

# Sherwood Anderson's Idea of the Grotesque

By DAVID D. ANDERSON

SHERWOOD ANDERSON, who was born in Clyde in 1876, is of that generation of American authors who are currently the object of much research.

DAVID D. ANDERSON, a member of the Department of Communications Skills at Michigan State University, is a frequent contributor to this magazine. He has under way a book-length critical study of Louis Bromfield and another of Sherwood Anderson which is due for early publication. He is not related to his namesake.

SINCE THE APPEARANCE of Sherwood Anderson's *Winesburg, Ohio*<sup>1</sup> much critical attention has been preoccupied with his use of the word *grotesque* as a noun to refer to people whom he saw as spiritual cripples, deformed by their inability to distinguish between appearance and reality. But Anderson's grotesques are not curiosities nor are they repulsive as the word usually connotes. They are human beings who epitomize the spiritual deformities of all men, and as such, Anderson points out, they are worthy of love, of compassion, and of understanding.

The origin of Anderson's use of the word "*grotesque*" to describe such people has been obscure from the beginning, and he chose to remain silent on the matter, leaving room for much speculation that has been aptly summed up by James Schevill:

While it is probable that Anderson derived the word from Poe's "Tales of the Grotesque and Arabesque," it is clear that Anderson intended a completely different meaning. Poe, who had in turn derived his title from an article by Sir Walter Scott called "On the Supernatural in Fictitious Composition," used the term in a loose, general way to indicate those of his stories which were satires or burlesques. Anderson was not interested in satire, but in myth.<sup>2</sup>

Shevill's last statement is, of course, open to question. Anderson was not interested in satire, but neither was he consciously constructing a myth. He was writing about people. His characters are turned in upon themselves, isolated, and alone, each of them spiritually distorted by his confusion in the face of society's emphasis on material rather than humanistic values, but, it must be remembered, they are people rather than symbols or caricatures. Because they are people, in spite of their deformities or perhaps because of them, they are good.

### Experimental Play

Anderson's reference to these people as grotesques is so remote from Poe's use of the term that it can hardly be considered an adaptation. Instead the probable source of Anderson's use of the word can be found much closer to his experiences while he was writing the *Winesburg* stories. It is in an experimental play, *Grotesque*, by

Cloyd Head and Maurice Brown, which was produced at the Chicago Little Theatre in 1915.<sup>3</sup>

In the fall of that year Anderson had started to write the *Winesburg* stories, beginning with "Hands," the story of the first of the grotesques,<sup>4</sup> in which he attempted to capture the essence of ". . . a poor little man beaten, pounded, frightened by the world in which he lived into something oddly beautiful."<sup>5</sup> On succeeding days he wrote the rest of the stories.

Undoubtedly Anderson was familiar with the play at this time. Not only was the Chicago Little Theatre a center for the Chicago Liberation group of which Anderson was a member,<sup>6</sup> but a review of the play appeared in the December, 1915, issue of *The Little Review*,<sup>7</sup> the same issue in which Anderson's second published short story, "Sister," appeared.<sup>8</sup>

The use of the title *Grotesque* for the play suggests Anderson's use of "The Book of the Grotesque" as the title of the prefatory sketch for *Winesburg, Ohio*. In the play a sardonic artist manipulates the characters, who are presented as marionettes, freely, without their understanding what is happening to them. Essentially this is the position in which Anderson's grotesques find themselves in *Winesburg, Ohio*. Finally in the play the characters perceive what is being done to them, they turn on the artist, and by rebelling free themselves.

This is the direction taken by Anderson's later grotesques, from Hugh McVey in *Poor White* to Kit Brandon in the novel of that name, who rebel against convention before going on to attempted liberation and fulfillment. However, for Anderson's people the process is much more difficult and less likely to succeed than for the grotesques in the play, who remain as symbols rather than the recognizable human beings who appear in Anderson's stories. The relationship between Anderson's concept of the grotesque and that of Brown and Head in the play is, nevertheless, more than mere coincidence.

#### Notes

<sup>1</sup>Sherwood Anderson, *Winesburg, Ohio* (New York, 1919).

<sup>2</sup>James Schevill, *Sherwood Anderson, His Life and Work* (Denver, 1951), p. 102.

<sup>3</sup>Bernard Duffey, *The Chicago Renaissance in American Letters* (East Lansing, 1954), p. 243.

<sup>4</sup>Sherwood Anderson, *Memoirs* (New York, 1942), p. 279.

<sup>5</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>6</sup>For a discussion of the role of the Little Theatre in the Chicago Liberation see Duffey, pp. 239-246.

<sup>7</sup>*The Little Review*, II, 38-40 (Dec., 1915).

<sup>8</sup>*Ibid.*, 3-4.

