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Winesburg, Ohio: A Guide to Unhealthy Relationships

By: Aaron Fletcher

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Everyone has a story in the town of Winesburg. Some of those stories show the reader why a character acts a certain way, others detail a joyful and adventurous soul underneath a stone exterior. The reader gets to see all of this, but the only resident of Winesburg who hears the stories of those around him is George Willard, the reporter for the local newspaper. In fact, there's little to no communication in the town of Winesburg unless it involves George. The relationships between the residents are often emotionless and based upon physical attraction, only lasting as long as they do because of sexual interaction. Basically, sexual interaction is the only relationship the residents have with anyone. The lack of communication and emotional expression in Sherwood Anderson's Winesburg, Ohio leads to ineffectual and shallow relationships based upon sex and sexual attraction.

The lack of communication within Winesburg can be traced back to Gendered Codes and Rules, put in place during the nineteenth century, which divide the social spheres of men and women. These guidelines were called the Doctrine of Separate Spheres. The Doctrine of Separate Spheres was an ideology in the mid-nineteenth century that came about because of the changing family structures and the bifurcation of gender roles. Popular literature during this time period, 1820 to 1860, reinforced separate spheres. It was widely accepted that the man was supposed to be the "breadwinner" and women were to tend to the spiritual, emotional, physical, and moral needs of the family. The women were supposed to stay at home and "redeem men and the world", therefore becoming the "Angels in the House". Because of these guidelines, men and women lived in entirely different worlds when it came to their social life. This caused different ideas of what a "man" and a "woman" should be. The accepted ideas for what a woman should be was called "The Cult of True Womanhood". The Cult of True Womanhood was based upon a set of cardinal virtues that every woman was supposed to have. These virtues were piety, purity, submissiveness, and domesticity. All of these things were intended to keep a woman in her "proper sphere". Men were supposed to go out and work hard to earn money for the family. The man of the household was to take care of the financial needs of his family and estate. He was allowed to be out among the town and taking part in various social activities because, after all, it was the "big, scary world of men" beyond the door of the household. The Doctrine of Separate Spheres was beginning to break down by the time period in which Winesburg, Ohio is set in, but the remnants of these guidelines were very much alive. This caused the men and women of Winesburg to barely communicate, therefore not knowing how to express how they felt towards each other.

The lack of communication caused by these powerful social doctrines between men and women in Winesburg leads to misunderstandings. Among these misunderstandings is the want of connection or emotional sincerity being mistaken for sexual attraction. In the chapter titled "Surrender", Louise Bentley's story is called "a story of misunderstanding" (45). Louise was living with the Hardy's while she was in school. Albert Hardy had two daughters, Mary and Harriet, and a son, John (45). The daughters were not as interested or proficient as Louise in their studies. In fact, they mocked Louise for her focus on education (45-47). Louise became so lonely due to the coldness she received from the girls that she would seclude herself to her room. This was where she began to think of befriending John Hardy (47). Louise wanted something "warm and close" that had "no conscious connection with sex" (48). She chose John because "he was at hand and... had not been unfriendly to her" (48). Louise had noticed the Hardy girl's attention to men and sex, and eventually she had taken John to be her lover. Louise didn't want a lover, but John had assumed this was what she wanted (49-50). During their marriage, Louise consistently tried to tell John how she really felt. But John always found her attempt to talk about her feelings as a consent to sex, attempting to kiss her and make love to her (51). While the story of Louise is one of the most powerful examples of misunderstanding, there are also many others. Such as the relationship between Kate Swift and George Willard.

When Kate Swift tries to "blow on the spark" that she had seen in George Willard in the chapter titled "The Teacher", George assumes her passionate grabbing of his shoulders and hand and her kiss upon the cheek is a display of sexual attraction (97). In reality, Kate wanted to "Open the door of her life to George" (98). She felt so strongly about this, and was so eager to enlighten George that her passion was released through physical touch (98). Within the last lines of the chapter, George says "I have missed something, I have missed something Kate Swift was trying to tell me" (99). He missed that Kate was attempting to connect with him on a level far beyond that which can be reached physically.

Yet another misunderstanding occurs in the chapter "Death". Elizabeth Willard is deathly ill and visiting Doctor Reedy (136). The two begin talking about their lives. Elizabeth talked especially about her failing marriage that struck down her adventurous spirit. Elizabeth married Tom Willard only because the reason that he was available and wanted to marry at the same time the notion came in her mind (137-138). While Elizabeth is talking about her marriage, Doctor Reedy takes her in his arms and begins passionately kissing her. Elizabeth tries to finish her story, but the Doctor just mutters "You Dear! You lovely dear! You lovely dear!" (140). This shows that Doctor Reedy completely missed the emotional connection Elizabeth was so desperately seeking.

These misunderstandings cause the actual desire of the individual to be overlooked. Instead, any sort of emotional expression attempted is viewed as sexual attraction. Louise Bentley wanted a friendship, a way to escape the loneliness that she received out of the coldness from the Hardy Girls. But the only warmth she had witnessed came from the Hardy girls' passionate encounters with men. Louise didn't know what she was feeling, therefore she thought she had to make love to get the warmth she desired. This led to a marriage that has no sort of emotional connection, but is filled with sexual interaction. Kate Swift just wants George to realize the amount of potential he has. Kate is so eager to do this that the only way her passion is released is physically. George takes this as her being sexually attracted to him and tries to invoke a sexual relationship. Elizabeth Willard is coming to her death; she feels lost and wants someone to talk to about how pointless her marriage and life has been. Doctor Reedy is available to her so she releases all of her emotions on to him. Doctor Reedy takes this release of emotion as a want of some sort of passionate relationship with another human being. Each of these tales have something in common, and that something is the misunderstanding between two people.

Even connections in Winesburg that aren't built upon misunderstandings can be based upon sex. This attention to sex often leads to insincere and ineffectual relationships. The story of Louise Bentley is again a perfect example. Louise wants a connection with someone, so she seeks out the friendship of the only man she has ever interacted with, John Hardy (47). Louise hadn't seen any sort of interaction between a man and a woman that wasn't sexual. This man always seemed to be the Hardy Sisters spending time with men, and she even witnessed a very heated encounter between Mary Hardy and a man in the parlor (49). Louise then seeks out John as her lover, eventually ending up in a marriage built on a foundation of sexual interaction without the support of an emotional connection (50-51). Louise didn't know of any connection other than that of the physical kind due to the importance of sex in Winesburg, Ohio. This leads her to fall victim to a relationship in which she has no satisfaction, physically or emotionally.

Another instance of a relationship failing occurs in the chapter "Respectability". In this chapter, we are told the story of why Wash Williams has become so misogynistic. Wash was married to a beautiful young woman, and he truly loved her (71). He felt a strong emotional connection to her that is not seen in any other relationship in Winesburg thus far. After being married to this woman for two years, Wash discovered that she had three lovers that came to their house while he was away at work. Wash sent her away and gave her the money that he acquired from selling the house (71). Soon after, the woman's mother asked Wash to go to the woman's home in Dayton. The mother sat Wash in the parlor and, while he was sitting there, he realized that he truly wanted his wife back (72). When Wash's wife finally entered, she "came into the room naked" (72). He says that "her mother did that... she was taking the girl's clothes off" (72). The mother did this in an attempt to make Wash and his wife reconcile over sex. Wash was outraged by this, taking a chair and striking the mother with it (72). Wash Williams truly is plagued more than most by the emphasis that is placed upon sex in Winesburg. Wash loses someone he truly loves because of sex, and as a result of his loss, becomes bitter and hateful towards women.

The story of Louise Bentley shows us that the emphasis placed upon sex in Winesburg can be used to force people into unwanted relationships. Louise didn't know that she had to feel something other than physical to be happy with someone, at least at the time she didn't. Wash Williams' story shows us that even if there is an emotional connection in a relationship, sex can ruin that. And the mother of Wash's wife further proves that there is a strong importance placed upon sex that completely overlooks the intangible connection that is needed in a successful relationship.

Even though the relationships in Winesburg, Ohio seem completely hopeless, there is still a way in which some of the damage done can be repaired. The only way to repair this damage, caused by the lack of communication between the residents of Winesburg, is for their relationships to become more egalitarian. In the chapter "Tandy", a new characteristic is invented by a drunken man that comes to the town of Winesburg in an attempt to sober up. This man describes "Tandy" as "the quality of being strong to be loved" (84). This quality, according to the drunkard, can only be achieved when someone has suffered many defeats. But, the person accepts these defeats and grows and learns from them (84). In Winesburg, Ohio every character is seeking to be "Tandy". But, the only two that actually achieve this characteristic are George Willard and Helen White.

George and Helen achieve Tandy in "Sophistication". In this chapter, we are told of an evening after the county fair which George Willard and Helen White spend together. This evening is spent in near silence between the two. In the presence of Helen, George feels "his own insignificance in the scheme of existence" (149). George wants to "love and be loved" by Helen while also not being "controlled by her womanhood" (149). The young couple kissed, but didn't feel compelled to continue embracing each other in such a physical way (150). The two continue actions such as this, finally coming to a point in which they stop kissing and stand apart. A "mutual respect grew big" between the two at this moment (150). They become embarrassed, but embrace that embarrassment and drop "into the animalism of youth" (150). The two begin to play in a childlike manner, but during this they seem to escape the roles put upon them by society. They are described as becoming "not man and woman, not boy and girl, but excited little animals" (150). After their time of play, George and Helen begin to go home. In reflection of the events that occurred that evening, the two realize that the thing they so desperately needed was what they received in their time together. The powerful last line of "Sophistication" reads: "Man or boy, woman or girl, they had for a moment taken hold of the thing that makes the mature life of men and women in the modern world possible" (150). This "thing" that George and Helen achieved in their evening of silent play is Tandy, the ability to love and be loved. In order to do this, the young couple had to escape what was expected of them from society. They were no longer male and female; they were two people enjoying themselves in the time they had together. They weren't focused on any kind of physical interaction, they didn't even care what the other looked like at the time. In that evening after the county fair, George Willard and Helen White found a connection that was far beyond anything tangible could provide. George and Helen achieved Tandy, the secret behind a happy and effective relationship.

Everyone has a story in the town of Winesburg. Many tell of some broken past or failed relationship. But one story gives us hope as to what two people together can achieve. Some of the lingering Gendered Codes and Rules cause communication across the boundary of gender to be difficult. When this boundary is not crossed and intentions are not clearly expressed, misunderstandings occur. With these misunderstandings comes a focus on sex. All of this leads to a book full of failed relationships called Winesburg, Ohio. But, we are also given hope from Sherwood Anderson with the interaction between George Willard and Helen White in "Sophistication". The only true way to be happy in a relationship is to take on the quality of being Tandy. George and Helen achieve this so perfectly when they escape the expectations of society and be themselves. Whether man, woman, or somewhere in between, everyone is looking for something. This something is to love and to be loved. This something is Tandy.

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Powerless

By: Kristina Hodges

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Life at the end of the 19th century and into the 20th was an especially difficult time in America for minorities. With wounds still fresh from the Civil War, several movements and ideas spread throughout these decades concerning different groups. Two of these groups seemingly intertwined at the time of the Civil War while working towards their respective goals. Both women and African-Americans were fighting for the same given rights as white Americans. The first wave of feminism worked towards gaining women's suffrage, right to be educated, and right to own property. This movement gave a voice to neglected African-American women in the midst of African-American men gaining the very rights that they too were yearning for. While women fought for their own rights, African-Americans were struggling to maintain theirs after the Reconstruction period in America. As Jim Crow laws settled in the South, African-Americans continued to be restricted and controlled by whites. The doctrine of "separate but equal" was introduced at this time, paving the way for what would be a long history of segregation and discrimination. These struggles, of both women and African-Americans, are emphasized in Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* and Ernest Gaines' *A Lesson Before Dying*. While Atwood depicts a dark future concerning women and their freedoms, Gaines discusses the oppression of African-Americans and the reality for black communities in the mid-20th century. Contemporary scholar, Ta-Nehisi Coates demonstrates how that oppression and reality is still present in America despite the approximate 70-year difference between the setting of *A Lesson Before Dying* and his novel *Between the World and Me*. The progressive gains made for both African-Americans and women are small when put into perspective of how much is still out of their control and might continue to be. This lack of control causes disembodiment among these groups as their bodies and lives become someone else's. Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* and Gaines' *A Lesson Before Dying* demonstrate how the bodies of non-white men and women are controlled by their oppressors.

Conforming to the expectations and rules of these oppressors causes self-hate and a sense of worthlessness. Offred despises her body and can barely stand to look at it. In the world of *The Handmaid's Tale*, the handmaids are used for nothing but procreation. Offred and the other handmaids are only seen for their uterus. They have become so reliant on the goal to bear children that the thought of being unsuccessful makes them feel like a failure.

I sink down into my body as into a swamp, I feel land, where only I know the footing. Treacherous ground, my own territory. I become the earth I see my ear against, for rumors of the future. Each twinge, each murmur of slight pain, ripples of sloughed-off matter, swellings and dimplings of tissue, the droolings of the flesh, these are signs, these are the things I need to know about. Each month I watch for blood, fearfully, for when it comes it means failure. I have failed once again to fulfill the expectations of others, which have become my own. (Atwood 75)

Every month Offred waits to see if she will have her period and waits for the tell-tale signs and feelings of it. She knows that once her period comes, she has failed her duty in society. Society's expectations of her and her body have become her own expectations thus having power and control over her and her body. This society has control over all women because of the expectations put on their bodies. The new structure of life in Gilead is supposedly "safer" for women since pornography is eliminated and sex is restricted to procreation. Handmaids are protected from harassment and rape since they "aren't seen as a sex object." Offred even remembers Aunt Lydia saying "There is more than one kind of freedom... Freedom to and freedom from" (Atwood 24). Before Gilead, women had the freedom to do whatever they wanted. In Gilead, they have the freedom from men shouting obscenities at them, touching them, or speaking to them. Women are supposed to be seen as more than their bodies in this world due to the absence of sexual stimulation. However, the sole purpose of women in this society is to use their body and they are evaluated on how well their body performs. The handmaids are taught to want to have children and base the value of their body on whether they achieve that goal. With the absence of sex for pleasure, the bodies of women are also being controlled. Limiting sex to the monthly occurrence between the handmaid and Commander doesn't allow women to have sex for pleasure since it is strictly forbidden for a handmaid to have sexual relations with anyone other than her assigned Commander. We see Offred act sexual by swaying her hips when walking away from Guardians when she's not supposed to because she knows how it will affect the men. The lack of casual sex in this world makes Offred do this because she knows the men can't do anything about it and she feeds off of that little bit of power and control she has. Still being seen as a sexual object, Gilead controls Offred's actions even when she thinks she's doing something for her.

While women are controlled in Gilead, African-Americans are controlled by the white community around them. In Bayonne, the black community is forced to be less than the white community. There are two distinct sides of town, one being white with more upscale facilities, restaurants, and businesses while the other is more run down and less appealing. When Grant goes to visit Bayonne he "had to drive down another two or three blocks before turning down an unlit road, which led back of town to the colored section" (Gaines 24). This difference in community immediately devalues the black community giving off the impression that they are not on the same level as whites. That idea is repeated throughout *A Lesson Before Dying* as the African-American characters are continuously made to be inferior through control over their bodies and their lives. During Jefferson's trial, his own attorney calls him a hog. Jefferson firmly believes his lawyer and refuses to eat in jail because "That's for youmans," he said. "I'm a old hog," he said. "Youmans don't stay in no stall like this. I'm a old hog they fattening up to kill." (Gaines 85). Calling Jefferson a hog dehumanizes him so much that he even believes it. They have taken control of his mind and his own sense of self-worth. Gaines also highlights how African-Americans were controlled through sharecropping. All of Grant's students come from families that are involved in sharecropping which makes Grant's school get out earlier than the white schools since the children have to help their family. Sharecropping takes advantage of the black community and was another way for whites to keep black opportunists and lives contained after the Civil War. They were often roped into contracts that they did not understand or could not understand since many were unable to read or write. These contracts would allow African-Americans to farm land in which they would receive a portion of the crop. Their portion was usually very small and did not yield much money. Sharecropping was another way for whites to control black lives and Gaines shows how it was used to make black lives inferior.

In the literal sense, the bodies of non-white men and women are completely controlled by their oppressors. We see what happens when women and African-Americans are in control as they are all killed or set up to be killed. In Gilead, women who misbehave are sent to the colonies where they are forced to pick up toxic waste that will eventually cause their death. Offred's mother was sent to the colonies after being a "radical" feminist who frequented protests and spoke against the majority. Sometimes the women don't even make it to the colonies. During a Salvaging, people are hanged for breaking rules. Many of these are handmaids being punished for things that women should have the freedom to do. Their bodies end up on "the wall" for the whole town to see to serve as a reminder to stay within the confines that Gilead places upon its people. African-Americans are lynched, tarred and feathered, and in Jefferson's case—executed. The reality for women and African-Americans is that whether they are in control of the situation or not, they will never be in control of their bodies. Ta-Nehisi Coates explains how this is still a problem in present day as he recalls his experiences growing up.

To survive the neighborhoods and shield my body, I learned another language consisting of a basic complement of head nods and handshakes. I memorized a list of prohibited words. I learned the smell and feel of fighting weather. And I learned that "Shorty, can I see your bike?" was never a sincere question, and "Yo you was messing with my cousin" was neither an earnest accusation nor a misunderstanding of the facts. These were the summonses that you answered with your left foot forward, your right foot back, your hands guarding your face, one slightly lower than the other, cocked like a hammer. I recall learning these laws clearer than I recall learning my colors and shapes, because these laws were essential to the security of my body. (Coates 23-24)

We see Grant controlling these same laws as he adjusts his behavior when speaking to certain people. When giving the sheriff the radio for Jefferson, Grant catches himself before he says the word "batteries", saying "batteries", saying "batteries" instead. Grant is well aware of how he must act and appear to others in order to not cause problems. Since the sheriff said "batteries", Grant knew that he could not sound "smarter" than the sheriff or else there would be consequences for not only him but perhaps Jefferson. We see Grant acknowledge it again when speaking to Mr. Pichot.

"And what do you plan to do?" he asked me. I shook my head. "I have no idea." He stared at me, and I realized that I had not answered him in the proper manner. "Sir," I added...He was finished talking to me. Now he wanted me to look away. I lowered my eyes. (Gaines 21)

Again, Grant is aware of what his actions are supposed to be according to whites so he behaves accordingly to avoid trouble. The expectations of him, enforced by whites, control his body. Jefferson's soul is controlled by what everyone else around him thinks about him. Miss Emma wants nothing more than for him to die a man, a human. Coates goes into detail about how a person is their body. "I believed and still do, that our bodies are our selves, that my soul is conducted through neurons and nerves, and that my spirit is my flesh" (Coates 70). Until Jefferson takes back control of his body, his spirit will be tarnished. His body will not be his. When he finds his death instead of being dragged, he is finally acting on his accord, taking control of his body and spirit. Though he has found his inner purpose and peace, his physical body will never be in his control as he is executed cementing the idea that his oppressors will always have the last say.

The idea that certain groups of people belong beneath others is an outdated one. To think that someone is less valuable or less human because of their skin or gender is furthering the idea that we aren't all on the same level. Coates said it best with "race is the child of racism, not the father" (Coates 7). This is applicable to both racism and sexism. The desire to make someone inferior came before the actual "reason". Race and gender are both characteristics that have been made to define people. Throughout history, minorities have been fighting to be seen as more than those manufactured characteristics. When put in perspective, those groups are being denied the right to be seen as an individual even though they have the same natural rights as their oppressors. Something so trivial and almost silly divides the world limiting opportunities, experiences, and interaction. The overwhelming authority of "whites" prompts the question, what gives them the right to confine others? Who gets to deem one life more important than another? The flaws in our world run deep and show little signs of improving. The progressive gains made for struggling women and African-Americans seem to be moving backward instead of forward. The representation of these struggles and gains in literature, and the reality of them, has stayed the same throughout the course of human existence. Only time will tell whether these primitive concepts will continue to rule the lives of those suffering from them or if they will finally be extinguished.

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