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## Towards the Interpretation of Some Symbols in “Winesburg, Ohio” by Sherwood Anderson

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**Abstract** This paper examines the essence and significance of symbols in “Winesburg, Ohio”, a short story collection by Sherwood Anderson. More precisely, the study explores the link between the emergence of symbols and Gricean maxims of manner, quantity, quality and relation. It has been revealed that in the work under discussion the pragmatic loading of one and the same symbol varies from passage to passage. Four basic functions of the symbols employed by Anderson have been stated; the symbols (a) reveal a character’s emotional state; (b) set the overall mood in the stories; (c) hint at upcoming unfolding of the text; (d) serve as a clue for interpreting different parts of the text.

**Keywords** Symbol, Modernism, Gricean maxims, Sherwood Anderson, “Winesburg, Ohio”

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## 1. Introduction

As is known, communication is not always a mere interchange of ideas, opinions and feelings between the interlocutors. At times, to achieve their goals the speakers have to add a little bit of colour to what they have to say. This can be achieved by using a wide range of literary devices such as metaphors, irony, symbolism, etc. The paper examines the essence, significance and functions of symbolism in a piece of modernist literature: Sherwood Anderson's short story cycle "Winesburg, Ohio", which is quite rich in a symbolic presentation.

Stylistics, pragmatics and literary criticism from the theoretical basis of the research.

## 2. Essence and Meaning of Symbols

Before moving straight to the text itself, it is crucial to understand what symbolism really is. According to a dictionary of stylistics (Wales 2014: 408)

From Gk 'token', a symbol is a sign, whether visual or verbal, which stands for something else within a speech community. ...human language can be seen as a characteristically symbolic system: words standing for referents in the outside world (and in the world of the imagination); the letters of our alphabet standing for sounds.

Many scholars argue about the relationship between the symbol and referent and its arbitrariness. The above-mentioned dictionary of stylistics refers to C.S. Pierce and his view on this matter. According to him, a symbol is a subtype of sign which is the most conventional and the least motivated. However, in some instances it can be used as an index (another type of sign). As illustrated by Peirce, Rolls-Royce points to wealth but symbolizes a social status (Wales 2014: 408).

Not surprisingly, every domain has its own set of symbols or symbolism. Literature, in our case, has its literary symbols, studied and analyzed in literary criticism. Some symbols are widely accepted and used, while others are created by individual writers, thus idiolectal in nature. For example, a white dove can be easily interpreted as a symbol of peace for its frequent use in literature. On the contrary, W.H. Davies in his poem "Rain", utilizes rain as a symbol of social stratification.

Interpretation of symbols is crucial to fully grasp the idea communicated by the writer. For this purpose, everything can be presented as a symbol: characters, objects, buildings and even events. In Katie Wales book we read the following: (Wales 2014: 409).

For Barthes (1970) the symbolic code is one of the forms of reference we draw upon for our understanding of a text, which enables us to work out thematic oppositions, such as good v. evil, life v. death.

### 2.1 Gricean Maxims and Symbolism

This paper analyzes symbolism from the standpoint of Gricean maxims. According to Grice, successful communication is a result of using four maxims of: quantity, quality, relation and manner (each of them will be discussed in much more detail below). As soon as one or several of these maxims are violated, different literary devices, such as metaphor, irony and symbolism, come into existence (Black 2006: 124-136).

To better understand how violation of these maxims calls for symbolic interpretation, it is crucial to look into them individually.

#### 2.1.1 Maxim of manner

Clarity in speech is a vital condition for the information to be quickly understood. The maxim of manner suggests avoiding obscurity, vagueness and circumlocution. According to Grice himself, there is no need for absolute coherence in informal situations, since being polite sometimes requires periphrases not to offend others.

In literary works, for instance, stream of consciousness writing regularly violates this maxim for the representation of thought processes.

#### 2.1.2 Maxim of quality

Generally speaking, people are expected to be truthful while conducting a conversation. We should not lie or talk about things we have no evidence for. So, when it comes to the maxim of quality sincerity becomes a must. This is

because telling lies impedes communication. However, in daily life being honest all the time is not possible if not undesirable whatsoever. For instance, “white lies” can be told not to hurt other’s feelings or advertisers may not say the whole truth for selling purposes.

In literature, many figures of speech distort the truth e.g. hyperbole (by exaggeration) or irony (by saying the opposite).

### 2.1.3 Maxim of quantity

The maxim of quantity shows the exact amount of information needed to have a proper conversation. Interlocutors should be as informative as required, avoiding revealing too much or too little information. However, again, in certain situations it cannot be simply done. For example, phatic communication breaks Grice’s conversational maxims since it gives information that is somehow unnecessary. But phatic communion is an important part of language which helps to establish and maintain social bond between participants.

As all Grice’s maxims, the occurrence of the maxim of quantity is not rare in literature as well. For instance, the figure of litotes distorts the truth by saying too little, while hyperbole – by saying too much.

### 2.1.4 Maxim of relation (or relevance)

While having a conversation both interlocutors must stay relevant or at least say something in a way that can be made relevant by inference. Compared to other maxims of conversation, violation of this maxim can cause a failure in communication. When it comes to daily life, it is quite common to encounter irrelevance in the stream of consciousness. While thinking it is difficult to stick to one topic and we can easily lose the sight of it.

In literature, modernist writers, such as Virginia Woolf, James Joyce and others, regularly employ distortion of this maxim.

In most cases violation of the maxims of quantity (too much) and manner (repetition) triggers the symbolic interpretation of a particular text. When placing too much attention on one specific aspect, it becomes clear that the author tries to tell us implicitly that it carries a significance within the text. For instance, in *Pragmatic Stylistics* (Black 2006: 126-27) a symbol of guns is thoroughly examined. In one small passage from Hemingway’s “The snows of Kilimanjaro” a major accent is placed on guns, description of which (as well as the number of times they are mentioned) occupies the major proportion of the text. Thus, it becomes obvious that the writer is trying to reveal a hidden message carried by this symbol whether it is lost childhood, the social role of his grandfather or any other interpretation.

Compared to metaphors and allegory, symbolism is a complex and intractable area. Metaphors are required to be comprehended accordingly to fully grasp the meaning of the text; allegory is more clear-cut, while symbolic interpretation is not mandatory, it is totally up to the reader whether to see something as a symbol or not. Another interesting fact about the interpretation of symbolism is that it may vary from reader to reader. How this or that symbol is understood depends on a number of things, which are the following:

- a. The reader’s encyclopedic knowledge;
- b. The reader’s ability to make judgments;
- c. The reader’s cultural background and epoch.

As a result, it becomes obvious that one and the same piece of literary work can be comprehended in a completely different way. What’s more, even the same text read by an individual at different times may attract various readings. It is mainly due to the fact that one thing can carry a nebula of associations depending on the reader’s experience and the way s/he sees things. It is safe to say that symbols are in the eye of the beholder.

According to Eco and his pragmatic approach to symbolism, symbols get their value only in the context, otherwise they make no sense (Eco 1986: 130-134). To better illustrate the point, let’s take the symbol of a house in several short stories, namely “The strength of God”, “The teacher” and “Paper Pills” from Sherwood Anderson’s “Winesburg, Ohio”. Outside the context a house refers to a building that people, usually one family, live in. However, houses in Sherwood Anderson’s short story cycle imply isolation and duration. Curtis Hartman (“The strength of God”) isolates himself in the clock tower. Kate Swift (“The teacher”) makes herself stay at home lonely. Doctor Reefy (“Paper Pills”) is always in his office by himself. These characters are just a few among many others in this collection of stories who

seek redemption from the outer world in four walls. In different contexts, however, a house can be associated with nostalgia, warmth, comfort and cosiness. For instance, *Green Gables* ("Anne of Green Gables") has been a beloved literary home for generations since it brings many positive emotions. Although for some readers a house may not carry any symbolic significance at all which brings us to our previous point that symbolic interpretation is purely optional. Nevertheless, identification and interpretation of symbols help process literary discourse, contribute to the revelation of the themes and characters' emotions and add more depth and significance to an idea.

## 2.2 Symbols and Modernism

Modernistic literature is especially known for its abundant use of symbols. As is known, Modernism as a literary movement began in the late 19th century and extended through the early 20th century. The main characteristics of modernism are the following:

- a. Reality presented in a creative way;
- b. Different interpretations;
- c. Discontinuity;
- d. new styles of writing;
- e. No set rules.

The modernists wanted to break with more traditional writing and manipulate common poetic conventions. Their ultimate goal was to give a realistic picture of the world and experiment with narrative techniques such as stream of consciousness, fragmentation, metaphors and symbolism. For instance, instead of describing people's appearances in detail, mainly in the beginning of the narrative, which would predispose the reader to how to view the person, modernists scatter fragments of images throughout the text for the reader to gather them up and form their own, individual understanding of the character. In modernistic literature, symbolism was not used as a tool to merely add mysticism to various works of literature any more. Its main purpose became to give a more insightful meaning to a complex theme or an idea.

## 3. Sherwood Anderson's "Winesburg, Ohio"

A 1919 short story cycle, at the heart of modernist movement, is "Winesburg, Ohio" by Sherwood Anderson. All the stories have a symbolic perspective on life in an industrial small town in the United States. The emphasis is placed on the psychological insights of characters instead of the documentary, journalistic recording of outward experience. The book is a compilation of twenty-two stories which deals with a specific character's past and present struggle to overcome the loneliness and isolation that seem to pervade the whole town.

Sherwood Anderson, as a true modernist writer, employs symbolism in each and every aspect of his novel. Here we can come across characters as symbols, places as symbols, actions as symbols, objects as symbols. Some symbols are characteristic of an individual character, like paper pills being a symbol of failed communication for Doctor Reefy ("Paper Pills"), while others can be applied to the whole town such as a traditional symbol – darkness, which will be discussed in much more detail later in this paper.

### 3.1 Characters as Symbols

In literature, it is a widely spread practice to root focalization in the character. Thus, "Winesburg, Ohio" is not an exception. Here each and every character carries some symbolic meaning. All of them represent the members of lost generation and every character can be seen as a symbol of isolation, lost belief, numbness.

For the purpose of symbolic interpretation of the character, this paper concentrates on the protagonist of the story "Hands" – Wing Biddlebaum. To present the character to its fullest, the author violates the maxims of quantity (hands are mentioned 30 times in the text) and quality (distortion of the character's real name).

Three basic symbols are presented in this story: the description of the house and its surroundings as a symbol of Wing Biddlebaum's life, main character's hands as a symbol of failed communication and the alteration of the protagonist's name as a symbol of futile attempt to change something.

The opening scene of the story is worth noting since from the very beginning the author gives us a hint about the way of life the character leads and sets the mood of the reader towards him (Anderson 1996:3).

Upon The Half-decayed veranda of a small frame house that stood near the edge of a ravine near the town of Winesburg, Ohio, a fat little old man walked nervously up and down.

As seen here, half decayed veranda directly denotes Wing's half destroyed life, which became more like a mere existence rather than a life. Anderson uses the only adjective "small" to describe the house which is immediately followed by the scarce description of its owner "a fat little man". Thus, the minuteness of the house emphasizes the insignificance of its owner. The author continues the further description of the house by saying that it is "near the edge of a ravine". It can be deduced that the house is likely to be tossed into the ravine, as is its owner. The author gives an additional account of the house by saying "... strode up and down on the rickety front porch of his own house" (Anderson 1996:3). The adjective "rickety" magnifies the misery Wing Biddlebaum has to live in, since it denotes something that is likely to collapse. As a result, this man's life is also in the extremity of falling apart.

From the further reading we discover that Wing Biddlebaum used to be a teacher accused of child molestation. However, these allegations have never been proven. What's more, the author bears the character's resemblance to a priest, thus suggesting Wing's innocence "...the kneeling figure looked like a priest engaged in some service of his church" (Anderson 1996:6).

Being misunderstood by the residents of his home town resulted in his redemption. Caressing his students looked unjustified and even though Wing has only good intentions, the story exposes the corrupt thinking of many people. The caress of his hands caused doubt and disbelief not only in the minds of the adults, but also the boys.

Such unfolding of the story is insinuated in the very beginning of the story when the author describes Wing's surroundings "Across a long field that had been seeded for clover but that had produced only a dense crop of yellow mustard weeds" (Anderson 1996:3).

From this passage one can conclude that Wing's pure intentions (clover as mentioned here) resulted in the complete misjudgment that led to the destruction of his life (production of weed). If we go even further, it becomes obvious that the choice of plants carries symbolic meaning. Clover is usually associated with growth and fertility as well as personal development. Weeds, on the other hand, symbolize neglected and undervalued aspects of life and they are often overlooked despite their potential usefulness.

The same happened in Wing's life. In the pursuit of giving students education and helping them grow and develop, his goal was disregarded and disparaged.

Another important nature-related symbol is the river bank. It is usually presented as an image of a safe zone, indicating the need for inner security. At the river bank Wing Biddlebaum feels safe and tries to communicate his ideas more freely. However, during the period of excitement he was already at the "grassy slope", here slope suggesting fall, taking Wing into the void again.

Wing Biddlebaum is a grotesque character since the reality and the way he is seen in society clashes. For the inhabitants his hands are the symbol of evil and humiliation. For the reader, they are the symbol of communication, expression of emotions. This contradiction is due to the period during which the story unfolds. In Industrial America where strengthening the economy and accumulating wealth became the main priority of many, education got devalued. For this reason, Wing Biddlebaum's hands are appreciated only when used for working purposes. Winesburg was proud of the hands of Wing Biddlebaum because "...with them Wing Biddlebaum had picked as high as a hundred and forty quarts of strawberries in a day" (Anderson 1996:3-4).

Another key point worth mentioning during symbolic reading is the character's change of name. When forced to leave his home town, Wing Biddlebaum alters his last name. "The name of Biddlebaum he got from a box of goods seen at a freight station as he hurried through an eastern Ohio town." (Anderson 1996:6)

Box of goods can be understood as values that are kept in a box. "Thinking outside the box" is prohibited in that period, it is shameful, punished. So, after adopting a new name he feels secured inside the box of ideas ("goods").

As for the first name we read "Their restless activity, like unto the beating of the wings of an imprisoned bird, had given him his name" (Anderson 1996:4).

Here the name of the character is comparatively clear cut and associations are easier to be seen. Firstly, wings help birds achieve freedom. The same is true in Wing Biddlebaum's case. Hands are his tool for expressing his ideas and thoughts freely. Secondly, if we consider the saying "take someone under your wing", we will see that it refers to the

idea of training someone and showing them the correct path in life. That was exactly what Wing was trying to do while being a teacher but was not allowed by the society to fulfil his mission ("..wings of an imprisoned bird").

Even though Wing Biddlebaum has moved to a completely different town and the alteration of his name was not caused by the necessity, we can assume that by doing so he was hoping that his life would also change. However, like the other characters of the short story cycle, his hopes and dreams remain unattainable.

### 3.2 Places as Symbols

Using settings as a symbol is a powerful tool to go deeper into the meaning and understand the text to its fullest. In this collection of stories, darkness sets the fundamental tone for the book. It is interesting to note that the most grotesque and eccentric behaviours take place at night or dusk. Take for instance Alice from "Adventure" who during a rainy night ran naked in front of her house or Tom Willard's sexual intercourse with Louise from "Nobody Knows" which also took place at "past ten o'clock".

The symbol of darkness is a repeated element encountered in the majority of stories. In "Mother" and "Loneliness", for example, there is only a single lamp to illuminate their rooms; in "The Untold Lie" the last scene is faintly lit by the last twilight; in "Sophistication" George Willard and Helen White look at each other "in the dim light". However, the most numerous symbolic interpretations of darkness can again be found in the story "Hands".

The symbol of darkness can evoke both positive and negative connotations. All the actions in the story "Hands" mostly take place in the deep and dark hours of the night. Every such passage with the symbol of darkness, bears various meanings and calls for different interpretations that will be discussed below.

The first thing that immediately attracts the reader's attention is that Wing Biddlebaum used to educate his students in the evening or late at night (Anderson 1996: 5).

"With the boys of his school, Adolph Myers had walked in the evening or had sat talking until dusk upon the schoolhouse steps lost in a kind of dream."

**He continues the same practice with George Willard (Anderson 1996:3).**

"George Willard was the reporter on the Winesburg Eagle and sometimes in the evenings he walked out along the highway to Wing Biddlebaum's house. .... he was hoping that George Willard would come and spend the evening with him."

Symbolic reading of these passages allows us to see darkness as a symbol of new beginnings, hidden potential and creativity. It also denotes truthfulness since it is generally considered that we cannot trust anyone in the daylight but at night the truth is most likely to be uncovered. Thus, Adolph Myers chooses the perfect time of the day to transfer his knowledge to schoolboys and later to George Willard.

Although as the story develops and the life of Wing Biddlebaum becomes complicated and condemned, the symbol of darkness adopts a negative interpretation. It starts to denote fear, captivity, sinister thoughts and ignorance.

As we learn, Wing Biddlebaum's banishment was a result of a boy's wild imagination which became particularly active during the night; bad thoughts came to him during the night. "In his bed at night he imagined unspeakable things..." (Anderson 1996:5)

Consequently, Adolph was forced to leave his home town again at night. "Adolph Myers was driven from the Pennsylvania town in the night." (Anderson 1996:6)

Here darkness represents the ignorance of the town's inhabitants. They lack the knowledge and thus they are "living in the dark".

The final episode takes place when "the sun had disappeared". In this passage we can read "In the darkness he could not see the hands and they became quiet." (Anderson 1996:6)

Here darkness is associated with an amalgamation of many negative emotions. It can be seen as a symbol of captivity both emotional and physical. The lack of sight prevents from moving and any physical activities become restrictive. Emotionally darkness causes feelings of fear and isolation – the emotions usually characteristic of captives. Moreover, the lack of light conceals things that we are mostly afraid of; in this case it is Wing Biddlebaum's hands.

**The author, however, finishes this story on a relatively positive note (Anderson 1996:6).**

"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."

As seen here, the symbolic meaning of darkness has changed once more. Now it brings up a sense of mystery. By connecting Wing Biddlebaum with an ecclesiastical person, the author hints at the character's innocence.

It becomes obvious that darkness has a highly symbolic significance. It is one of the most recurring symbols throughout the novel. By violating the maxim of quantity, the author draws too much attention to the frequent use of darkness hence offering a symbolic reading of the text.

### 3.3 Actions as Symbols

Another way of using symbols is through assigning them to the whole action. This paper analyzes the instance with a cat from the story "Mother" which serves as an epitome of the mentioned type of symbolism.

Elizabeth Willard has a habit of sitting by a window and watching the back door of Abner Groff's bakery where the following picture unfolds:

The baker swears and waves his arms at the cat trying to kick it out after it secretly crept into his bakery. Frightened and alarmed the cat hides behind the barrels full of torn paper and broken bottles and flies swarming above.

This particular moment in this story symbolizes Elizabeth's life. Even the character herself realizes the bitterness of her life. „It seemed like a rehearsal of her own life, terrible in its vividness." (Anderson 1996:11)

From this small passage it becomes clear that Elizabeth, like this cat, is not welcomed by the society. The baker, being symbolically Elizabeth's husband, pushes her away and makes her feel undesired and unacceptable. But she feeling numb and disabled "creeps into the door of the bakery" every time she got forced away. In general, a barrel may be seen as a symbol of abundance; as a container of hopes and dreams. However, this barrel is full of paper and broken bottles. Broken bottles being a symbol of shattered dreams while paper may mean new possibilities and new opportunities ("a new page of life"), although here paper is torn and thus there is no escape from this misery for Elizabeth. Swarming flies add more tragedy to the whole picture. The fly is often associated with death and decay. In addition, swarming flies may represent the chaos and the crowds of ignorant people surrounding Elizabeth.

At first glance, such a detailed description of a cat seems irrelevant. The story is supposed to be about a woman's rejection, sadness and isolation and bringing cat's row with a baker into the story calls for a symbolic reading. Thus, it becomes obvious that the maxim of manner is flouted.

### 3.4 Objects as Symbols

The most frequently employed technique to represent something symbolically is through objects. One particular item may bear a nebula of associations. The story "Paper Pills" is a perfect example. Interestingly, even the title is subjected to symbolic interpretation.

This story is about an isolated, old man who spends his life writing bits of thoughts on pieces of paper and then throws them away. He used to be married; however, this marriage did not last long due to his spouse's death.

The first-time paper balls are mentioned in the story is when the author gives the description of Doctor Reefy (Anderson 1996:7).

"In the office he wore also a linen duster with huge pockets into which he continually stuffed scraps of paper. After some weeks the scraps of paper became little hard round balls, and when the pockets were filled, he dumped them out upon the floor."

Then there comes the episode of his marriage with a tall girl to whom he used to read his "thoughts, ends of thoughts, beginnings of thoughts. "During the winter he read to her all of the odds and ends of thoughts he had scribbled on the bits of paper." (Anderson 1996:8)

As shown in these passages, a paper ball (something that the character has been doing at any point in his life) is a repeated element which violates the maxim of quantity. Moreover, it is safe to say that the maxim of manner has also



been flouted. Scrapes of paper cause too much ambiguity and obscurity. The reader never knows what thoughts Doctor Reefy is trying to communicate, and this leads to a symbolic interpretation.

One of the most recurring themes in this collection of stories is alienation among members of the society. As a result, paper pills can be seen as a symbol of ineffective communication. Doctor Reefy jots down his thoughts on a piece of paper but never lets anyone see them not because he does not want to, but after trying several times, he realizes the futility of his action. (Anderson 1996:7)

"Sometimes, in a playful mood, old Doctor Reefy took from his pockets a handful of the paper balls and threw them at the nursery man. That is to confound you, you blathering old sentimentalist."

Here we can see that even the closest friend is unwilling to understand him, he is confused and laughed at by Doctor Reefy for being so superficial.

One more interesting moment to consider is the title of the story itself. "Paper Pills" creates some kind of association with drugs in the reader's mind. So, this unusual habit can serve as a symbol of temporary relief. Generally, it is therapeutic to write things on paper and thus this action is a short-term relief for the character.

#### 4. Conclusion

To sum up, the paper is an attempt to examine the significance and use of symbols in one of the samples of modernist literature. The analysis of a short story cycle "Winesburg, Ohio" has shown the following:

- i. People of any nationality and culture tend to use symbolism for various purposes, would it be for making comparisons, understanding complicated abstract concepts or just making their speech vibrant and memorable;
- ii. Symbolic reading is purely optional and depends on the reader's encyclopedic knowledge. Some symbols are easily comprehended since they are rooted in the culture while others need some prior knowledge and readiness to be understood. They are called idiolectal (created by individual writers);
- iii. Symbolism, as any other figure of speech, is achieved by deviations made in speech. Here symbolism is analyzed in terms of the violation of Gricean maxims;
- iv. The maxim of manner is responsible for the clarity in speech; the maxim of quality – for truthfulness; the maxim of quantity – for the adequate amount of information used and the maxim of relation – for the relevance of the conveyed information;
- v. With the emergence of Modernism, symbols in literary works became a much more frequent occurrence since modernist writers started to convey complex ideas and emotions that could not have been done through conventional way of writing;
- vi. The main purpose of using symbolism is to reveal character's emotional state, set the mood, predict the story development and explain intricate aspects of the text;
- vii. Sherwood Anderson's short story cycle "Winesburg, Ohio" is abundant in symbols. The writer uses characters, places, objects and events to call for symbolic interpretation and reveal deeper layers of the text;
- viii. Symbolism in Sherwood Anderson's short story cycle is mainly achieved by the deviation of the maxim of quantity which is found in all above analyzed stories. This can be explained by the fact that one of the characteristics of modernism is to concentrate the reader's attention on one particular aspect, detail in a text;
- ix. Alongside the maxim of quantity, the other maxims are also violated in the stories. In "Hands" the distortion of the main character's real name violates the maxim of quality, in the story "Mother" the episode with the cat violates the maxim of relevance and the mysterious content of scrapes of paper in the story "Paper Pills" flouts the maxim of manner.

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