away with his friends for a week.

The death of Seth's father has had a significant impact on the Richmond family's sense of structure and normalcy. In the midst of the grief and disruption that the loss has caused, Seth is floundering without a fatherly presence to discipline him. His mother, though a devoted parent, is unable to reign in Seth's rebellious behavior as he grows older.

Seth is a quiet, lonely boy who wishes he could join the other teenagers who laugh and joke together on their way to pick berries in the fields. The townspeople view Seth as a sullen, deep thinker, instinctively respecting him as they did his father and believing that he will move on from Winesburg to better things. Seth, however, feels that he has no underlying purpose or plan. He is envious of his friend George Willard, whose job at the *Winesburg Eagle* gives him a path in life and "a place of distinction" in the community.

While the people of Winesburg value and respect Seth as an individual, he tragically does not perceive the affection they feel toward him. Instead, Seth often feels lost, alienated, and unable to relate to other teenagers. From Seth's perspective, his close friend George Willard has found an external sense of meaning through his career path, while Seth has no underlying direction in his life. He resolves to leave Winesburg, convinced that he cannot grow up and make something of himself if he remains in his hometown.

One day, George tells Seth that he is writing a book and has resolved to fall in love with the banker's daughter Helen White so that he can draw material from his own romantic experiences. Since Seth knows Helen better, George asks him to tell her that George is in love with her. Seth, who also has feelings for Helen, is resentful of George and decides to talk to her, but not about George.

George is under the impression that he must gain life experience in order to be an effective writer, and that falling in love is a crucial element of manhood on which he is missing out. Although he and Seth are close, George is seemingly unaware that his good friend also has feelings for Helen White.

Walking around Winesburg, Seth feels envious of George's rapport with the same townspeople from whom he feels alienated. He goes to Helen's house and tells her that he will leave home and move to Columbus to work or go to university, and that George Willard is in love with her. They go on a walk and Helen holds Seth's hand. Seth soon regrets his decision to get out of Winesburg because Helen has had a crush on him since they were children. He hastily imagines a future with her and hopes that she will talk him out of leaving. Instead, Helen encourages him to go and runs off. Seth leaves feeling convinced that George will find love but that he never will.

Still feeling uncertain and directionless, Seth tells Helen that he plans to leave Winesburg in order to test her feelings for him. Although he is unsure of what his path in life should be, he is disappointed when Helen encourages him to go rather than objecting. This interaction deepens Seth's envy for George as he becomes convinced that his friend is destined to find love while he is bound to be alone forever.

15. TANDY

Tandy Hard is a seven-year-old girl in Winesburg whose mother has died and who is now neglected by her father Tom Hard. Tom is a devout atheist obsessed with debating the existence of God with his neighbors. Tom befriends a drunken stranger who has fled the city and come to Winesburg in hopes of overcoming his alcoholism, and he is the one who gives Tandy her first name. The man is not successful in breaking his drinking habit, but he leaves a lasting impression on Tom's daughter.

Tandy Hard has experienced a great deal of grief and pain at a young age, having lost her mother and been left in the care of her neglectful father. Tom's staunch atheism encourages a sense of nihilism and hopelessness that is likely to influence Tandy as she grows older. The arrival of the stranger serves as a welcome disruption in the otherwise meaningless lives of the Hards.

The stranger tells Tom Hard and Tandy that he has lost faith, but that there is a prophetic woman coming and that the little girl might grow up to be her. He kisses the little girl's **hands** and tells her that the woman will possess a rare quality that he calls "Tandy." He then urges her to embody this by becoming strong, brave, and "something more than man or woman." Tom soon forgets the stranger, but from that point on the little girl rejects her old name and demands to be called Tandy.

By delivering his prophecy to Tandy, the stranger imbues her with a strong sense of purpose and direction. Rather than telling her to emulate someone else, the stranger encourages her to embody the positive qualities that she already has within herself. This impactful moment emphasizes the importance of finding intrinsic meaning within oneself rather than subscribing to strict ideologies.

16. THE STRENGTH OF GOD

Reverend Curtis Hartman, the pastor of the Presbyterian Church of Winesburg, is well-liked and respected by the townspeople. He takes his role as a minister seriously and spends every week from Wednesday morning until Saturday night consumed by his two Sunday sermons. Despite this, people are not very inspired by his church services. Hartman yearns for "a strong sweet new current of power" to possess him so that people will see the spirit of God manifested in him.

Although Reverend Hartman's job should seemingly bring him a sense of purpose, the disconnect he feels between himself and God leaves him unfulfilled. Hartman is established as a man who seeks truth from external sources rather than finding a consistent sense of meaning within himself.

Reverend Hartman spends his Sunday mornings praying in the room in the bell tower of the church. One day, he looks out the window of this room and is shocked to see the local schoolteacher Kate Swift in the upstairs of the house next door smoking a cigarette while reading in bed. He is horrified by the sight and guilty that he was reading the Bible just before he saw Kate's bare neck and shoulders. Hartman hopes that the she will attend his Sunday sermons and that his words will lead her away from sin.

The shame Hartman feels over merely seeing Kate Swift's bare neck and shoulders suggests that he is a deeply pious man who takes his faith seriously. He feels guilty on behalf of Kate, whom he believes is engaging in sinful behavior by smoking cigarettes and appearing scantily clad in view of her bedroom window.

Kate Swift has a "sharp tongue" and an unladylike reputation around town. She reminds Reverend Hartman of women in the novels he read in college, and he assumes that her time visiting Europe and living in New York City has corrupted her morals. Hartman reflects on his limited experience with women, having married his wife after an extensive courtship and avoided thinking of other women throughout the years.

Kate's questionable reputation and coarse demeanor cause her to be isolated from most other people in town. Her persona confuses Hartman, whose sheltered life as a religious young man led him to forgo gaining experience with women in favor of staying faithful to his wife.

Reverend Hartman is quickly thrown into a dilemma over Kate. At first, he only wants to reach her troubled soul with his sermons, but he soon becomes obsessed with the image of her lying in bed. He sits in the bell tower with his Bible, waiting for Kate to appear in the room across from him. Despite being possessed by "the carnal desire to peep," Hartman's sermons encourage his parishioners that God will raise them up and save them from temptation.

While Hartman's interest in Kate began out of concern for her potentially corrupted behavior, his growing sexual fixation on her reflects his fallibility as a man in contrast with his piety as a minister. His sermons amidst this obsession are somewhat hypocritical, as he urges his parish to resist temptation while he is incapable of doing so himself.

Although Reverend Hartman is confident that God will intercede on his behalf and free him from his obsession with Kate, he watches her read through her bedroom window several times over the course of a few months. Hartman is plagued by thoughts of kissing her shoulders and throat and pleads with God to empower him to fix the hole in the window that allows him to see into Kate's room.

Rather than accepting his sinful nature as a human being, Hartman is convinced that he must receive divine intervention in order to be freed from his obsession with Kate. He believes that the solution must be divine rather than something he finds intrinsically within himself.

After months of deliberation, Reverend Hartman decides that he will give himself over to sin because otherwise he would be a hypocrite preaching God's word but secretly lusting after Kate. He nearly freezes to death in the bell tower waiting for Kate on a winter night. Finally, Kate appears, and Hartman is shocked to see her completely naked, weeping, and praying in her bedroom. This sight inspires a spiritual epiphany for Hartman, who breaks the glass window in the bell tower with his bare fist. Hartman deliriously runs out of the church and into the *Winesburg Eagle* office to tell George Willard that Kate Swift is an instrument of God and that he has been delivered from sin.

Hartman's resolution to finally give into temptation marks a conscious decision to accept his inherently fallible human nature. When he sees Kate in her most vulnerable form, he is struck by her ability to engage in holy worship even in a traditionally sexualized state of nudity. This encounter allows Hartman to see Kate for who she is and value her as a person rather than a sexual object, a revelation which convinces him that Kate is a divine instrument. His exclamation of this discovery to George Willard only confuses the impressionable boy who is trying to gain a firm understanding of the world and its complexities.

17. THE TEACHER

On the same bitterly cold day leading up to Reverend Hartman's revelation in "The Strength of God," George Willard is glad that the weekly newspaper has already been printed because it gives him the day off of work. George walks along Wine Creek in the deep snow, comes to a grove where he builds a fire, and sits down to think. George has begun to talk regularly with Kate Swift, his former schoolteacher, and is convinced that she must be in love with him. He pretends that she is there with him and warns her that he knows she's "just letting on" and that he will find out her true intentions.

"The Teacher" is unique in that it is the only section in the novel to tell another story ("The Strength of God") from an alternative perspective. Whereas George Willard has had several other romantic encounters with girls his age, his relationship with Kate Swift is particularly confusing for the young man. While George tries to convince himself that he can outsmart Kate, he cannot help but be thrown into a state of contemplative uncertainty at the thought of her.

Back home at the New Willard House, George lights another fire and begins to have "lustful thoughts." He embraces his pillow, pretending it is Kate Swift or Helen White, with whom he is "half in love." Later that evening, the deep snow causes nearly all of Winesburg to stay home and go to bed. Only three people are awake—George working in the *Winesburg Eagle* office, Kate leaving for a walk through town, and Reverend Hartman waiting in the bell tower.

George struggles to make sense of his feelings and is conflicted over his affections for both Kate and Helen White. While he genuinely cares for Helen, he is also sexually frustrated by Kate. This dilemma suggests that George is trying to make sense of what he wants out of a romantic partner as he matures.

Recently, Kate has been experiencing an internal crisis of "grief, hope, and desire" that drives her to take long walks around town at night. That afternoon, Kate had been to the doctor and was told that she was in danger of going deaf, but she decides to risk going for a walk in the blizzard. The narrator tangentially discusses Kate's reputation as a cold, severe schoolteacher who is only rarely happy and has a tendency to invent anecdotes about the authors whose work she teaches.

Kate's unapproachable demeanor and strange behavior lead her to be alienated from the rest of Winesburg. The ongoing existential crisis she is experiencing only amplifies her solitary nature. Kate's decision to take a walk in dangerous weather despite having just received a serious diagnosis suggests the deep sense of desperation and confusion that Kate is experiencing.


Kate has become fixated on George Willard, attracted to the childhood whimsy and burgeoning manhood that he dually embodies. She attempts to impart her wisdom onto the young man, telling him that he will have to gain experience and develop his intuition about what people are thinking if he wants to be a writer. On the night, before Reverend Hartman waits to catch a glimpse of Kate in the bell tower, she meets with George and is attracted to him but frustrated that he is not mature enough to understand all of life's complexities.

Kate's relationship with George has been gradually progressing up to this point. Her attitude toward George is ambivalent, since she's attracted to him but finds him immature. Kate's confusion toward the situation is just as pronounced as George's, as she struggles between her conflicting feelings of attraction and frustration toward the young man.

On the night of the blizzard, while Reverend Hartman waits for Kate, she goes to the *Winesburg Eagle* office and has a deep, hour-long conversation with George in hopes that she can "open the door of life" to him. She notices how mature George looks in the lamplight and the two are suddenly overcome with a confusing desire for one another. But when George embraces Kate, she beats him with her fists and runs away, leaving George bewildered as he paces the *Eagle* office and swears to himself.

Kate, though adamant that she can "open the doors of life" to George, seems equally hopeful that a relationship with him will give her the sense of meaning that she has been craving. She is let down when George fails to understand the lesson she is trying to give him and lashes out with violence. George is left confused and furious after their encounter, unsure of where he went wrong in his attempts to pursue Kate.


This moment of frustration is when Reverend Hartman bursts in on George, overlapping with the same moment from the minister's point of view in "The Strength of God." Hartman, having seen Kate naked and emotionally praying in her room after her confusing encounter with George, proclaims that she is an instrument of God. Believing that "the town had gone mad," George returns home and lies in bed, trying to make sense of what the minister had said in relation to his strange evening with Kate. Exasperated, he comes to the conclusion that he must have missed something Kate was trying to tell him and finally drifts off to sleep.

This is the point in the story that fully intersects with the same scene in "The Strength of God." While the reader already knows the events that led up to this moment in the previous chapter, George is left utterly bewildered by Hartman's declaration that Kate is "an instrument of God" considering the heated conflict he just had with her. George's subsequent frustration reflects his inability to surmount the gap in maturity between himself and Kate.

18. LONELINESS

Enoch Robinson, a man who grew up on a farm just outside of Winesburg, moves to New York City at twenty-one to attend art school and lives there for fifteen years. Although Enoch is talented and has an eccentric mind that would lend itself to creativity, his lofty plan to study in Paris with the masters never pans out. Enoch is very immature, and his inner child prevents him from fully understanding adult concerns like "money and sex and opinions."

Enoch Robinson is an example of a man who escaped Winesburg in hopes of pursuing bigger dreams outside of his hometown. Though talented and motivated, Enoch's perpetual immaturity leaves him unable to successfully integrate into the adult world.

The narrator points out that Enoch's story is "the story of a room almost more than it is the story of a man." When Enoch first arrives in New York, he has several chaotic experiences with alcohol and women that leave him confused. He makes a group of artist friends who come to his room in Washington Square in the evenings to discuss art and smoke cigarettes. Enoch stays silent in the corner during these gatherings, wanting to join the conversation but too excited to speak coherently. He especially wants to explain his paintings on the walls (many of which portray scenes from his old life in Winesburg) that his friends misinterpret.

The unsettling experiences Enoch has in New York reflect his childlike inability to regulate his own behavior or understand complex situations. Enoch is surrounded by friends, yet his immature, underdeveloped nature makes him unable to fully relate to his peers. Although he desperately wants to connect with them and discuss art, he cannot coherently express himself.

Enoch becomes so frustrated with his own inability to communicate that he decides he doesn't need real people and invents imaginary friends instead. Enoch, according to the narrator, is a "complete egoist" like a child, and wants people he can selfishly control and boss around at his whim. But the imaginary friends do not quell Enoch's loneliness, and soon he gets married to a woman he meets at art school, has two children, and gets a job at an advertising agency.

Enoch feels a deep sense of shame at his inability to interact with other people, and as a result he decides to create imaginary friends whom he can influence. While this temporarily satisfies Enoch's need for socialization, he gets married and begins a career path, as he still craves a more conventionally mature lifestyle.

For awhile, Enoch is serious about playing the role of an adult and tries to be a productive, politically-aware citizen. But he begins to feel trapped by his life and family, lying for an excuse to go out on walks and secretly re-renting his old room in Washington Square. When Enoch's mother dies and leaves him $8,000, he gives the money to his wife (who is afraid of him and thinks he is insane) and leaves her and their two children. Without his family, Enoch lives happily in his apartment with the company of his imaginary "shadow people."

While Enoch is ostensibly committed to his role as a husband and father, it is only a façade that he maintains out of obligation. He begins to regress toward his old life and eventually cracks under pressure and abandons his wife and children. The loss of his family does not initially seem to faze Enoch, as he is content to go back to his alienated life with only the company of his imaginary friends.

Enoch, having returned to his hometown of Winesburg from New York City after fifteen years, decides to tell his story to George Willard. George is apprehensive due to Enoch's unstable reputation, but Enoch can sense George's introspective "youthful sadness" and believes that he will understand. Enoch tells George about a female acquaintance in New York whom he wanted to be with but scared away when he had a nervous breakdown and yelled at her. When the woman left, Enoch's imaginary friends followed her out and he was left with no one. On the way out of Enoch's room in Winesburg, George hears the man whimpering about being all alone.

Many years after he loses his family, Enoch returns to Winesburg because he has nowhere else to go. Like many of the other older men in town, he tells his story to George Willard because he perceives a quality in the young man that is both innocent and mature. Enoch's ongoing dilemma between wanting to be left alone and yearning for human connection culminates in the loss of his female acquaintance and his imaginary friends. George, who thus far has been encouraged by several other characters to branch out and form relationships, is struck by Enoch's tragic story.

19. AN AWAKENING

Belle Carpenter is a young woman who, when visited by "black thoughts," wishes that she were a man and could take out her frustrations physically. Her father, Henry, a bookkeeper in Winesburg, is a man of fastidious habits who bullies Belle but is afraid of her and gradually loses control of his daughter as she grows up. Belle occasionally goes out walking with George Willard but is secretly in love with Ed Hanby, a local bartender. She continues to see George because he is a more socially acceptable mate and kissing him allows her to relieve sexual tension.

Like George Willard, Belle Carpenter is a teenager who is struggling with the expectations placed upon her as she matures. Though Belle wishes that she could openly express herself the way men do, social conventions limit what is and is not appropriate for her. Although George has genuine feelings for Belle, her attraction for him is superficial and self-serving.

Several years before, Ed Hanby had inherited a large farm from a dead uncle, which he sold for $8,000. Ed spent all of the money within six months on frivolous expenses like carriages, wine, and gambling. Though thirty years old, he is unsuccessful at courting the much younger Belle Carpenter. On their only date thus far, Ed's simple nature had prevented him from properly expressing his strong feelings for her. Ed believes that George is the sole obstacle standing in the way of his courtship of Belle.

Though Ed Hanby's age should theoretically make him more mature than Belle, he is irresponsible and frivolous with his money. His inability to regulate his behavior or to eloquently express his feelings for Belle suggests that he is still somewhat of an adolescent himself, despite being nearly twice her age.

The story pivots to George, who one night goes out with Seth Richmond and Art Wilson to the town pool hall where young men in Winesburg talk about women. George, wanting attention, tells Seth that women should "look out for themselves" because men cannot be held responsible for what happens on dates. Art tells the boys a story of when he went to a brothel with two other townsmen and charmed one of the prostitutes working there.

As a teenage boy, George is concerned with impressing his male friends. Although he is relatively inexperienced with women and often confused in by his romantic encounters, he tries to appear more masculine and mature by feigning a sense of dominance. This attempt to gain attention is ultimately overshadowed by Art's story.

George leaves his friends in the pool hall and walks around town under the night sky, playing and talking to himself as he walks. Pretending that he is a soldier, George suddenly has an epiphany that law and order manifest at all levels of existence. He realizes that he must align himself with those principles to have a meaningful life and that his friends would not fully understand this. George comes upon an alleyway behind a farm shed and spends half an hour there in the dark, observing his surroundings and feeling that he is "oddly detached and apart from all life." He is overwhelmed by a deep sense of renewal, personal significance, and connection with humanity.

George's realization that law and order manifest at every level of the universe is a significant epiphany in his journey toward adulthood. This realization gives him a sense of direction, as he concludes that becoming a man means he must find his own place within the natural order. George feels alienated from his friends, whom he believes are too immature to understand his profound thoughts, yet deeply connected to the world around him.

Still reeling with deep emotions, George goes to Belle Carpenter's house and she agrees to go on a walk with him in hopes of making Ed Hanby jealous. Ed had visited her earlier that night and threatened that if Belle didn't stay away from George, he would break both of their bones. On their walk, George is "full of big words" and emphasizes to Belle that he is a changed man who is no longer weak. Newly empowered with masculine confidence, he kisses Belle and she does not resist him.

George's newfound sense of purpose awards him confidence that he did not previously have. Perceiving himself as a changed, newly matured man, George decides to more assertively pursue Belle. Again, Belle does not share George's genuine feelings and only agrees to go out with him because she is sexually attracted to him and wants to make Ed jealous.

Suddenly, Ed Hanby appears and attacks George, believing that he is trying to steal Belle away. George tries to fight back but is overpowered by the older man. He is disoriented by the humiliation that has eclipsed his profound thoughts from earlier that night. Back in his bedroom, George weeps and rages with anger at Belle, whom he vows to hate for the rest of his life.

Ed's immaturity manifests again as he is overcome with jealousy and lashes out at George. The profound epiphanies and sense of manhood that George had experienced earlier in the night are usurped by the humiliation and anger he feels after Ed attacks him.

20. QUEER

Elmer Cowley is the son of the owner of Cowley & Son's store, a place that Will Henderson once described as "selling everything and nothing." As a newcomer in town, Elmer is intensely resentful of George Willard and imagines that the young reporter can hear everything being said in his family's store. He takes out his wrath for George on two traveling men who are making a business deal with his father Ebenezer, pulling a gun on them and demanding that they leave the store. Elmer's father is left perplexed at his outburst.

The bizarre nature of the Cowley & Son's store makes the family an oddity in the Winesburg community. Already alienated by his family's reputation, Elmer Cowley's outburst and threat of violence in his father's store makes himself into even more of a spectacle.

Elmer leaves Winesburg to go walking out in the country along the railroad tracks. He passionately declares that he will prove himself to George Willard. Elmer has no reason to hate George but views the young man as representative of the town where he feels ostracized. He believes that George, as the only newspaper reporter in town, must have influenced Winesburg to condemn the Cowleys as strange and unlikable. Elmer, who has made no friends during his first year in Winesburg, assumes that George must always be happy and self-assured.

Elmer's blind resentment of George Willard is revealed to be rooted in his perception of George as the epitome of Winesburg. Having failed to make friends during his first year in town, Enoch is incredibly lonely and is sure that George has never felt this way. Paranoid that George's reporting has somehow influenced the community's lackluster opinion of the Cowley family, Elmer makes him into the de facto object of his hatred.

On his walk, Elmer becomes cold and turns off into the woods to build a fire. He sits in the warmth for two hours and then makes his way out of the underbrush to find that he has come upon the farm where he grew up before moving to Winesburg. Elmer convinces Mook, his family's old farmhand, to sit by the fire and listen to him rant about his frustrations. Elmer complains about his family's "queerness" which makes them stand out in Winesburg and wishes that he could return to his simple life on the farm where he did not worry about what other people thought of him. Again, he pins his angst on George Willard and vows that he will stand up to him.

Elmer's encounter with his family's old farmhand serves as a point of connection with his past. This conversation, however, only leaves Elmer feeling more distraught at the alienation he experiences in Winesburg compared to the peaceful, contented life he led on his family's old farm. As a result, his unfounded rage toward George grows deeper and he vows to seek justice.

Back in Winesburg, Elmer marches into the *Eagle* office and demands that George follow him outside. The two boys walk through Winesburg and George (unaware of Elmer's secret resentment toward him) is delighted that he finally has the opportunity to befriend the newcomer whom he has been curious about. Suddenly, Elmer turns on George, yelling at him to leave him alone. He spends the next three hours wandering through the streets, feeling defeated and furious that he could not stand up for himself.

The blind hatred that Elmer feels toward George prevents him from ever realizing the ironic truth that George is actually the one person in Winesburg who does not preemptively judge him and his family. Whereas George innocently hopes to befriend him, Elmer's resentment stands in the way of the connection he so desperately desires.

Elmer, distraught over his failed confrontation, robs twenty dollars from his father's store and decides that he will run away from home. He plans to hop a train to Cleveland and start a new life there, free to work and make friends without his family's "queer" reputation hanging over him. Inspired with newfound hope and confidence, Elmer decides that he will challenge George (and, by proxy, all of Winesburg) before he leaves.

Like several of the other teenagers in town, Elmer believes that escaping Winesburg is his only means of finding happiness and fulfillment. His vision of finding a job and making friends in a new city suggests a deep desire for independence and a fresh start away from the preconceived notions attached to his family name.


Elmer goes to the New Willard House hotel and demands that the night clerk wake George and send him downstairs. Again, Elmer is too flustered to speak his mind and instead confesses to George that he robbed his father's store and hands over the money. In a fit of rage, he attacks George, relentlessly punching the boy until he is "half unconscious." Elmer then hops on a passing train and leaves Winesburg, full of pride and assuring himself that "I ain't so queer."

Although Enoch finds pride in the fact that he was finally able to stand up for himself, his robbery of his father's store and violence toward George are senseless acts. While he believes that beating up George proves that he is respectable, his underlying motivations are not clear to anyone but himself.

21. THE UNTOLD LIE

Ray Pearson and Hal Winters are laborers on the Wills farm outside of Winesburg who come into town to socialize on the weekends. Ray is a quiet, serious, and nervous man with a wife and six children, while Hal is young and irresponsible. Hal's father was killed in a dramatic train accident that was the envy of young boys in Winesburg who romanticized living and dying gloriously. Hal was the worst behaved of his brothers growing up, often getting into mischief like stealing and getting drunk. A known womanizer, he goes to work on the Wills farm because he is interested a country schoolteacher who lives nearby.

Ray Pearson and Hal Winters are foils of one another, embodying contrasting potentialities of manhood. Whereas Ray is a stable, mature father figure, Hal represents a resistance toward becoming this classical archetype.

One October day, Ray and Hal are joking with each other as they husk corn in a field. Ray, who is more sensitive than Hal, is in a bad mood and becomes emotional at the beautiful autumnal scenery that surrounds them. As a young man, he had enjoyed wandering around introspectively in the woods. Ray suddenly realizes that the entire course of his life had been influenced by asking a girl (who would become his wife) to join him on a walk. He becomes indignant at this realization, believing that God trapped him in his role as a husband and father.

Although he leads a simple life and seems to be content, Ray's epiphany throws him into an existential crisis. The beauty of the surrounding fall foliage represents youth and freedom for Ray, as his time in nature used to be spent on leisure rather than work. As a result, he suddenly resents his wife and questions his identity, sure that there must be a more meaningful life path that he could be pursuing.

Hal questions whether or not marriage has been worthwhile for Ray and reveals that he has gotten a girl named Nell Gunther pregnant. Hal asks for the older man's advice, wondering if he should "harness" himself to the girl and risk being "worn out like an old horse." Ray knows that (based on his personal values and those of his community) he should tell Hal to marry Nell but he cannot manage to say so. Looking at the gorgeous countryside, Ray has an inexplicable desire to scream or hit his wife and cannot make sense of what has come over him.

Unaware of the internal conflict that has just come over Ray, Hal ironically comes to him for marriage advice. As an older, married man, Ray is somewhat of a de facto father figure for Hal. While Hal questions whether becoming tied down to a relationship will bring him satisfaction in life, Ray is so distraught over his perceived lost youth that he feels inclined to lash out with words or violence.

After a day's work, Ray's wife good-naturedly scolds him for puttering around the house and asks him to get some groceries for supper. Walking toward town at sunset, Ray becomes overwhelmed by the natural beauty, throws off his coat, and runs through a field. He cries out, asking why he or any other man should owe anything to women who willingly enter relationships with them. Ray decides that he will find Hal before he gets to town and tell him not to marry Nell.

Though the nagging between Ray and his wife seems playful, his current troubled mindset makes the teasing overwhelming. As Ray runs through the field, he is again overcome by a sense of meaninglessness and entrapment, questioning why any man should resign himself to the type of life he leads. In resolving to warn Hal not to marry Nell, he is trying to free the younger man from what he views as the inescapable confines of marriage and family life.

Running to catch Hal, Ray reflects upon the traveling and life goals that he sacrificed when he married his wife. He imagines his own children clutching at Hal and is desperate to warn the younger man that children are accidents which men have "nothing to do with." By the time he reaches Hal, Ray has lost sense of these thoughts altogether. Hal tells him that Nell does not want to marry him after all, and Ray laughs with him before turning back. On the walk home, Ray recalls pleasant evenings spent with his children and realizes that telling Hal not to marry Nell "would have been a lie," anyway.

Again, Ray mourns all of the past experiences on which he has missed out. Though his life is centered around supporting his children, he cannot make sense of his own motivations for taking on this responsibility. But Ray's conversation with Hal creates a shift in this pessimistic mindset, as he realizes that while he no longer has the choice to forgo family life, Hal is worse off, as the younger man does not have the opportunity to experience the joy and satisfaction that fatherhood can bring. Ray is ultimately able to find purpose in the life he has.

22. DRINK

Tom Foster, a sixteen-year-old boy from Cincinnati, moves to Winesburg with his grandmother after his mother and father die. Tom's grandmother, who had an adventurous youth, steps in to raise him after his parents die but is worn out physically and emotionally. The old woman was raised near Winesburg and insists that she and Tom move there using some money that she finds on her way home from work. On the train ride to Winesburg, Tom's grandmother tells him stories of her childhood there. She only reluctantly gets off the train when she realizes that the rural farm community in which she grew up has expanded into a bustling town.

As a young man, Tom Foster has experienced a tragic life thus far. After losing both of his parents, he is left with his ailing grandmother who seems to be rapidly deteriorating. Having lived in Winesburg many years ago, his grandmother's perspective of the town is unique—whereas most of Winesburg's residents view the town as small, depressing, and devoid of opportunity, Tom's grandmother only notices that the town has become more prosperous and metropolitan over time.

Tom Foster adapts well to life in Winesburg. He and his grandmother get jobs as servants for a wealthy banker's family. Tom is a small boy who is sweet and gentle despite growing up in a rough, gang-infested neighborhood in Cincinnati. He is well-liked by nearly everyone and tends to stay quiet and fade into the background. Once, Tom had stolen money for food when his grandmother was ill and he was out of work. He was ashamed of the deed but felt that the experience had helped him "understand new things."

Tom's positive attitude and likable demeanor in spite of his troubled background suggests that he responds well to loss and adversity. Yet although everyone in Winesburg thinks well of him, he is still timid and isolates himself from other people. His reaction to stealing money implies that Tom is inclined to search for the deeper meaning behind his experiences rather than accepting things at face value.

Despite his good intentions and likable personality, Tom Foster is irresponsible. He loses his job as the banker's stable boy because he does not take very good care of the horses nor remember to complete his chores. On errands, he gets caught up in listening to conversations and goings-on around him, feeling that he is "a part of and yet distinctly apart from" the community. After Tom loses his job, he rents an inexpensive room and spends most of his time lying around and thinking or visiting with his grandmother. Tom enjoys living in Winesburg and begins to do odd jobs around town. His ability to be made happy by simple things (such as the smell of freshly roasted coffee) endears him to the community.

Although Tom has lost both of his parents and been somewhat forced into growing up, he struggles to make the transition into becoming a responsible adult. Despite losing his job, he still maintains a positive attitude and his tendency to be made happy by life's simple pleasures makes him lovable to those around him. Unfortunately, Tom does not seem to perceive this likable quality in himself and feels that he is more an observer of the community than an active participant.

During Tom Foster's upbringing in Cincinnati, he was exposed to crime, sex, and the "ugliness" of life. Tom had once been tempted by a prostitute and was scarred and confused by the experience. He puts sex out of his mind altogether until he arrives in Winesburg and falls in love with Helen White. One night, Tom decides that he needs to gain the one-time experience of getting drunk and does so in a local saloon. He becomes drunk quickly and makes his way to a nearby bridge where he sits feeling dizzy and ill.

Tom's experiences in Cincinnati have left him with a pessimistic view of adulthood and particularly of sex. Believing that he must grow up regardless, Tom decides to get drunk as a makeshift rite of passage.

George Willard finds Tom Foster wandering drunkenly around town and takes him into the *Winesburg Eagle* printshop. Tom tells him that he made love to Helen White by the sea, but George knows this is not true and angrily tells Tom not to slander Helen's name. George sits with Tom for hours and takes him for a walk once he has recovered a bit. Tom tells him that being drunk has allowed him to think more clearly so that he will never have to resort to alcohol again. Feeling a strange motherly instinct toward Tom, George takes him back to the print shop.

Throughout George Willard's encounter with Tom, George displays greater maturity despite the two boys being around the same age. Although Tom's mention of Helen momentarily angers him, George feels a sense of parental endearment for the boy. George, who (unlike Tom) has a solid foundation of a close relationships and a career path, is a comforting voice of reason for Tom amidst his drunken stupor.

Tom Foster again tells George that he had sex with Helen, and George becomes angry. Tom puts his hand on George's arm and tries to explain himself. He tells George that although he was happy, he had noticed that everyone else suffered. Tom decided to try alcohol in hopes of suffering and feeling what everyone else felt. He clarifies that he did not have sex with Helen but felt as if he had. Tom insists that he is glad he got drunk, because the experience taught him a lesson.

While people in Winesburg admire Tom for his happy-go-lucky demeanor, he feels that this quality is what alienates him from the Winesburg community. Tom's drunken night is motivated by a desire to acquaint himself with the same suffering he believes everyone else feels, as that experience is what prevents him from relating to others.

23. DEATH

The narrative shifts backward to a few years prior when George Willard is around thirteen years old. Doctor Reefy has an office above the Paris Dry Goods Company store that is spacious but full of miscellaneous clutter. Around this time, George's mother Elizabeth Willard begins to go see Reefy. While the visits usually concern her poor health, occasionally the two simply have conversations about their lives. The hours they spend together are important to both Reefy and Elizabeth, who share the same alienation and yearning for release. Many years later when Reefy has married a young wife, he tells her that he had "invented gods and prayed to them" in his loneliness, and that Elizabeth worshipped those same gods.

Doctor Reefy and Elizabeth Willard are both characters who have experienced a deep sense of loss and subsequent alienation from those around them. Whereas Reefy has stagnated in mourning the death of his wife, Elizabeth's chronic illness and the tragedy of her lost youth have worn her down into a ghost of her former self. Reefy perceives the same sense of grief in Elizabeth that he feels within himself, reflecting that she has a similar tendency to compensate for unhappiness by searching for meaning in external, arbitrary sources.

Elizabeth opens up more and more each time she comes to see Doctor Reefy, and his company serves as a solace from her dull days spent sick in bed. Back in her bedroom, Elizabeth's thoughts often wander to nostalgic memories of her adolescent adventures and love affairs. Reefy is her only friend, and his encouragements to let love be indefinite and to embrace the "divine accident of life" echo in her mind. Elizabeth also recalls her unhappy childhood, her mother having died when she was five and her father often consumed by his own chronic illness and depressive demeanor.

Elizabeth and Reefy are both intensely comforted by each other's presence, believing that they have finally found companionship and understanding after years of loneliness. Reefy, who has become a wise, poetic soul in his old age, encourages Elizabeth to embrace life's unpredictability rather than engaging in the self-destruction of attempting to take control of her fate.

Before Elizabeth married George's father Tom Willard, she was a free spirit who had many adventures and "half a dozen lovers." Beneath this sense of adventure, Elizabeth yearned for true love and lasting companionship. She was indifferent toward her affair with Tom, viewing their impending marriage purely as a matter of convenience. On the night before the marriage, Elizabeth visited her father on his sick bed. He confided in her that he had lived an unfulfilling life despite working hard and he pleaded with her not to marry Tom. Elizabeth's father then gave her $800 and made her promise to never tell Tom about the money if they did get married.

Elizabeth's marriage to Tom is revealed to be a major source of the regret that she feels toward her life. While she longed for deep connection, she was never truly in love with Tom and only married him for a sense of security and stability. Elizabeth's memory of her father pleading with her not to marry Tom suggests that he, too, saw the great potential she held and wanted more for his daughter.

At forty-one years old, Elizabeth sits in Doctor Reefy's office discussing her marriage with an impersonal detachment. She regrets not heeding her father's advice to back out of the wedding. Elizabeth reflects that although she wanted a husband, she did not want Tom, and only married him because she was already the subject of town gossip and did not want to be a "bad woman."

As she has grown older, Elizabeth has come to regret her marriage and mourn the adventures she never got to have. Her decision to marry Tom was influenced by the town's opinion of her, suggesting that she has always felt like a social outcast in Winesburg.

Elizabeth tells Doctor Reefy about an incident that happened soon after her marriage when she desperately ran away in a horse and buggy, beating the horse to go faster until it could not continue. She got out of the buggy and ran, wanting to escape all aspects of her life. As Elizabeth tells Reefy this story, she kneels at his feet and he embraces and kisses her. It seems to Reefy that the beautiful, innocent girl Elizabeth used to be is projecting herself out of "the husk of the body of the tired-out woman."

Elizabeth's dramatic episode of running away from home further reflects the deep-seated grief she feels over her lost youth, as she was nearly driven to the point of a mental breakdown. Reefy does not judge Elizabeth for this—whereas most people view her as downtrodden and pathetic, Reefy is able to perceive her inner beauty instead.

This moment of passion is the last meeting between Elizabeth and Doctor Reefy. A few months later, Elizabeth succumbs to her ongoing illness and dies before she can tell George about the $800 she has kept hidden from Tom behind the drywall in her bedroom. George, now eighteen, at first feels annoyed and unable to make sense of Elizabeth's death. The event solidifies his conviction he will definitely leave Winesburg for a new life. He begins to fantasize about Helen White as he sits beside his mother's dead body and breaks down in shame. George is suddenly thrown into denial that Elizabeth is dead and leaves the room, unable to bring himself to look at her body under the bedsheet.

Elizabeth's death takes on an especially tragic note because she was not able to fulfill her deepest wish of passing on the $800 to her son. The timing of her death is also particularly troubling for George, who is quickly reaching the point in his life when he must make the decision of whether or not to stay in Winesburg. George's chaotic mix of emotions suggests the profundity and complexity of grief as he has lost his mother during the most pivotal time in his life.

24. SOPHISTICATION

George Willard avoids the festivities of the Winesburg County Fair, hiding in a stairway away from the crowds of townspeople. George is on the cusp of adulthood and is planning to leave Winesburg and work on a city newspaper. He feels lonely, old, and tired, and wishes that someone else could understand the confusion he has experienced in the aftermath of his mother Elizabeth's death. George is lost in introspective thought and feels himself crossing "the line into manhood," recalling childhood memories and dwelling on the self-doubt and uncertainty that he feels toward his future. He becomes aware of his own mortality and wishes for human connection and understanding.

The death of his mother has resulted in an existential crisis for George in which he questions his past, present, and future. Although he is a young man full of potential, Elizabeth's death has forced him to mature quickly and has made him acutely aware of his own mortality. As a result, George feels alienated from the community, as he is convinced that no one could relate to his inner turmoil. Above all, George longs for companionship and understanding as he makes the transition from boy to man.

Feeling a distinct shift toward manhood in himself, George longs to see Helen White, who has come from college in Cleveland to spend the day at the fair. Although Helen is with another young man (one of the instructors from the college), she is thinking of George and remembering the time they spent together throughout their adolescence. Going to college and living in the city has given Helen new experiences and perspectives on life. George and Helen simultaneously yearn for each other to understand their newfound maturation and wisdom.

Like George, Helen White is experiencing a parallel coming-of-age in which she feels a disconnect between her imminent adulthood and the childhood experiences that are tied to her hometown. Having grown up together, Helen and George believe that they will feel completed and understood by each other's company as they both try to navigate their newfound maturity.

On the night of the county fair, Helen and George both remember a summer evening when they had walked together through the countryside and discussed their futures. George had encouraged Helen to be beautiful and "different from other women." Struggling to express his feelings for her, George commented that he used to think she would marry Seth Richmond but now knew that she would not. Amidst the loud spectacle of the fair, George feels dejected and tries to convince himself that he does not care that Helen is with another man. He eventually decides that he will go to Helen's house to speak with her.

George's conflicting feelings for Helen reflect his deep desire to understand how they will now relate to one another as adults. George has had several confusing, chaotic romantic relationships throughout his adolescence. His encouragement of Helen to be different from other women suggests that he believes her to be special, and that his own experiences have led him to hold particular beliefs about the nature of women.

At Helen's house, her date is trying to impress her parents but comes off as rude and arrogant when he belittles Winesburg. Helen's mother agrees with him, commenting that no one in their hometown is "fit to associate with a girl of Helen's breeding." Frustrated, Helen runs out into the street and calls out to George, who has coincidentally arrived at her house. Unsure of what to do or say, George takes her hand and the pair walk off into the night.

While Helen is put off by her date's attitude, her mother's approval reflects the sharp class divide that exists in Winesburg. Whereas most of the community is working class or impoverished, the Whites are a wealthy family that stands out from the rest of the town. Despite this, Helen still holds an allegiance toward Winesburg that leaves her feeling frustrated and disconnected from her mother and her date.

George and Helen climb up a hill to reach the Winesburg Fair Ground. George feels that his emotions are reflected in Helen and that his isolation is both "broken and intensified" by her presence. Now that the fair is over, Helen and George look over the vacant town and the narrator comments on the conflicting fondness and meaninglessness that the sight inspires. George, feeling refreshed and completed by Helen's feminine presence, wants to love and be loved by her. He marvels with reverence at the townspeople he has grown up with and has the sense that he is insignificant in the grand scheme of life.

George feels both comforted and alienated by Helen's presence. He realizes that men and women have complementary societal and interpersonal roles, leading to an epiphany where he feels completed by Helen's femininity. This moment is the climax of the novel, as George's ongoing desire to feel incorporated into the natural order of the world is realized.

George and Helen both experience a profound sense of mutual understanding and share a brief kiss. Walking back into town, the pair kiss again and feel a great respect for each other. They play and roll in the grass like children as they go down the hill. Afterward, they walk in "dignified silence" and feel that their evening together has given them something that they both needed.

Although George and Helen kiss, the time they share together is significant because it allows them to appreciate each other as more than just sexual counterparts. They are both overcome with a sense of understanding and completeness, and the night serves as a rite of passage into their adult lives.

25. DEPARTURE

George Willard wakes up at four in the morning and prepares to leave Winesburg. He reflects on the beauty of Trunion Pike where he had often walked throughout his youth and decides to go for a walk to the edge of town and back. Shop owners on Main Street greet George along the way and ask him how it feels to be leaving his hometown. Later that morning, Tom Willard carries George's bag to the train platform and waits with his son. Several townspeople have gathered at the train station to see George off, all wishing him good luck on his journey.

The death of George Willard's mother Elizabeth, along with his profound final night with Helen White, have given George the push he needs to leave Winesburg and begin his adult life. As he prepares for his new journey, George looks on the town with fondness, reflecting on the beauty of the countryside and his associated childhood memories. The image of the community gathering to see George off reflects the fondness that his town feels for him in return.

When the train pulls into the station at seven forty-five, George hurries aboard before Helen White can have a parting word with him. He counts the money in his wallet, remembering Tom's instructions to be sharp and keep track of his money. Looking out the train window, George reflects on small but significant memories of his life in Winesburg and the people with whom has grown up. As the train departs and his hometown fades away in the distance, George feels that his life there has become "but a background on which to paint the dreams of his manhood."

As George becomes momentarily nostalgic, his tendency to focus on simple memories suggests that the subtle moments of one's everyday life can be more meaningful than significant events. Although George is nervous to set out on his own, the novel ends on a note of optimism as George closes one chapter of his life to begin a new one.

HOW TO CITE

To cite this LitChart:

MLA

Kunkle, Jenn. "*Winesburg, Ohio*." *LitCharts*. LitCharts LLC, 15 Mar 2019. Web. 21 Apr 2020.

CHICAGO MANUAL

Kunkle, Jenn. "*Winesburg, Ohio*." LitCharts LLC, March 15, 2019. Retrieved April 21, 2020. https://www.litcharts.com/lit/winesburg-ohio.

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MLA

Anderson, Sherwood. Winesburg, Ohio. Signet. 1993.

CHICAGO MANUAL

Anderson, Sherwood. Winesburg, Ohio. New York: Signet. 1993.