

# Sherwood Anderson

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## **Sherwood Anderson**

(September 13, 1876 – March 8, 1941) was an American writer, mainly of short stories, most notably the collection *Winesburg, Ohio*. His influence on American fiction was profound; his literary voice can be heard in Ernest Hemingway, William Faulkner, Thomas Wolfe, John Steinbeck, and others.



Sherwood Anderson in 1933.  
Photo by Carl Van Vechten.

## **Biography**

He was born in Camden, Ohio, the third of Erwin

M. and Emma S. Anderson's seven children. After his father's business failed, they were forced to move frequently, finally settling down at Clyde, Ohio, in 1884. Family difficulties led his father to begin drinking heavily. His father died in 1895. Partly as a result of these misfortunes, Anderson eagerly worked odd jobs to help his family. It earned him the nickname "Jobby." He left school at 14.

He moved to Chicago near his brother Karl's home. He worked as a manual laborer until near the turn of the century, when he enlisted in the United States Army. He was called but did not see action in Cuba during the Spanish-American War. After the war in 1900, he attended Wittenberg Academy in Springfield, Ohio. Eventually he secured a job as a copywriter in Chicago and was highly successful. In 1904 he married Cornelia Lane, the daughter of a wealthy Ohio family.

He fathered three children while living in Cleveland, Ohio, and later Elyria, Ohio, where he managed a mail-order business and paint manufacturing firms. In November 1912 he disappeared for four days after suffering a mental breakdown. He described this as "escaping from his materialistic existence," which garnered praise

from many other writers, who used his "courage" as an example. He moved back to Chicago, working again for a publishing and advertising company.

In 1916, he divorced Cornelia Lane and married Tennessee Mitchell. That same year, his first novel, *Windy McPherson's Son*, was published. Three years later, his second major work, *Marching Men*, was published. However, he is most famous for his collection of interrelated short stories, which he began writing in 1919, known as *Winesburg, Ohio*. He claimed that *Hands*, the opening story, was the first "real" story he ever wrote. His themes are comparable to those of T. S. Eliot and other modernist writers.

Although his short stories, especially those mentioned, were very successful, he felt the need to write novels. In 1920, he published *Poor White*, a rather successful novel. He wrote various novels before divorcing Mitchell in 1922 and marrying Elizabeth Prall, two years later.

In 1923, Anderson published *Many Marriages*, the themes of which he would carry over into much of his later writing. The novel had its detractors, but the reviews were, on the whole, positive. F. Scott

Fitzgerald, for example, considered *Many Marriages* Anderson's finest novel.

Beginning in 1924, Anderson lived in the historic Pontalba Apartments (540-B St. Peter Street) adjoining Jackson Square in New Orleans. There he and his wife entertained William Faulkner, Carl Sandburg, Edmund Wilson and other literary luminaries. Of Faulkner, in fact, he wrote his ambiguous and moving short story "A Meeting South," and, in 1925, wrote *Dark Laughter*, a novel rooted in his New Orleans experience. Although the book is now out of print (and was satirized by Ernest Hemingway in his novel *The Torrents of Spring*), it was Anderson's only best-seller.

Anderson's third marriage also failed, and Anderson married Eleanor Copenhaver in the late 1920s. They traveled and often studied together. In the 1930s, he published *Death in the Woods*, *Puzzled America* (a book of essays), and *Kit Brandon*, which was published in 1936.

He dedicated his 1932 novel *Beyond Desire* to Copenhaver. Although he was much less influential in this final writing period, many of Anderson's more significant lines of prose were

present in these works, which were generally considered sub-par compared to his others.

He died in Panama of peritonitis after swallowing a toothpick at a party, aged 64. Sherwood Anderson was buried at Round Hill Cemetery in Marion, Virginia. His epitaph reads, "Life Not Death is the Great Adventure".

Anderson's final home, known as **Ripshin**, still stands in Troutdale, Virginia, and may be toured by appointment.

## Quotations

"Realism in so far as it means reality to life is always bad art."

"That in the beginning when the world was young there were a great many thoughts but no such thing as truth. Man made the truths himself and each truth was a composite of a great many vague thoughts. All about in the world were truths and they were all beautiful."

"Everyone in the world is Christ and they are all crucified."

"Few know the sweetness of the twisted apples."

"My freedom sleeps in a mulberry bush. My country is in the shivering legs of a little lost dog."

"You will have to know life," she declared, and her voice trembled with earnestness. She took hold of George Willard's shoulders and turned him about so that she could look into his eyes. A passer-by might have thought them about to embrace. "If you are to become a writer you'll have to stop fooling with words," she explained. "It would be better to give up the notion of writing until you are better prepared. Now it's time to be living. I don't want to frighten you, but I would like to make you understand the import of what you think of attempting. You must not become a mere peddler of words. The thing to learn is to know what people are thinking about, not what they say."

"We got up at four in the morning, that first day in the east."

"The young man's mind was carried away by his growing passion for dreams. One looking at him would not have thought him particularly sharp. With the recollection of little things occupying his

mind he closed his eyes and leaned back in the car seat. He stayed that way for a long time and when he aroused himself and again looked out of the car window the town of Winesburg had disappeared and his life there had become but a background on which to paint the dreams of his manhood." (*Last paragraph of "Winesburg, Ohio"*).

## External links

- Works by Sherwood Anderson at Project Gutenberg
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- Winesburg, Ohio at American Literature

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