Winesburg, Ohio: Two Thinkers Essay, Research Paper

Attention, I really screwed up the author?s name in this. His name is Sherwood, not Sherwin. I guess that comes from writing the paper at 3am. I actually spent several days rewriting this paper. The paper compares and contrasts two stories from Winesburg, and received an 89 or 90, I don?t remember. It was submitted in an Honors English class, the hardest english level at my school. I hope it?s high quality bullshit. Have a nice day.

Sherwin Anderson?s collection of short stories about a small farm town, Winesburg, Ohio, contains an idea he terms ?grotesques?. The term outlines the tendency of man to grasp a truth, and hold so strongly on to this truth that it becomes distorted. In the two stories, ?Paper Pills? and ?A Man of Ideas?, the reader witnesses grotesques who have distorted the truth due to their egos. The egos of the main characters direct them to believe they contain the greatest truths of all the townspeople in Winesburg. Dr. Reefy, in ?Paper Pills? holds back the information from his fellow Winesburgers because his ego tells him they do not deserve the mountains of truth. Joe Welling, an oil dealer, spreads his knowledge and observations, because he believes his thoughts enrich the townspeople?s? lives. The irony that these two men boil over with a complex soup of thoughts yet express their ideas clearly to only a handful of willing individuals reinforces the idea of the grotesque. The truth they hang on to?the ?truth? of their supremacy in intelligence? distorts their communication skills to a point where they lose their audience. The symbolic (mis)use of hands as a means of communication and the symbolic use of names and occupations also strengthen the theme of the grotesque as an egoist. The grotesques become so wrapped up in the potency of their thoughts because their egos begin to inflate its importance. Their fixed ?truth? (reinforced by their egos) of higher aptitude causes isolation and grotesqueness. ?A Man of Ideas? and ?Paper Pills? demonstrates the theme of egotistical grotesques through a combination of character, symbols, and irony.

Dr. Reefy and Joe Welling appear an unlikely pair when first viewed, but they soon look like very similarly distorted grotesques as the two stories progress in Winesburg, Ohio. The essence of their similarities and differences lies in the nature of their thoughts. The title of the story, ?A Man of Ideas?, which falls after ?Paper Pills? in the collection, brings to mind an inventor, or brilliant scientist with its grandiose title. However, the author describes Joe Welling?s lines of thought as fits, rather than a subject of study. Welling?s actual thoughts have the potential to fascinate people, yet his delivery of the energy contained in these startling revelations overwhelms the recipient. ?The excited man breathed into his face, peered into his eyes, pounded upon his chest,? demanded, compelled attention? (103). Joe Welling normally goes about his business of dealing oil, but sometimes, he reveals his tendency for dealing out spiritual energy. He wants to imbue the closest man with a shining truth, improving the neighbor?s life with a small witticism, or brilliantly crafted insight. Joe Welling?s eagerness? perhaps correctly termed an overeagerness?to provide these truths causes his grotesqueness. The very thing which makes some of Welling?s ideas so brilliant, their energy, also disturbs his audience. He states obscure facts, expecting a reception worthy of the ?news of the victory of the Greeks in the struggle at Marathon? (195) If he could only pump his ideas and energy into a person like his oil, then he would become perhaps the greatest thinker in the whole town. Instead, the man?s ego consumes him in a desire to demonstrate to everyone his great intelligence and ideas. ?He was beset by ideas and in the throes of one of his ideas was uncontrollable? (103, my italics). The reason Welling loses his audience lies in his grotesque overeagerness to prove himself a smart man. The ?uncontrollable? fits of condescending egotism cause discomfort in his target audience. Conveying a message becomes a prodding, pushing, and herding of the listener in the direction of the of Joe Welling?s ideas. The indifference and annoyance caused by his outbursts limit the number of townspeople who subscribe to his personal energy supply.

The flow of thoughts from Dr. Reefy also spills out, although he expresses them differently. ?Paper Pills? focuses on a man unable to express his thoughts to others, because he believes them unworthy of something so great. With the exception of the tall dark girl, Dr. Reefy keeps these ideas to himself. Instead of cornering someone with a tidbit of truth, he writes his ideas onto small slips of paper, which form into balls after being placed in his pockets. ?On the papers were written thoughts, the beginnings of thoughts, the ends of thoughts? (37). He believes in the supremacy of his thoughts, although he does not share them as Welling does. He records his profound thoughts and uses them to erect massive ideas before they fade away into another massive idea. He toys with these thoughts and performs mental gymnastics to prove his mental supremacy to himself. In the story ?Paper Pills?, the doctor never once accepts an idea from an outsider for his slips of truth. His ego tells him the wisdom of his peers does not match his own, because ??In Doctor Reefy there were the seeds of something very fine? (35). Because he knows his education provided him with better mental faculties, the doctor?s ego projects himself beyond the paltry dealings of the town?s citizens. In the story, he does not attempt to communicate his ideas to anyone but the tall dark girl. He and Joe Welling, the oil dealer, hold in common this denial of their fellow man?s intelligence. Both characters? egos underestimate the aptitude of the townspeople?s minds to rationalize their preaching of ideas, or withholding of ideas. Joe spouts purely energetic thought, hoping someone can harness his brilliance, while the doctor hides his paper pills before discarding them. Neither man can present his ideas to Winesburg successfully, but Joe Welling?s inability results from his pestering character to share everything; Doctor Reefy?s seclusion?a refusal to share with those less than him?from the small society outside his window causes his lack of audience.

Ironically, both characters manage to drop, just once, the idiosyncrasies caused by their egos in order to impact a few individuals. This modesty delves into the grotesque?s previous nature, before they became distorted by their egotistical inclinations. Neither Dr. Reefy nor Joe Welling manages to bring the townspeople as a whole an understanding, or at least an appreciation of the level of deep thought which they hold. Nevertheless, Welling?s speech to the two King men holds their attention. ?As he [Tom King] strode along, he leaned over, listening?absorbed, fascinated? (111) Welling drops his egotistical attitude of teaching everyone the right way?his way? to discuss a topic of deep interest. Anderson?s idea of the distortion of a truth by a person appears relevant in this case. As a grotesque in Winesburg, Ohio, Welling distorts his truth: that all his ideas deserve an audience battered into respect for them. He expects people to listen, because his ideas are more important than their affairs. ?I thought I?d tell you?it?s interesting, eh?? (105), he says, after cornering Ed Thomas for a speech. This interest in holding attentions through rapid firing of thoughts designed to impress the listener only causes discomfort for the listener and isolation for the speaker. ?An expression of helpless annoyance crept over the faces of the four? (105). Welling creates a buffer zone around him because of his pestering nature. The distinct solemnity and unexpectedness of the talk with the Kings deepens the character of the grotesque. This irony of character shows us how successfully Joe Welling could convey his ideas without the overactive prodding. He cannot allow his ideas to go to waste, but in this case, he shares them without forcefully pushing the Kings in the direction of his ideas. The in-your-face egotistical desire to convince them of his righteousness remains conspicuously absent from this scene. Dr. Reefy?s ironic openness also comes with the sharing of ideas with a resident of Winesburg. He has isolated himself already, therefore, his chance at an audience for his thoughts never materializes. In stark contrast, the irony in the story ?Paper Pills? comes when Dr. Reefy reads his most precious personal possessions, his thoughts, to another individual. Unlike the oil dealer, the doctor shares his innermost ideas for the first time. He lacks the nerve to go out and confront someone with his thoughts; the tall dark girl comes to him at his office. After making her acquaintance, he finally acknowledges the worthiness of a townsperson to understand and accept his ideas, something he never did earlier. The aggressive, forceful push of Welling for an audience makes him a grotesque, although for different reasons Dr. Reefy also makes himself a grotesque. The doctor?s complete lack of communication (skills) sets him apart, and causes him to become a grotesque. Absorbed in producing thoughts of great importance, he fails to realize that the truths he holds onto need to be shared. In a weak attempt at communication, ??old Doctor Reefy took from his pockets a handful of the paper balls, and threw them at the nursery man? (36). Amassing a fortune in wisdom in knowledge by his own resources, Dr. Reefy?s truth would perhaps emerge as a great asset. It shines, ironically, but only once, and never enough to encourage him to emerge from his grotesqueness. When he fell in love with the tall, dark girl, ?he read to her all the odds and ends of thoughts he had scribbled on the bits of paper. After he had read them he laughed and stuffed them away in his pockets to become round hard balls? (38). He stuffs his thoughts back into his pockets, a place where his ideas are stored. However, the doctor never retrieves the ideas in his pockets to share them. The ironically open-minded doctor becomes a grotesque once again with this action. Joe Welling?s overeagerness, however, seems less violent at the end of the story ?A Man of Ideas?. The Kings walk along, beside him, in the street, as equals. He does not back them into corners with forceful prodding, or continue with his grotesque insistence. With his big ideas and his small audience, ?He gets everybody working together. You just watch him? (107) Although he still remains egotistical, because he craves attention, Joe Welling discontinues the harassing attitude which caused his unpopularity. The idea of his righteousness fades somewhat, and the reader cannot consider Joe Welling a grotesque any longer. Dr. Reefy?s act of placing his thoughts back into their secluded pocket also dooms him to continue his grotesque isolation. The two characters? small ironic twists take different paths; Joe Welling?s leads to a less grotesque character, while Dr. Reefy?s ego resumes its push towards an unshared life of ideas.

A plethora of symbols abound in the two short stories ?A Man of Ideas? and ?Paper Pills?. In Winesburg, hands hold special priority, because the town relies on the hands of the workers to support itself. In the novel, Winesburg, Ohio, hands also mean more than the ability to accomplish a hard day?s work. The symbolism of hands as a window to the character of an individual becomes apparent when Sherwin Anderson jumps into symbolic hands shortly after the introduction of each short story. Hands represent the person?s personality, and perhaps traits or idiosyncrasies manifest themselves in the hands of a person. Dr. Reefy?s knuckles stand out as his hand?s most obvious features, and they represent a kinship between the doctor, and the gnarled apples which strongly resemble his knuckles.

?Winesburg had forgotten the old man, but in Doctor Reefy there were the seeds of something very fine ? One the trees are only a few gnarled apples that the pickers have rejected. They look like the knuckles of Doctor Reefy?s hands. One nibbles at them, and they are delicious. Into a little round place at the side of the apple has been gathered all of its sweetness ? Only the few know the sweetness of the twisted apples. (35-36)

Anderson extends the metaphor and stretches it into a symbol of immense proportions. The gnarled apples and Dr. Reefy remain untouched and undiscovered wonders, except by ?the few?. The round apples find their way into homes and shops, but still the best fruits of the earth lie undetected in the small, quiet town of Winesburg. The symbol of the sweet apple with an imperfect appearance represents the townspeople?s view of Dr. Reefy. He retains a quality inside which many people don?t have, and his ?sweetness? inside?his myriad of thoughts?collect to form a fruit akin to the apple in the garden of Eden. However, his enticing ideas only become evident when sampling the old man. The ?seeds of something very fine? seal themselves inside the ugly fruit, leaving only the harsh exterior of the old, gnarled hands to discourage people from tapping this storehouse of free thought. In contrast, Joe Welling?s ideas cause him to use his fingers and even flail his whole arm for the purpose of making a grander statement. Instead of allowing sweetness to win over the audience for his ideas, he drives them home with his hands. ?His finger beat a tattoo upon Ed Thomas?s broad chest? (104). With prodding and poking, Joe ?demanded, compelled attention? for his ideas. This method of communication causes a resentment among his fellow Winesburgers. Because of this, no one approaches him for suggestions or novel ideas. Though his ugly hands symbolize a passive, not aggressive communication of ideas, people also ignore Dr. Reefy in his musty office. Joe Welling immediately pounds his ideas home, but perhaps Dr. Reefy expresses all his most coveted treasures in writing for discovery later by someone worthy of their greatness. What the men accomplished with their hands, their occupations, also symbolizes their personalities. Joe Welling, an oil dealer, spouted ideas. His name reminds the reader of an uncapped oil well, shooting black gold into the air. The ?welling up? of his ideas represents the seemingly inexhaustible supply of energy coming from an oil well. The oil dealer sells energy as his job, denoting his persistent attempts to ?sell? his tireless stream of ideas to other individuals. However, his energy blooms like a mushroom cloud from an atomic bomb: too rapidly to be harnessed for useful purposes. Both his occupation and his name symbolically illustrate his character as a spasmodically energetic person. Dr. Reefy?s method of distributing his thoughts also harks back to his occupation. His paper thought pills look like medicine for stupidity and ignorance. The town fails to see Dr. Reefy?s brilliance because of these ailments and for some reason, he holds no desire to treat them for the disease. However, he attempts a weak form of communication with them when he cried, ?This is to confound you, you blithering old sentimentalist,? (36) and then threw the paper pills at the nursery man. By throwing out ideas, he tries to communicate some of his vast ideas to another friend, but he does not succeed. The quip from the doctor displays his desire to demonstrate his superiority. He comments how the thoughts confound the man, a man of ordinary schooling. Only by directly reading the scraps, before they roll into pills, does he finally communicate his ideas fully. The truth may be such a bitter medicine that none of the townspeople wish for a cure. Names also play an important symbolic role in the story ?Paper Pills?. The ?tall dark girl? opened the doctor?s heart and softened him into sharing his ideas. The absence of her name belies the fact that the girl represents anyone. The figure simply took notice when no one else had. She symbolizes the few people who realize gnarled apples taste the sweetest, and that Doctor Reefy holds a pocket full of priceless wisdom. The tall dark girl represents anyone ?who has discovered the sweetness of the twisted apples, she could not get her mind fixed again upon the round perfect fruit that is eaten in the city apartments? (38). The anonymous identity of the woman belies a common trait for anyone who wishes to understand the doctor: the discovery of the sweet side to the doctor. Perhaps the doctor stands correct in his assumption that only a smart person deserves his thoughts. Dr. Reefy?s anonymous friend remains the only individual in the story perceptive enough to identify his ?sweetness? inside. The doctor?s grotesqueness temporarily vanishes with a bite into the gnarled apple by an individual with enough courage to try the untouched fruit. The symbolic names, occupations, and hands in these stories represent the different aspects of the grotesqueness of the two characters. Although the hands of both men may be symbolic of their personalities, their meanings, like the other symbols, differ greatly between the two individuals.

Joe Welling, in ?A Man of Ideas? and Dr. Reefy, in ?Paper Pills? both think grandly of themselves, and hold their thoughts in high esteems. However, the way their egos inflate this ?truth? into grotesqueness contrasts as greatly as the physical appearances of the two men. Dr. Reefy, with his large hands, nose, and beard, shrinks back into a shell. He conserves his thoughts for his personal use in erecting mountains of truth, because no one else deserves them. However, the small, fiery oil dealer, Joe Welling, gushes energy and ideas like an oil strike, and he tries to forcefully share his wealth of ideas. The two thinkers? egos disrupt their minds, and corrupt their truths and them until they become grotesques. The grotesques result from believing they represent the final truth. Stretching righteousness bothers Anderson, and in these stories, he demonstrates how grotesques form from people too willing to believe in their dazzling reason and logic. His witty stories filled with symbols, irony, and carefully drawn caricatures demonstrate the egotistical path to grotesqueness.