

The Grotesques under the Perspective of Inferiority Theory: The Inferiority Complex in *Winesburg, Ohio*

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Abstract

American modernist writer Sherwood Anderson's masterpiece *Winesburg, Ohio* shows the gradual distortion of the psychological process of the Winesburg people. Anderson's grotesques lack of a sense of social belonging, and their attempts to establish love and friendship end in failure, which echoes with the theory of inferiority complex put forward by Austrian psychiatrist Alfred Adler. This paper uses Adler's theory of inferiority, takes the sense of inferiority as an entry point, analyzes the symptoms of the inferiority complex and the reasons for that in *Winesburg, Ohio*, and finally reveals the importance of the sense of cooperation and social emotion. Anatomy of the malformed psychology of the Winesburg inhabitants contributes to a further understanding of the modern consciousness of confusion, loneliness, and loss. Adler's theory of inferiority is also confirmed in the psychological interpretation of *Winesburg, Ohio*.

Keywords

Winesburg, Ohio; Sense of Inferiority; Inferiority Complex; Pursuit of Superiority.

1. Introduction

Sherwood Anderson, hailed by Malcolm Cowley as a "writer's writer" [1] (p357) and by Harold Bloom as "a crucial, early influence upon Hemingway and William Faulkner" [2](p10), holds a significant place in American literature. "In 1919 *Winesburg, Ohio*, won international acclaim for its insightful and penetrating psychological study of and compassion for the suffering and warped personalities of the characters" [2](p14). Critic Irving Howe observed that "the figures of Winesburg usually personify to fantastic excess a condition of psychic deformity" [3](p99). Based on this, we can say that this novel's enduring appeal lies in its vivid portrayal of human nature, allowing every reader to find resonance with its "grotesques", thus standing the test of time and becoming a must-read classic.

In *Winesburg, Ohio*, Anderson depicts a cast of psychologically complex characters, often described as "grotesques", who struggle with alienation and isolation. Some withdraw from society entirely, seeking to escape their unhappiness, while others attempt to mask their inner emptiness with exaggerated behavior. Their lives are marked by loneliness, distress, and loss. Paradoxically, their efforts to find love and connection often backfire, driving them further into isolation. Adler's theory of inferiority offers a compelling framework for understanding these characters' struggles, suggesting that their difficulties stem from a failure to engage in social life, cultivate social interest, and forge meaningful bonds with others. Therefore, this paper analyzes the psychology of the characters in *Winesburg, Ohio* through the lens of Adler's theory of inferiority.

2. Inferiority, Compensation, and the Inferiority Complex

According to Adler, feelings of inferiority are a universal human experience, present in everyone to varying degrees. These feelings are not inherently negative; they can, in fact, serve as a powerful motivator for striving and achievement. Many notable figures throughout history

have harnessed their sense of inferiority to achieve remarkable goals. However, “as feelings of inferiority always produce stress, there will always be a compensatory movement towards a feeling of superiority” [4] (p54). These compensatory behaviors can be broadly categorized as adaptive or maladaptive.

Adaptive compensation involves channeling feelings of inferiority into prosocial behaviors and contributing to society. Adler's own life provides a compelling example. Born frail and sickly, he transformed his own experiences of inferiority into a driving force for personal and professional growth, ultimately becoming a renowned psychiatrist. Maladaptive compensation, conversely, stems from a distorted pursuit of superiority, often prioritizing self-aggrandizement over social connection. Individuals engaging in maladaptive compensation tend to focus on personal gain at the expense of social contribution, struggling to connect with others and finding meaning primarily in individual achievement. Their attempts to assert superiority—through complaining, boasting, aggression, or withdrawal—often backfire, intensifying their underlying feelings of inferiority and contributing to the development of an inferiority complex. Over time, this sense of inferiority becomes deeply ingrained, forming the basis of their personality and worldview—what is known as an “inferiority complex”. “The inferiority complex manifests itself in the presence of a problem for which individuals are not properly adapted or equipped, and highlight their conviction that they are unable to solve it” [4] (54). A deepening inferiority complex can exacerbate an individual's alienation from society, leading them further down a path of internal struggle and isolation.

In *Winesburg, Ohio*, the characters initially appear as ordinary individuals experiencing common feelings of inferiority. However, their attempts to escape these feelings through maladaptive compensatory strategies ultimately lead to the development of an inferiority complex. Thus, they isolate themselves, detach from society, and avoid confronting life's challenges, seeking solace in unrealistic fantasies or clinging to distorted perceptions of “truth”.

3. Inferiority-ridden Grotesques

“Winesburg, Ohio, like the Clyde, Ohio and the Old Northwest recently become the Midwest of Anderson's youth, was not a goal or an end in itself for its people; rather it was a way of station, a place to which one came to find refuge or to await an opportunity to move on, or conversely, a place in which one was forced by circumstances to live and die alone” [5] (89). Faced with feelings of inferiority, some individuals bravely confront their perceived shortcomings, adopting healthy coping mechanisms. Others, however, struggle to find constructive outlets for their inferiority. When their feelings of inadequacy become overwhelming, they may resort to maladaptive behaviors. George Willard, the aspiring writer, finds a path to self-discovery and growth through his craft. But for many of the other characters in *Winesburg, Ohio*, the pursuit of superiority becomes a self-destructive quest. Misogyny, communication difficulties, alcoholism, and religious fanaticism emerge as symptoms of their failed attempts at compensation.

These characters generally employ one of two maladaptive strategies to manage their inferiority: withdrawal or fantasy. Some erect psychological walls, isolating themselves from the outside world to avoid the perceived judgments of others and the challenges of life. They retreat into solitude, as seen in characters like Wing Biddlebaum (“Hands”), Doctor Parcival (“The Philosopher”), Jesse Bentley (“Godliness”), and Kate Swift (“The Teacher”). Others construct elaborate fantasy worlds where they reign supreme, using these imagined scenarios to numb themselves against the pain of their perceived inadequacy. This is evident in characters like Joe Welling (“A Man of Ideas”), Jesse Bentley (“Godliness”), and Enoch Robinson (“Loneliness”). Their inferiority prevents them from living fully integrated lives, distorting their

personalities and behaviors, turning them into the “grotesques” that Anderson so vividly portrays.

In “Hands,” Wing Biddlebaum’s name derives from his remarkable hands, capable of picking one hundred and forty quarts of strawberries in a single day, a source of pride for all of Winesburg. Yet, these same celebrated hands fill him with a crippling anxiety and deep-seated shame. He was once a teacher in a small Pennsylvania town, beloved by his students for the way his hands, seemingly imbued with magic, could soothe their anxieties and dispel their worries. This idyllic life, however, was shattered when a naive student, mistaking a disturbing dream for reality, accused him of inappropriate behavior. Driven out by the ensuing accusations and violence from the townspeople, he fled to Winesburg. The scorn and hostility he encountered only intensified his inferiority, making it nearly impossible for Wing to form genuine connections. Blaming his hands for his troubles, he keeps them hidden in Winesburg, desperate to avoid a repetition of the past. In Winesburg, he hides them, desperately trying to avoid a repetition of past trauma. He withdraws into seclusion, “not think(ing) of himself as in any part of the life of the town where he had lived for twenty years” [6](9). His inferiority becomes an invisible shackle, preventing him from forming meaningful connections. His attempts to change his situation are limited to physical and emotional withdrawal, which only intensifies his loneliness and deepens his yearning for connection.

Seth Richmond, the protagonist of “The Thinker”, also retreats into himself. Though naturally introspective, his thoughts lack direction and purpose, leaving him “feeling himself an outcast of the town” [6](p74). Hampered by his inferiority complex, he struggles to connect with the community, dismissing others’ conversations as meaningless. He erects a psychological barrier between himself and the other residents, eventually deciding to leave Winesburg. A brief encounter with Helen White offers a fleeting sense of belonging, but her departure reinforces his self-doubt, prompting him to escape in search of validation and purpose elsewhere.

In “A Man of Ideas”, Joe Welling’s response to his feelings of inferiority takes a different form. Unable to bear the discomfort of feeling inadequate, he constructs a persona of intellectual superiority. His compensatory strategy involves crafting a grandiose image of himself through language, attempting to impress others with his supposed brilliance. George Willard’s writing talent, in particular, triggers Joe’s insecurity and envy, fueling his desire to assert his own superiority. He exaggerates his creative abilities, boasting that if he had run a newspaper, he would “be a marvel” [6](56). Furthermore, his conversations with the Winesburg residents fall into two categories: either pronouncements of his profound insights or boasts about his foresight. Both are manifestations of a false sense of superiority. His attempts to compensate for his deep-seated inferiority inevitably fail. He hopes to project a grand image through his pronouncements, seeking validation and acceptance, but achieves the opposite. His unfounded pronouncements and exaggerations become the subject of ridicule and amusement in Winesburg. His pretension and grandstanding, instead of earning him acceptance and recognition, only make him a laughingstock and an object of fear.

Similarly, Enoch Robinson, in “Loneliness”, struggles with deep-seated insecurity. His inferiority stems from his inability to articulate his artistic vision. He arrives in New York harboring artistic dreams, but finds himself unable to express his ideas among his peers. Unable to voice his thoughts aloud, “He knew what he wanted to say, but he knew also that he could never by any possibility say it” [6](93). Therefore, he retreats into an elaborate fantasy world, populating it with imaginary friends who offer the validation and understanding he craves. Within this imagined realm, he can freely express himself and experience a sense of connection. However, this precarious equilibrium is disrupted by the arrival of a woman. Her subsequent departure shatters his carefully constructed fantasy world, taking his imaginary companions with her. Enoch’s vitality is inextricably linked to his loneliness; unable to navigate the real

world, he retreats into the solace of his imagined reality. His escape is driven by a profound sense of insecurity and helplessness.

4. The Roots of Inferiority Complex in *Winesburg, Ohio*

Adler posited that feelings of inferiority are a universal human experience, varying in degree from person to person. The development of an inferiority complex arises from an individual's recognition of their perceived imperfections. A multitude of factors can contribute to these feelings. In *Understanding Human Nature*, Adler highlights the significant impact of physical disabilities, gender inequality, and family dynamics. While the specific triggers for feelings of inferiority are diverse, they often share a common root: "the perception of being less capable or worthy than others in some respect" [7] (5). As social beings, humans inevitably engage in comparisons with others, often leading to feelings of inadequacy or imperfection. That is to say, the protagonists of *Winesburg, Ohio*, through constant comparisons of themselves with others, perceive their own imperfections, deeming themselves inferior, and thus develop a profound sense of inadequacy.

"Our civilization is a culture which is based on the health and adequacy of fully-developed organs. Therefore, a child whose important organs suffer defects is at a disadvantage in solving the problem of life" [8](p36). The defects in physics can lead to feelings of exclusion, difficulty integrating into society, and a heightened vulnerability to developing an inferiority complex. This dynamic is powerfully illustrated in the character of Jesse Bentley, the protagonist of "Godliness". Born in an era that prized masculine strength, Jesse's small stature and slight build set him apart. "By the standards of his day Jesse did not look like a man at all"[6](p31). His aspirations to emulate his robust brothers were met with amusement and dismissal by those around him. This early experience of perceived physical inadequacy became a deep source of inferiority. The Civil War dramatically alters Jesse's life. With the deaths of his brothers and his father's declining health, he unexpectedly inherits the family farm. This sudden shift in circumstances elevates him to a position of power and control, seemingly erasing his previous physical disadvantage. However, the psychological wounds of his earlier experiences remain. His inferiority complex, now twisted and magnified, morphs into a sense of superiority that alienates everyone around him. He becomes a domineering and tyrannical figure, driving his wife to an early grave through his relentless demands, emotionally neglecting his daughter Louise, and ultimately contributing to the disappearance of his grandson.

As Adler observes in *Understanding Human Nature*: "A girl is daily subjected to the argument that girls are less capable than boys and are suitable only for unessential activities. It is not surprising then a girl is firmly convinced of the unchangeable and bitter fate of a woman and sooner or later because of her lack of training in childhood, actually believe in her own incapability"[8](p131). In other words, women in this context, burdened by societal expectations and gender roles, experience a greater sense of vulnerability, insecurity, and powerlessness compared to their male counterparts. This often leads them to relinquish their aspirations and compromise their lives, their self-doubt and resignation reflecting a deeply ingrained sense of inferiority. Elizabeth Willard, George Willard's mother, exemplifies the plight of women in *Winesburg, Ohio*, her experiences serving as a microcosm of the broader societal constraints they faced. As a young woman, she possessed a vibrant imagination, dreaming of a life on the stage and a fulfilling romantic relationship. However, societal constraints thwart her aspirations. Instead of a life of artistic expression and travel, she is confined to the mundane realities of running a small-town hotel. The trivialities of her daily existence extinguish her creative fire, trapping her spirit within the messy old hotel. Her marriage, far from providing the "hidden significance" she craved, intensifies her unhappiness. Her internalized inferiority manifests as resignation, a passive acceptance of her fate, and the suppression of her inner

desires. This psychological torment takes a physical toll, leaving her prematurely aged and ill: "She was only forty-five years old, but the flame of life dimmed due to some rare disease" [6](p16). Similarly, Alice Hindman, in "Adventure", experiences the devastating consequences of betrayal and societal limitations. Abandoned by her lover, who disappears into the anonymity of city life, Alice clings to the hope of his return, diligently saving money and remaining loyal. However, she remains trapped within the confines of traditional gender roles, unable to understand "the growing modern idea of a woman's owning herself and giving and taking for her own ends in life" [6](61). As time passes and her lover fails to return, her hope turns to despair, culminating in a desperate and self-destructive act. The tragedies of Elizabeth and Alice underscore the pervasive impact of gender inequality on women's psychological well-being, highlighting their marginalization and the limited opportunities available to them in a society that often rendered them invisible.

"A family's level of engagement with the broader community plays a crucial role in a child's development, shaping their understanding of cooperation and social connection" [9](4). When a family is isolated or disconnected from society, children may struggle to develop healthy social relationships, leading to feelings of isolation and alienation. This dynamic is evident in Elmer Cowley, the protagonist of "Queer", whose sense of inferiority stems from his family's perceived eccentricity. He views his parents as weirdos, their unconventional clothing choices—which they consider formal attire—setting them apart from the other residents of Winesburg. This contrasts sharply with the descriptions of George Willard's new coat, mentioned twice in the story, further highlighting the Cowley family's social difference. After his mother's death, Elmer's father continues to run a failing shop, filling it with strange and unusual items. This perceived mismatch in appearance and lifestyle fuels Elmer's belief that he is the object of ridicule in Winesburg, exacerbating his feelings of inferiority. His decision to leave Winesburg becomes a means of escaping this perceived judgment. Before his departure, his pent-up anger and frustration erupt in a violent outburst directed at George Willard. Elmer's desire to "be indistinguishable" underscores his longing to escape the psychological burden of his family's perceived strangeness and to find a place where he can feel a sense of belonging.

5. Conclusion

In *Winesburg, Ohio*, Sherwood Anderson presents a cast of characters whose lives are marked by eccentricity and psychological struggle. These individuals, initially ordinary people burdened by common feelings of inferiority, adopt misguided strategies in their pursuit of superiority. Their attempts to alleviate their psychological discomfort, often by pursuing a distorted vision of success, ironically trap them in a cycle of self-defeating behaviors. This aligns with a central theme of the novel: the pursuit of "truth", when misdirected, can lead to psychological distortion and alienation. As the novel suggests, if the path to "truth" leads to falsehood, the journey itself becomes meaningless. Adler's individual psychology provides a valuable framework for understanding the psychological complexities of the Winesburg characters. His theory illuminates how their misguided attempts to compensate for feelings of inferiority ultimately lead to their isolation and unhappiness. Furthermore, Adler's work encourages a nuanced understanding of inferiority itself. Rather than viewing it as a destructive force, it can be understood as a fundamental human experience that, when channeled effectively, can motivate personal growth and social contribution. As John Donne famously wrote, "No one is an island". Overcoming feelings of inferiority requires embracing social connection, actively participating in community life, and finding fulfillment through contributing to something larger than oneself. This, Adler suggests, is the path to genuine and lasting psychological well-being.

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