

Worksheet 2. Investigating the Grotesque in Other Stories (teacher resource)

The following analyses are offered as examples of summaries and connections with the grotesque that students may develop as they prepare their presentations:

“Hands”

Wing Biddlebaum has extremely active hands that draw others’ attention. He has a conversation with the ever-curious George Willard, who wonders about the hands, but their interaction stops when Wing’s hands caress George. The young reporter does not hear Wing’s story, but we do. Once named Adolph Myers, he was a well-loved and successful teacher in Pennsylvania who, almost unconsciously and with no malevolent intentions, expressed physical affection with his students. This ignited a reaction among his students’ parents, who drove him out of town. He has ended up a lonely, fearful, and twisted man in Winesburg. The story arouses empathy for Wing, but also recognition that a similar parental reaction would be likely today.

“The Philosopher”

Doctor Percival’s grotesque appearance is stressed in the opening paragraph—large size, drooping mouth, blackened teeth, twitching eye, and dirty clothing. He admits that he is strange, and he does not want a lot of patients. In talking with George Willard, he mentions that he himself was once a reporter and describes his insane father, his mother, and his brother. In his view, people are despicable. One day, a little girl is killed in an accident. Later, the doctor speaks of a premonition of being hanged on Main Street. He shares with George his main “truth”: “Everyone in the world is Christ and they are all crucified.” The story does not explain the significance of the statement, but it is clear that Doctor Percival clung to one truth, and the book is making it clear that action leads to grotesqueness.

“Godliness”

This unique story consists of four stories that span time from before the Civil War. Jesse Bentley, generally considered an “odd sheep,” became a minister and then returned to his family’s farm near Winesburg. He came to see himself as a kind of biblical patriarch, called to wrest land from all of the “Philistines” around him. David Hardy, Jesse’s grandson, had a joyless childhood with a mother who “could not be made happy.” It is evident that she did love her son, but in an ineffective way. David Hardy’s childhood was heavily influenced by his grandfather and came perilously near a premature ending when Jesse identified with the biblical Abraham and prepared to sacrifice his grandson. The third story traces the history of David’s mother and directly blames her neuroses on the culture around her, which made her life and the lives of many others unlivable. The final story describes David’s attack on Jesse, which resulted in the boy’s flight from Winesburg. All of the characters in the stories, even young David, exhibit grotesque characteristics.

“A Man of Ideas”

The characters’ traits in this story are caricatured—the volcanic Joe Welling, his “grey, silent” mother, the mean King father and son, and Sarah (tall, pale, with dark circles under her eyes). “The couple

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looked ridiculous together,” the narrator says of Joe and Sarah. When the Kings arrive at the hotel, clearly meaning nothing good for Joe, he simply stuns them into silence by talking ... and talking ... and talking. By this point, nearly halfway through the book, readers are sure that Winesburg, Ohio, has more than its share of truly grotesque people.

“The Thinker”

Seth Williams and his mother have a distorted relationship, but his adventure on the train does not seem particularly strange for a teenage boy. In Winesburg, he is seen and respected as a thinker. He and George have a rather odd friendship, and George involves him in a juvenile ploy to get Helen White’s attention. Seth and Helen walk together and he tells her some of his plans and ideas, but then concludes that George (or someone like him) is a better suitor, that Helen will just find him strange. Seth is young, so his progress toward being grotesque is just beginning.

“Tandy”

This very short story exerts an intriguing appeal to many readers, as it suggests the possibility of courage and love, characteristics in short supply in the book. Tom Hand’s single-minded dedication to denial of God is grotesque; the red-haired stranger is a grotesque combination of drunkard and mystic. At the end Tom Hand’s five-year-old daughter claims for herself the name “Tandy,” which the stranger equated with strength, bravery, and love.

“The Strength of God”

Reverend Curtis Harman, a somewhat timid Presbyterian minister, observes Kate Swift, a teacher, through a window in his church and becomes obsessed with her—a grotesque situation in itself. At the end he is raving to George Willard about a grotesque merging of the teacher with Jesus as some kind of redeemer because he feels freed from his obsession.

“The Teacher”

This story connects directly with the previous one, as it focuses on Kate Swift and events that led to the scene Reverend Hartman observed through his window. Kate’s cold demeanor masks a passionate nature, and loneliness has left her frustrated. She has a strong interest in George Willard as a promising writer, and he has a disturbing sense that she might be in love with him. Their encounters border on passion but do not cross the line; and one feels that George does not really understand what is going on and that she understands far too well. There is something grotesque about the idea of the two of them as a couple—she a decade older and once his teacher; and George—already beginning to feel love for Helen White.

“Queer”

Elmer Cowley is an alienated young man who desperately wants to fit in with and be like others, but it is evident that will never happen. He has an unnecessarily violent response to the salesman in the store and a bizarre conversation with old Mook. At the end of the story, he assaults George Willard before jumping on a train. To him, George represents the normalcy and sense of belonging he craves. George, on the other hand, does not seem to perceive Elmer as “queer,” suggesting that freakishness is a product of his own imagination. Students may find it easier to identify with this story than with some of the others, as it deals with two young men close to their own age, one who seems to “have it all,” the other an outsider who can never fit in.

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“The Untold Lie”

This is one of the stories that does not mention George Willard, but instead deals with Ray Pearson and Hal Winters, farm workers. The “untold lie” of the title refers to the fact that there is no universal truth about whether one is better off getting married or not. Marriage, for a man, appears to break and harness him as a horse is trained for use—an unidealistic and twisted view. Ray’s middle-aged life appears dull and henpecked; his marriage resulted from the convention that marriage was the only honorable thing when a young woman became pregnant. Hal, a much younger man and a wild one, is about to make the same choice. Marriage and sexual expression within it, pervasive topics throughout *Winesburg, Ohio*, seldom lead to anything except stifled frustration. An additional grotesque element of the story is the death of Hal’s grandfather—note the comment about “going on with their humdrum lives.” In contrast to the human stagnation being discussed, the story stresses the natural beauty of Winesburg’s surrounding landscape.

“Drink”

This story about Tom Foster and his grandmother includes grotesque elements (for example, the grandmother’s twisted hands and Tom’s big head), but both characters have a kind of simplicity and innocence not typical of many of the others described in the book. Tom saw much that is twisted and ugly during his earlier life in Cincinnati, but somehow he remained uncorrupted. In Winesburg he is unambitious and liked; his attraction to Helen White leads him to poetic thoughts and to his single, harmless experience of becoming drunk. George Willard, irritated by Tom’s comments about Helen, does not understand Tom’s claim. The reader is left with the impression that Tom will continue to be strange, but will never become twisted.