The Significance of Sherwood Anderson's Poetry

Winfield Scott Lenox
Loyola University Chicago

Follow this and additional works at: https://ecommons.luc.edu/luc_theses

Part of the English Language and Literature Commons

Recommended Citation

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Theses and Dissertations at Loyola eCommons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Master's Theses by an authorized administrator of Loyola eCommons. For more information, please contact ecommons@luc.edu.

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 License.
Copyright © 1961 Winfield Scott Lenox
The Significance of Sherwood Anderson's Poetry

by

Winfield Scott Lenox

A Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of the Graduate School of Loyola University in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of Master of Arts

February 1961
Life of the Author

Winfield Scott Lenox was born in Chicago, Illinois, May 26, 1932.

He was graduated from St. Philip High School in June, 1950, and from De Paul University in June, 1954, with the degree of Bachelor of Science. He is continuing his studies in English at Loyola University evening school where he has been enrolled as a student since February, 1957.

Since September, 1959, he has held the position of Assistant in the English Department at Loyola University.
FOREWORD

Basically, most of Sherwood Anderson's works, whether written in poetry or in prose, concern themselves with the same common themes and subject matter. He devoted his time to the treatment of only a very few subjects, and his attitudes toward them remained consistent throughout the dozen years (1916-1927) of his career which will be discussed in this paper.

His most often repeated theme during these years was one in which contemporary man, with his distorted sense of values created for him by the industrialized atmosphere around him, had descended to a level at which he found it impossible, or at least very difficult, to love and understand his fellows. The frustrations he experienced in his attempts to succeed in living with his fellowmen were caused by the simple fact that he had forgotten how to love them. Only when he returned to some sound appreciation of his surroundings could he finally regain the love and the peace of mind for which he had been searching.

Since Anderson's subject matter seldom varied and since his attitudes toward it were consistent during his most
productive years, a study of his artistic development might best be focused on an element in his works which underwent significant change during the years under consideration here. Perhaps this development might be seen most clearly in the area of his style, more specifically, in his use of language. In looking not merely at what Anderson said, but more particularly at how he said it, we will come to appreciate the influence his poet's mind had on his prose.

His two ventures into the field of poetry failed, while almost all of his prose has been praised for the fine poetic qualities it possesses. That it is his prose that deserves to be remembered as his great contribution to our literature will go here undisputed. What will, however, be demonstrated is the fact that the qualities of these prose pieces will be appreciated even more by the reader who will permit himself to become familiar with Anderson's poetry. If the poems did not increase the number of subjects Anderson treated, they certainly added depth to those topics on which he chose to concentrate.

Mrs. Eleanor Anderson, the author's widow, in a recent letter to the writer of this paper said: "Sherwood talked a great deal about 'singing prose' and 'hidden poetry'." It is this "singing prose" that will be looked at here, giving special consideration to the effect his poems had on its growth and development.
By first showing the seriousness with which Anderson composed his "songs" and "testaments"—and this will be demonstrated mainly by quoting from his personal correspondence, much of which remains unpublished—and second, by showing the close relationship existing between these poems and the prose works, this paper will hope to prove that the poetry is worthy of finally occupying the position of significance which has previously been denied it.
ACKNOWLEDGMENT

The author wishes to express his gratitude to several persons for the assistance given him during the preparation of this paper.

Particular thanks is extended to Mrs. Sherwood Anderson for the kindness, the interest, and the encouragement she so cordially showed to him. Also, a special mention of gratitude is here made to Dr. Walter Rideout for the extremely sound advice he offered so freely.

Finally, the author thanks the staff of the Newberry Library, especially Dr. Stanley Pargellis, Mr. Benjamin Bowman, Mrs. Gertrude Woodward, and most particularly, Mrs. Amy Nyholm.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I. THE SIGNIFICANCE OF ANDERSON'S POETRY</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anderson's reputation is based mainly on Winesburg, Ohio and a handful of his short tales--His two volumes of poetry have been neglected--There are relationships between his poems and his prose works which make necessary our giving his poetry more serious consideration than has been given it in the past.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>II. ANDERSON THE POET</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Correspondence with friends and associates during the years in which his &quot;songs&quot; and &quot;testaments&quot; were conceived and written serves to illustrate his deep concern and enthusiasm for these works--Critical reception of his poetry.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>III. INFLUENCE OF HIS POETRY ON HIS PROSE STYLE</td>
<td>49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The influence of Gertrude Stein on Anderson's style--The poetic tendency carried over into his prose: <em>Mid-American Chants, Winesburg, Ohio</em>, <em>A New Testament</em>, <em>Many Marriages</em>.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IV. CONCLUSION</td>
<td>85</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Because the poetry adds greatly to the further understanding and appreciation of Anderson, the man and artist, it demands more recognition and consideration than it has been permitted.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>V. SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY</td>
<td>89</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
CHAPTER I

Sherwood Anderson was forty years old when his first major work, a novel entitled *Windy McPherson's Son*, was published in 1916. Then, during the twenty-five years of his life which remained, he produced an average of almost one book per year.

Though his fame rests largely on his *Winesburg, Ohio*, a novel composed of several related short stories, many of his critics will agree that others of his works also rank among the best pieces of American literature produced during this century.

Although his first two novels gained for him the attention and recognition of the literary critics, his audience was always to remain small. Only a few of his works were to

---


2. Between 1916 and 1941 Anderson had published 23 major volumes. His memoirs were published in 1942.


4. Several tales, including "Death in the Woods," "The Egg," and "I Want to Know Why," have come to be recognized by the critics as short story classics.

5. The second was *Marching Men* (New York, 1917).
become "popular" and only one, Dark Laughter, was to meet immediate success. His *Winesburg, Ohio* was very slow to gain acceptance. On showing the manuscripts of these stories to his friend Floyd Dell, he was advised to throw them away because "they had no form." His publishers, having fulfilled their agreement to print three of his books, refused to accept this new work, and so it was finally published by Ben Huebsch. Several of these stories had appeared in magazines previous to their being assembled in book form, and when they did at last appear as *Winesburg, Ohio*, they were greeted by "public abuse, condemnation, and ugly words.... Only gradually did the Winesburg stories meet

---

6 Dark Laughter (New York, 1925).


8 The third book was *Mid-American Chants* (New York, 1918).


10 Masses published "Hands" (March, 1916), and "The Strength of God" (August, 1916). The Little Review printed "The Philosopher" (June, 1916), and "The Awakening" (December, 1918). Seven Arts published "Queer" (December, 1916), "The Untold Lie" (January, 1917), "Mother" (March, 1917), and "The Thinker" (September, 1917).

with approval and eventually with praise. Anderson himself tells us that

when first published, they were bitterly condemned. They were thrown out of libraries. In one New England town, where three copies of the book had been bought, they were publicly burned in the public square of the town. I remember a letter I received once from a woman. She had been seated beside me at a table of a friend. "Having sat beside you and having read your stories, I feel that I shall never be clean again," she wrote. I got many such letters.

Then a change came. The book found its way into schools and colleges. Critics who had ignored or condemned the book now praised it. "It's Anderson's best work. It is the height of his genius. He will never again do such work." People constantly came to me, all saying the same thing.12

And so, it is his short stories or tales, as he preferred to call them, which have assured him his place in the history of contemporary literature; and though he attempted for years to make a novel which would not "break to pieces,"13 his longer works never quite attained the over-all power which

12 Jones and Rideout, p. 406.

13 Letter to Gertrude Stein. (August, 1922). He was very much aware of the weaknesses of his previous novels and was anxious to correct them. With his Many Marriages (New York, 1923), he felt that he finally had a firm grasp on the long form of the novel. "I think it is pretty good. The first long thing I've done that sticks together and doesn't break to pieces anywhere."
some of his shorter pieces possess. It is for his short tales, where "everything is bent on revelation," where he can "make his flash of revelation the climax,"\textsuperscript{14} that he is most vividly remembered.

\textit{Winesburg, Ohio} and a handful of other short prose works have, then, positively though belatedly, received the praise they deserve, while his novels have taken a place of secondary importance.

But what about his poetry?

Sherwood Anderson wrote two volumes of poetry,\textsuperscript{15} and though he hoped almost desperately that they would find a large audience, they have found but a few readers, and have gained almost no recognition from his critics. Apparently no one save their author felt them to be of any significance, but to him they were of the greatest importance. In a letter to a very close friend he had said: "Wish I could come in the evening sometime and read to you from my New Testament.

\textsuperscript{14}The two quotations just given are from Granville Hicks, \textit{The Great Tradition} (New York, 1933), pp. 229, 236.

\textsuperscript{15}The second was \textit{A New Testament} (New York, 1927).
It's the best thing I've ever done but it is done for quiet meditative people living among beautiful savages.\textsuperscript{16}

Despite Anderson's great concern for his poems, they are mentioned only casually by his biographers and even then, it would appear, only so as not to destroy the chronological listing of his total literary output. Both volumes seem to be consistently disregarded by all who discuss Anderson's work, and yet time and again his prose works have been praised for their poetic qualities. He has been called by Edmund Wilson a "poet of fiction,"\textsuperscript{17} and by Pelham Edgar "the poet of a shirt-sleeved civilization."\textsuperscript{18}

Certainly he considered himself a poet. "The truth is that I have always known I was essentially the poet, but I have always known that the thing least to be desired in this world is to be known as a poet."\textsuperscript{19} And again he says: I've thought all these years I've been writing, that if I'm any good at all, there should be music at the bottom of my prose.

\textsuperscript{16}Letter to Jerry and Lucille Blum. (November 12, 1921).


\textsuperscript{18}Pelham Edgar, \textit{The Art of the Novel} (New York, 1933), p. 342.

\textsuperscript{19}Jones and Rideout, p. 300. Letter to his daughter-in-law, Mary Chryst Anderson. (January, 1934).
The painters have always liked my stuff. I've never made much money by my writing and haven't been notably successful in personal relationships. I have, however, dreamed all the time that I might be planting song. You know, something like song seeds in prose, I guess.  

Even the characters in his prose works, which so very often are considered to be autobiographical, feel that they too, at times of crisis or introspection, are poets. In Many Marriages John Webster states: "Perhaps I am a poet. Perhaps it's only the poet who manages to keep the lid off the well within and to keep alive up to the last minute before his body has become worn out and he must get out of it...."  

At the end of Poor White Hugh McVey "for a moment became not an inventor but a poet. The revolution within had already begun. A new declaration of independence wrote itself within him." Twice in telling the story of Wing Biddlebaum's "Hands" the narrator called upon the verse-maker to supply

---

20 Ibid., p. 283. Letter to H. S. Kraft and Louis Gruenberg (before March 31, 1933). Kraft was a free-lance writer interested in adapting some of Anderson's work for stage presentation. Gruenberg, a composer, would do the music for the project.

21 Many Marriages, p. 281.

the necessary inspiration for the telling of the tale: "It is a job for a poet." "It needs a poet there."\textsuperscript{23}

Anderson, together with many of his critics, recognized that his first two novels, \textit{Windy McPherson's Son} and \textit{Marching Men}, were "the result not so much of my own feeling about life as reading the novels of others."\textsuperscript{24} These same critics are quick to call \textit{Winesburg, Ohio}, his fourth book, a masterpiece, listing among its qualities its great poetic beauty. One critic even considers "amazing" the fact that this great work should follow so closely on the heels of two not so extraordinary novels.\textsuperscript{25} Little notice and no significance has been attached to the fact that in this chasm that seems to exist between mediocrity and art Anderson published his first book of poetry, \textit{Mid-American Chants}. Mr. Schevill states that this book marks the end of the first period of Anderson's writing,\textsuperscript{26} a period distinct from that one in which \textit{Winesburg, Ohio} was

\textsuperscript{23}Both of these quotations are from \textit{Winesburg, Ohio}, pp. 10, 13.

\textsuperscript{24}\textit{Sherwood Anderson Memoirs}, p. 289.

\textsuperscript{25}\textit{Schevill}, p. 92.

\textsuperscript{26}\textit{Ibid.}, p. 91.
produced. Is it not conceivable that this slender volume of verses might better be considered as a link between the early novels and the oftentimes poetic Winesburg stories?

The second book of poems, A New Testament, was written over a period of almost ten years. It has received no more recognition than Anderson's first volume of verses. Again in critical writings dealing with Anderson's literary efforts, this particular work is passed over almost as though it did not exist.

Steadily Anderson's prose became more and more poetic in approach, in language, in style, and yet these testaments, on which he worked during the years which saw perhaps ten of these volumes of prose published, have not even been considered significant enough to warrant more than a glance from his biographers and critics. The mere fact that Anderson thought, when Many Marriages was to be published, that this novel, as well as his testaments, might be better understood and appreciated if both books could be published at the same time, strongly suggests that the poetry deserves something other than the neglect which has for these past thirty years surrounded it. In an unpublished letter to Ben Huebsch he wrote:

---

27 The poems were published in book form in 1927 but many of them had appeared separately in various magazines beginning in 1919. (See the Gozzi bibliography of Anderson's contributions to periodicals. Newberry Library Bulletin, December, 1948, pp. 72-76).
I think the new prose is going to be unlike any I've written. I am struggling to get a quick, nervous laugh to the thing.... Will I achieve it?

The gods know.

There is one thing. The New Testament might perhaps be brought out at the same time as *Many Marriages*. The complicated rhythms and the rush of imagery I have worked for in these things would be better understood after reading the same impulses in prose, and the prose would be better understood in the light of the Testament. It is all woven together, you see.²⁸

That Anderson took his poems seriously is obvious.²⁹ That they contributed to the style and form of his prose becomes on investigation more and more apparent.

In order to understand Anderson the artist more thoroughly, to appreciate Anderson the writer of beautiful, powerful prose more fully, one cannot permit himself the error of overlooking or casually bypassing the two volumes of his poetry which have so much to offer and which have for so long remained unopened.

Sherwood Anderson simply wanted to tell stories. "I like to think that I am just a storyteller.... To me it's like this:

²⁸ Letter to Ben Huebsch. (Dated February 17, 1922).

²⁹ Several examples of his great concern over his poetry are evident in his correspondence (see note #17) and these will be referred to throughout the body of this paper.
there are people everywhere you go. They talk. The voices go on endlessly. But they are not saying what they think, what they feel. Very well. If you can keep something quiet or a little relaxed in yourself you can, sometimes, hear the unspoken words people are saying."30 This idea of laying open the minds of people for the purpose of better understanding them was to be a great struggle for Anderson, and perhaps nowhere did he express this problem, together with his fear of inadequacy in solving it, so clearly and beautifully as in his poem entitled "The Story Teller."31

Tales are people who sit on the doorstep of my mind.
It is cold outside and they sit waiting.
I look out at a window.
The tales have cold hands.
Their hands are freezing.

30 Jones and Rideout, p. 454. Letter to Margaret Bartlett, daughter of Judge George Bartlett.

31 A New Testament, p. 63. This poem first appeared with other poems and short stories in The Triumph of the Egg (New York, 1921). It is interesting to note that in his biography of Anderson, James Schell says: "The least successful part of The Triumph of the Egg is the prose-poems. It is hard to understand how such mediocre verse can be aligned with such outstanding prose." (p. 162).
The street before the door of my mind is filled with tales.
They murmur and cry out, they are dying of cold and hunger.
I am a helpless man--my hands tremble.
I should be sitting on a bench like a tailor.
I should be weaving warm cloth out of the threads of thought.
The tales should be clothed.
They are freezing on the doorstep of the house of my mind.
I am a helpless man--my hands tremble.
I feel in the darkness but cannot find the doorknob.
I look out at a window.
Many tales are dying in the street before the house of my mind.

Sometimes his storytelling took the form of a novel, sometimes the form of the short tale, and sometimes he wrote his stories in poetry, but always he was trying to do the same thing.

As has been mentioned, his greatest artistic successes were his short stories. Since most of his tales deal with such brittle things as man's frustrations and inner conflicts, it is not difficult to understand why his novels might not be as effective as his shorter works. The long form was simply not very well suited to his purposes. He often spoke of the trouble he had with his novels. Most satisfactory was the form he used in Winesburg, Ohio, that is, a group of tales independent enough of each other so that they could stand alone,
but which might also be published as a novel.\textsuperscript{32}

"It seems to me that in this form I have worked out something that is very flexible and that is the right instrument for me. The reason will be plain. I get no chance at all for long periods of uninterrupted thought or work. I can take my character into my consciousness and live with it but have to work in this fragmentary way. These individual tales come clear and sharp. When I am ready for one of them it comes all at one sitting, a distillation, an outbreak. No one I know of has used the form as I see it and as I hope to develop it in several books."\textsuperscript{33}

As it turned out, he was correct in thinking that this form was the best suited to his talents. When he wandered too far from the short tale, his works lost much of their power.

Although there is much to be said about the novels and tales in terms of their effect on Anderson's literary contributions, it is specifically with the poetry that this paper will be concerned.

He had said of himself: "What I most want is to be and remain always an experimenter, an adventurer."\textsuperscript{34} He was particularly interested in exploring the possibilities and potentials of literary forms and styles.

\textsuperscript{32}Letter to Ben Huebsch. (November 12, 1919).

\textsuperscript{33}\textit{Ibid}.

\textsuperscript{34}Letter to Paul Rosenfeld, critic, author of \textit{Port of New York}, and close friend of Anderson. (March 10, 1921).
I want constantly to push out into experimental fields. "What can be done in prose that has not been done?" I keep asking myself.

And so I constantly set out on new roads. What is gained?—perhaps nothing but a little colorful strength in my everyday writing. I push on, knowing that no one will perhaps care in the least for these experiments/ A New Testament/ into which I put so much emotional force.35

In his driving desire to know people well enough to write sympathetically and intimately about them, Anderson was always of the feeling that the artist must remain close to the people he would expect to recreate. It was from them that he would learn. Boynton expresses the idea clearly when he writes that:

He must never lose his real interest in the people around him; and when he became aware of a story pleading to be told, he must lend himself to the simple folk who lived it, or might have lived it, and believe in those people until he and they were one.36

"I want to live here and now," he wrote. "As an American writer I want to live as fully as I can in the lives of the


36 Percy Boynton, Americans in Contemporary Fiction (Chicago, 1940), p. 121.
people about me here and now. I want to see more of the forces, the drive of the country go into the development of the imaginative life."  

He felt that it was his job as an artist to penetrate first. Before he could begin to write he must first enter into his subject as deeply as he could, for he believed sincerely that "It is only by knowing each other we can come to understand each other...." He wants in everywhere. To go in is my aim in life." 

In a short poem significantly entitled "The Poet," he very strongly expressed this desire to identify himself with the people who surrounded him. He says of himself:

If I could be brave enough and live long enough I could crawl inside the life of every man, woman and child in America. After I had gone within them I could be born out of them. I could become something the like of which has never been seen before. We could see then what America is like.  

---


38Ibid.


Because it was his feeling that "the secret of America lies in enough tales," he searched unceasingly for new stories to tell in the hope that in his telling them he might help to reveal people to themselves and to each other.

His methods of storytelling demonstrate his preoccupation with the inner man and the function of man's imagination. Anderson insisted that there are two distinct channels in every man's life. We all live on two planes. There is what we call the world of reality and there is the somewhat unreal world of the imagination. These roads do not cross each other but the road of the imagination constantly touches the road of reality. It comes near and it goes away. All of us are sometimes on one road and sometimes on another. I think that we are all living more of our lives on the road of the imagination, or perhaps I had better say in the world of the imagination, than in the real world.

So the imaginative world was of great concern to Anderson. It is not true that he thought of it only as a place to which he might escape. Rather, he ran to it in order to find things he knew would be there. Still, the artist must not lose himself in this unreal world. Since the imagination "feeds on reality" it is clear that some sort of balanced relationship

---


43 Ibid., p. 67.
between these two worlds must be maintained. "Separate yourself too much from life and you may at moments be a lyric poet, but you are not an artist."\textsuperscript{44}

Anderson's link between these two worlds was to be the language he used. At a time when much prose was taking on the aspects of poetry, and poetry was adopting many of the properties of prose,\textsuperscript{45} his style was to cause almost as much discussion as his subject matter did. His language often seems to act as an anchor holding down thoughts which might too easily lose their effectiveness were they to rise above an idiomatic to an elaborate style. When he was successful in suiting his style to his matter, he produced the kind of literature which has won him fame. Too often, however, his works, though containing parts and sections of exceptional force and beauty, lacked the overall harmony which he so insistently strived for.

He made clear his attitude toward the question of style when he stated that any good American literature of his time would of necessity have about it a kind of characteristic crudity. Since a lasting work of art would be one to come out

\textsuperscript{44}Ibid.

\textsuperscript{45}Schevill, p. 144.
of the people, and since the people were simple and unsophisticated, it would follow that the art of this population would reflect these basic characteristics of the culture creating it. Crudity in American writing would have to be expected. It need not be apologized for. It should rather be looked upon as a quality of a literature which would in time grow to a more subtle, beautiful thing. 46

In the foreword to his first book of poems he very clearly stated:

For this book of chants I ask only that it be allowed to stand stark against the background of my own place and generation. Honest Americans will not demand beauty that is not yet native to our cities and fields. In secret a million men and women are trying, as I have tried here, to express the hunger within and I have dared to put these chants forth only because I hope and believe they may find an answering and clearer call in the hearts of other Mid-Americans. 47

His intentions here seem to have been clear. Why then would his contemporaries not simply take him at his word and see his work for what he intended it to be?

It is important that one realize that much of Anderson's disappointment over his two volumes of poetry stemmed from


47 Mid-American Chants, p. 8.
the fact that he felt them to be greatly misunderstood. He looked for "understanding, not of what is accomplished, but of the thing aimed at."

This understanding has not been awarded him. Few readers of today are even aware that Anderson wrote two volumes of poems.

---

48 Jones and Rideout, p. 84.
CHAPTER II

The publication of Anderson's first book of poetry, Mid-American Chants, marked the conclusion of his association with the publishing firm of the John Lane Company. According to the agreement between them, the Lane Company would publish three of Anderson's works, and since they had already produced two of his novels without any great financial success, they were undoubtedly pleased, after completing their obligation by publishing the poetry, to terminate their connections with this author who seemingly was not going to make any money for them. Their final effort together was even less of a success than either of their earlier ventures. Anderson said: "...I gave John Lane, who was no doubt discouraged with me, the little book of verse called Mid-American Chants. How many copies of that little book were sold I do not know. But if I learned it sold two hundred I would be surprised." ¹

It is easy to appreciate the gravity of the disappointments he felt at the failure of his poems to find acceptance, when we can see that during the many months that preceded their publication he had time and again shown tremendous enthusiasm for them.

Almost always when he referred to these works in his letters, he called them "songs." Singing would allow him the freedom he thought necessary to express what he had to say. His concept of poetry was an untutored one. Perhaps he came closest to defining his idea of what poetry should be only much later, when he saw it as "the carrying of conviction to others through feeling through the medium of words." Also he was to tell Hart Crane that he had enjoyed that author's poems simply because, "They made sustained pictures for me." Anderson made no pretense about possessing any technical skills as a poet, but he did feel that he wanted to achieve in these songs a certain "rhythm of words with rhythm of thought." They were to be the emotional outpourings of one who wanted to hope that the world was not falling down in front of him.

---

2Jones and Rideout, p. 224.


4Jones and Rideout, p. xv.
Whether or not the songs were really poetry does not seem to be a problem. Most of Anderson's critics will agree that if the songs are not poems by the strictest standards, they are something more than prose. It was Louis Untermeyer who suggested that perhaps they might better be called the "stuff of poetry rather than poetry itself." That his critics would have so many unpleasant things to say about the form of his work disturbed him. Hadn't he made clear his stand when he wrote the foreword to his book? Whether these were technically good poems or not seemed of little consequence to Anderson. Since he thought he had sufficiently prefaced his songs with his remark in the foreword, he undoubtedly felt that he could go ahead and sing without expecting a great amount of criticism for his lack of training in the art of poetry.

To his friends, in letters written during the year preceding the publication of Mid-American Chants, he spoke often of these songs and the significance he attached to them. His correspondence with Waldo Frank, an editor of Seven Arts magazine, demonstrates the seriousness with which he regarded his poems. The following excerpts from letters written to Frank at this time will serve to show the growing enthusiasm and concern Anderson had for these writings.

As early as March 2, 1917, his excitement was apparent as he wrote that the "...poems would make you sit up...[but]... you can't see them yet." Then, just three days later, he could keep them to himself no longer: "I cannot resist sending you two of my songs. There are about twenty of them now. I believe they get at a note." In this same letter he made it clear that he was not submitting the songs for publication. He merely wanted to show them to his friend. Soon after, he said: "I have sent you some more songs. Tell me if they sing to you." And then, as his confidence grew: "If you like them I would like Seven Arts to publish a group of them."9

In the month that followed he continued to discuss the possibility of publication:

I have not heard anything from you in regard to the songs, several of which I sent you some time ago. I am sending you two or three more enclosed today.

---

6 Jones and Rideout, p. 10.
7 Letter to Waldo Frank. (Dated March 5, 1917).
8 Jones and Rideout, p. 11.
9 Letter to Waldo Frank. (Undated) Spring, 1917.
The impulse toward these things continues and I have now about forty of them.

By the way, it would be worth while to have *Seven Arts* magazine tell me at an early date whether or not they are interested in these songs. I keep getting requests for things from other publications....

Apparently *Seven Arts*, though it was at this time publishing a few of his *Winesburg* stories, was not especially interested in his chants:

"The songs sing to me. They have carried me far. I am only sorry that *Seven Arts* does not want them, because it is the only place I at this moment know for them."

It is easy to see from the form and style of this same letter that his mind was filled with poetry. The letter itself is song-like:

I have been to Nebraska where the big machines are tearing the fields to pieces; over the low hills runs the promise of corn. You wait, dear Brother; I shall bring God home to the sweaty men in the corn rows. My songs shall creep into their hearts and teach them the sacredness of the long aisles of growing things that lead to the throne of the God of men.

---

10 Letter to Waldo Frank. (Undated) Summer, 1917.

11 Actually *Seven Arts* did publish two of the songs in its June, 1917, issue, pp. 190-192.

12 Jones and Rideout, p. 13.
We shall talk of the lands west of Chicago. Then I shall sing you my songs as the good old men sang. We shall sing and talk as old men talked before magazines and checks for stories came to corrupt their minds.\footnote{13}

Compare this letter with the poem "Song of the Middle World," one of his chants, in which he writes:

\begin{quote}
Promise of corn,
Promise of corn,
Long aisles running into the dawn
and beyond
To the throne of gods.

I want falling light and an evening sky,
I want to sing my songs low and
crooning to the moon.
I want to bring gods home to the
sweating men in the corn-rows and in shops
When my song sings.\footnote{14}
\end{quote}

While spending the summer months of 1917 at Lake Chateaugay in upstate New York, he contacted Harriet Monroe, the editor of \textit{Poetry} magazine. She showed interest in his work and subsequently printed a group of his songs in her magazine.\footnote{15}

\footnote{13}{Ibid.}
\footnote{14}{\textit{Mid-American Chants}, p. 35.}
\footnote{15}{\textit{Poetry} magazine was founded by Harriet Monroe in 1912 in Chicago. Anderson's six songs appeared in the September, 1917, issue.}
Upon receiving several of his poems, she chose six which she would use. He wrote to her:

The selection you have made suits me very well for my debut as a singer. I think the sequence you have named would be very good. I trust you entirely for that. The amount of $75.00 for the six songs is O.K.

"Song of Stephen the Westerner"
"American Spring Song"
"Evening Song"
"Song of the Drunken Business Man"
"Song of Industrial America"
"A Visit"

Call the group "West Winds."16

Then later, perhaps after a new title had been suggested, he wrote:

Dear Miss Monroe,

I really prefer "Mid-American Songs" but don't think the matter of vital importance. Do as your judgment suggests.

Sherwood Anderson17

16 The six songs mentioned in this letter all appeared under the same titles in Mid-American Chants on pages 38-40, 44-45, 81, 64, 15-18, and 55, respectively. It is significant to note, if only for the purpose of correcting the impression made by some critics that Anderson never changed or re-worked his poems, that several alterations were made in these songs between the time they appeared in Poetry and their publication in book form. For example compare the two versions of "The Song of the Drunken Business Man."

17 Postcard to Harriet Monroe. (Dated July 9, 1917).
Just a few days later, he had this enthusiastic announcement to make to Miss Monroe:

I hope you can use the verses in September. I may issue a book of songs soon and would like the ground broken by publication through such good channels as Poetry as early as possible. My feelings about the title were expressed on a postcard. I am really perfectly willing to leave it up to you.18

A complete reversal of feelings was sounded when he dispatched the following brief note:

Dear Miss Monroe,

On second thought please call the group of songs "Mid-American Songs."

Sherwood Anderson19

This particular set of unpublished letters to the editor of Poetry magazine ends with these optimistic words:

Dear Miss Monroe,

I am in receipt of check. Thanks. You will be interested to know that I am planning to issue my book of verses or "emotional prose" or whatever it may be called some time this winter.

Sherwood Anderson20

During the same months that the above correspondence was taking place, Anderson continued to write Waldo Frank,

18 Letter to Harriet Monroe. (Dated July 14, 1917).


20 Letter to Harriet Monroe. (Dated September 21, 1917).
and at the close of that summer he wrote in an almost wildly enthusiastic way:

Since I came back to Chicago a madness has seized me. I do nothing but write songs. Like a big ugly bird I jump up on the rail of the bridges and sing.

See the list:

1. "Song of Theodore"
2. "Chicago"
3. "Song of the Break of Day"
4. "The Cornfields"
5. "The Stranger"
6. "Manhattan"
7. "A Visit"
8. "A Lullaby"
9. "The Beam"
10. "Song of the Break of Day"
11. "Revolt"
12. "Night Whispers"
13. "Hosanna"
14. "Song of Cedric the Silent"
15. "Song of the Love of Women"
16. "Evening Song"
17. "Song Long After"
18. "Brief Barroom Song"

Murder your wife. Chuck your job. Come out and we will sing the real songs of the West.

But don't you tell anyone what I am doing. I'm disguised as a truck driver, a man who runs a bird store, a fellow who opens oysters in a restaurant. They kill singers out here on suspicion. 21

---

21 Letter to Waldo Frank. (Dated September, 1917). All titles that are mentioned here, with the exception of the last one, appear in Mid-American Chants. Notice that title number ten is a repetition of number three.
After the publication of his songs in Poetry magazine, a displeased but determined Anderson wrote again to Frank that the poems "created some stir out here, and everyone abused me. Nevertheless, I shall put them into a book.... I would publish the verses for one reason if no other. It will give a rare opportunity to those who desire to flay me." 22

Certainly Anderson was aware of the difficulties he would have to face were he to continue with his songs instead of concentrating solely on fiction, but because of his desire to "experiment" he felt he must go on with the poetry. By now his feelings about its importance to his development were becoming more certain. They were instinct. He was still not sure, however, that his book would be accepted by his publisher.

With what appears to be a strengthened self-confidence, he writes almost boldly to Frank:

You were wrong about the songs. Your argument that I will make more progress by bringing out the novels is all right, but don't you see I must snap my fingers at the world? That must remain a part of my creed. If a road leads to destruction, one must take it as a sporting chance.

22 Jones and Rideout, p. 17. Letter to Frank. (Dated September, 1917).
The songs will perhaps not be printed. I have not heard from Jeff Jones of the John Lane Company and have a hunch he has lost his nerve.23

He did so very much want these poems to reach a large audience, but his confidence in their worth was continually wavering. Doubts plagued him constantly and he could not dismiss the feeling that he was perhaps not as well equipped for his job as he would like to have been:

At my best I am like a great mother bird flying over the broad Mississippi Valley, seeing its town and its broad fields and peoples and brooding over some vague dream of a song arising, of gods coming here to dwell with my people. At my worst I am a petty writer not big enough for the task I have set myself.24

He was determined, however, at least to try to accomplish what he felt that other writers of his period had so far been unable to do: "My songs are going to be widely abused and perhaps rightly. I'm a poor enough singer. But there is a song here, and it's been muffed."25


24 Ibid., p. 25. Letter to Frank. (Dated November, 1917). This is the second time Anderson uses a bird image when referring to himself as a writer of the songs. See letter Frank written in September. (Footnote #20 of previous section.).

25 Ibid., p. 31. Letter to Van Wyck Brooks. (Dated April, 1918).
This responsibility of uniting all of America by crying out and making all of its people aware of their common trials and goals, was, he felt, one that had so far been only unsatisfactorily met.

Two of his contemporaries who might have been capable of doing what Anderson was attempting to do were Edgar Lee Masters and Carl Sandburg. Though Anderson admired both men he did not think that either of them was adequately singing this song that had to be sung.

Although he had great respect for Master's Spoon River Anthology, he thought that that author lacked the kind of deep love for his fellows that necessarily would have to permeate a work which would have as its end the uniting of all the peoples of his country.

Sandburg, on the other hand, failed to measure up to the standards Anderson had set, mainly because "most of his

26 Schevill, p. 97. "...Anderson took the book to his room and stayed up most of the night reading it. Six months afterward, in the fall of 1915, he started to write Winesburg. The characters of Spoon River, isolated with their own problems and yet connected by their small town background, had given him the clue."

27 Jones and Rideout, p. 31. Letter to Brooks. (Dated April, 1918). "Masters might get it [the song], but he has too keen a quality of hate."
verses don't sing.... Ben Hecht called him a true poet who could not write poetry."²⁸

So even though he feared that the publication of his chants would make him "the most abused man in the country,"²⁹ he was determined to see them in print because he really believed that they might satisfy a need existing in the people around him. Surely he recognized this need within himself, and in his songs he would make it known to all who would listen: "My chants will fall flat and go unnoticed. They perhaps deserve it, but they deserve something better also."³⁰ Someone had to put into words the frustration and hope of this generation of men and women who, because of the tremendous changes that were taking place daily around them, were afraid to understand and love each other. Someone had to speak out for all of them. He would let them all know that the feeling of aloneness, and desire for understanding were things common to them all.

²⁸Ibid., p. 12. Letter to Frank. (? April, 1917).

²⁹Ibid., p. 20. Letter to his brother Karl who was, at this time, on his way to becoming a successful painter. (Late 1917).

³⁰Ibid., p. 36. Letter to Frank. (Spring, 1918).
Mid-American Chants was finally published in the spring of 1918. As we have already seen, it failed to accomplish what Anderson had hoped it might. It was not condemned by his critics; it was, rather, dismissed as a well intended but poorly executed attempt at poetry. Anderson felt that little of the criticism written about the book was valid, but at least one review particularly pleased him, mainly because its author "struck on what I was trying to do whether I did it or not." Few of his critics, he felt, understood what he was trying to do, and so they had seen the crudeness of the work not as being basic to its beauty, but rather as a distraction from it. The review which he especially favored, although it was a complimentary one, did not attempt to make Anderson's book anything more than he intended it to be. The reviewer, Alice Henderson, saw it as a work that was "purely emotional, and any definition that 'would seek to give it purpose' would wrong it."

Unfortunately, everyone did not extend to him the kind of encouragement he found in the Henderson analysis of his


32 Letter to Frank. (Dated January, 1919).

33 Henderson, p. 288.
poems. He was much disturbed to find that his good friend Van Wyck Brooks was not very enthusiastic about the book. In explanation of his efforts he wrote to Brooks candidly stating: "In the chants I reached into my own personal mutterings, half insane and disordered, and tried to take out of them a little something ordered. You should see how I clutched at the ordered cornfields, insisted on them to myself, took them as about the only thing I could see." Though this insistence is felt throughout his work, he suffered to realize that it was not being properly interpreted by his readers.

To this discussion of the events surrounding the publication of the chants, let this one more thing be noted. As if he were not upset enough with the disappointing debut he made as a poet, consider the further unpleasantness and embarrassment he must have felt when he found that he had to write:

Dear Miss Monroe,

By one of the curious slips of mind that are always happening to me I did something I should not have done. Some of the songs printed in my new book were first printed in Poetry. I, of course, intended to have a note printed into the book giving Poetry credit. It was unfair of me not to have done so as Poetry brought these chants

---

out ahead of anyone else. I am sorry.
The note to John Lane was written, put into
my pocket and forgotten. Please forgive
me.

Sherwood Anderson

The whole atmosphere created by his songs seemed to be
one of disappointment and discomfort. Only a few critics
have recognized that the chants did add something of importance
to Anderson's artistic growth, but their comments were not
of sufficient force to have caused any serious reconsideration
or re-appraisal of the poems.

Anderson, himself, foresaw the difficulty his poetry
would experience in finding acceptance when he wrote:

I had an interesting experience with
these songs and they have brought me, in a
way, a greater personal satisfaction than
anything that I have ever done. They are,
I presume, illegitimate children that have
by some accident come to live in my house.

---

35 Letter to Harriet Monroe. (Dated April 19, 1918).

36 "The failure of many of the poems to achieve this end
to stand stark against the background of my own place and
generation does not alter or mar their purpose. It is
precisely this desire, this purpose that is most fully and
exquisitely achieved in Winesburg, Ohio, parts of The Triumph
of the Egg, Horses and Men, and in Poor White." V. Calverton,
"He has begun to work as a conscious craftsman: the
resulting ferment was Mid-American Chants, the substance
Winesburg," Irving Howe, Sherwood Anderson (New York, 1951),
p. 96.
At first no one liked them, then they began to make a headway. I find that with certain people I care the most about they have come to mean more than anything else I have done. I really believe they will be legitimated by time....

Were someone who is unfamiliar with his works to examine a chronological listing of Anderson's books, he might conclude that upon his disheartening experience with the Mid-American Chants, Anderson gave up the idea of writing poetry for almost a decade. This conclusion would be erroneous for although his second book of verses, A New Testament, did not appear until 1927, he had been working on it for almost a decade, publishing sections of it in magazines as early as 1919. Furthermore, anyone having read the many prose works which Anderson had had published during these years could hardly have escaped noting the definite poetic tendencies of these books whether they were in the form of novels, short tales, or essays.

---

37Letter to Frank. (Dated April 10, 1918).

The influence of his poetry on his prose was growing stronger all the time. Critic N. B. Fagin clearly reminds us that this tendency toward the poetic could be seen in the simple men and women of his stories—the yokels that people his Winesburgs, and Bidwells and Caxtons and Willow Springs—they have their moments of experience that find articulation in Anderson's pages as pure lyricism. In his fiction their wonder and brooding, their dark introspection and child-like exuberance becomes a record of melodious stutters.39

That his poems helped to shape his prose was a fact that he, himself, recognized and spoke of to his friends. The significance which he attached to the poems was much greater than that bestowed on them by any of his critics or biographers. In an unpublished letter he says very plainly:

Some years ago I wrote the little book Mid-American Chants and that led directly into the impulse that produced Winesburg, Poor White and the The Triumph of the Egg. For two years now I've been at work on another thing I call A New Testament, and that has led directly to Many Marriages. If it comes off---the gods grant it may---it will be the biggest, most sustained and moving thing I've done.40


40 Letter to Ben Huebsch. (February 17, 1922).
If the reader of Anderson's prose works cannot appreciate the influence that the poetry had upon them, the reason surely cannot be because similarities do not exist.

Throughout his entire career, in most of the prose he wrote, there are innumerable examples of his using words always as a poet would use them. How it must have pleased him to read Percy Boynton's statement: "It is a marked fact about Sherwood Anderson's prose that you close a book feeling that on the whole you have been reading poetry."  

The early "testaments" which Anderson wrote were more prose than poetry. Their length was often considerably greater than any of the single pieces to be found later when they were collected into book form. To fellow-poet Hart Crane he confided that he appreciated the looseness and flexibility that this sort of writing permitted him:

In a way I like the structure and mood of the Testament thing better than anything I have found. In it I hope to express much of the vague, intangible hunger that constantly besets me, as it must you. One doesn't hunger

---

41 Fagin, p. 147. Fagin quotes Boynton here.
to defeat the materialism of the world about.
One hungers to find brothers buried away
beneath all this roaring modern insanity
of life.42

His motives for writing these testaments were the same
as those which prompted him to write his **Mid-American Chants**.
The chants were written because he felt that: "In secret a
million men and women are trying, as I have tried here, to
express the hunger within and I have dared to put these chants
forth only because I hope and believe they may find an answering
and clearer call in the hearts of other Mid-Americans."43 So
also, of his new verses he tells us: "In the **Testaments** I
want to send the voices of my own mind out to the hidden
voices in others, to do what can't be done perhaps."44 "It's
the **Mid-American Chants** thing carried on---it's out on the
edge of madness but earthy too."45

---
42 Jones and Rideout, p. 52. Letter to Hart Crane. (?) December 17, 1919.
43 **Mid-American Chants**, p. 3.
44 Jones and Rideout, p. 53. Letter to Hart Crane. (See #5 above).
45 Letter to Frank. (May, 1919).
But if his goals here were to be the same as in his earlier songs, his methods for attaining them were not. He felt that the form that these new poems were taking was an even more unusual one than he had used in his chants. The testaments were to be more subjective, more complex, more concerned with the communication which must exist between the imagination of one man and the imaginations of all his fellows. The Testament, he excitedly tells Van Wyck Brooks,

is an attempt to express, largely by indirection, the purely fanciful side of a man's life, the odds and ends of thought, the little pockets of thoughts and emotions that are so seldom touched.

I've a fancy this last experiment would make your hair stand on end. It is infinitely more difficult than the chants.46

Later in a letter to other close friends he wrote that "the New Testament thing is experimental. What I suppose I'm after is a new intensity of prose handling."47 If, however, the beginnings of these works looked and sounded like prose, it is not long before the "intensity" grew to the point at which it began to distill the prose into a sort of poetry that Anderson hoped for: "The Testament goes on. It may achieve poetry."48

---

46Jones and Rideout, p. 46. Letter to Brooks. (March 31, 1919).
47Letter to Lucille and Jerry Blum. (November 12, 1921).
48Letter to Frank. (Late 1919?).
That these works were written, so to speak, in moments of passion, was a fact that Anderson did not deny: "I do not work at them. They are to be a groping after expression of my own faith,...." But what he wanted to make clear was that time and care would be spent in editing, selecting and re-working the poems before the book would be published. He wrote to Paul Rosenfeld:

The Testament is a purely experimental thing with me. Many of the things which you will now find in it will no doubt eventually be cast out altogether. However, I'm going to send it to you just as it is. In this book I am trying to get at something that I think was very beautifully done in some parts of the Old Testament by the Hebrew poets. That is to say, I want to achieve it in rhythm of words with rhythm of thought. Do I make myself clear? The thing if achieved will be felt rather than seen or heard, perhaps. You see as the things are, many of them violate my own conception of what I am after.

The unorthodox approach which he decided to employ was one for which he felt, that while perhaps no explanation would satisfy, no apology would be required. He hoped that

49 Letter to Frank. (Late 1919).

50 Jones and Rideout, p. 77. Letter to Paul Rosenfeld. (After October 24, 1921).

51 Ibid. "In making this book I have felt no call to responsibility to anything but my own inner sense of what is beautiful in the arrangement of words and ideas. It is in a way my own Bible."
his testaments would be read and judged as serious, personal studies of the world of a man's fancy—"a sort of autobiography of a man's fanciful self."\(^{52}\)

He sent his testaments to his friends, hoping for their understanding and approval. Some of them were able to feel just the result he intended to produce, and so provide him with the words of encouragement he so strongly wanted to hear.

I think the piece you sent me is a very lovely, a very quiet, a very swelling opening of Song. Of course, I cannot judge it in relation to a book I have not read. But I found in it an invitation to a good and open singing book—and I reckon the Testament is going to be that. I am eager to see more of it.... It flows sweetly and surely and widely; it has viste, it has grace. Many would call it formless. But it has a form of its own—an opening form. The vision of all the world stopping stark still for your words is very real and very stopping indeed.\(^{53}\)

On the other hand, certainly not all of his associates were convinced that the testaments had much merit. He sent some of them to Harriet Monroe, hoping that she might think them suitable for publication in \textit{Poetry}. Since she had liked his \textit{Mid-American Chants} well enough to use them, perhaps now she would accept these new things and print them for him.

\(^{52}\) Letter to Ben Huebsch. (November 12, 1919).

\(^{53}\) Letter from Frank to Anderson. (December 4, 1919).
Unfortunately, she was not very favorably impressed with them, and so she did not use them in her magazine.

Anderson, disappointed and hurt, apparently at her lack of sympathy with the poems, wrote her this letter:

Dear Harriet:

The more I think about it, the more I feel that it would be better for you to return the things to me and not use any of them. I intended to ask you about them when I saw you the other evening, but I forgot about it. Yourself and the others who have looked these things over may be entirely right about them.

On the other hand, these things are also fragments of a rather big theme on which I have been working for several years and which may never function properly.

I think that you are undoubtedly right that they are not clear and it would probably be a good deal better if I kept all these things about me for a few years more, before using any of them.

I am afraid what poetic conception I have is not very clearly related to anything I know of now going on in poetry and it may possibly not be related to anything. I noted the comments on the envelope and presume that is why you sent them. The truth is that they are not very illuminating, nor do I think they are very understanding.

However, I know, Harriet, that you will know just what I mean.

My only intent in asking you to send the things back is that they were no doubt sent out prematurely. I would really like to get them back into their own house. After two or three years, occasionally looking at them, I will know more about them. With love,

Yours sincerely,

Sherwood Anderson

---

54 Letter to Harriet Monroe. (December 2, 1921).
In further correspondence he continued to mention the work he was doing on the poems. He kept them in a kind of notebook which he carried with him in his bag whenever he went anywhere. Always this notebook was in reaching distance so that he might add to it anytime he was moved to do so: "Often something goes into that strange book that is always on my desk." He was to work on his testaments all through the early 1920's, publishing them separately in literary magazines. That they created little public interest did not seem to prevent Anderson from writing more and more of them during these years.

At this same time he was busy writing quite a good deal of prose. *Poor White* and *The Triumph of the Egg* were published in 1921. These were followed by *Many Marriages* and *Horses and Man* (1923), *A Story Teller's Story* (1924), *Dark Laughter* and *The Modern Writer* (1925), *Tar: A Midwest Childhood* and *Sherwood Anderson's Notebook* (1926).

---

55 Letter to Frank. (The close of 1919).

56 Letter to Frank. (Dated August 10, 1920).
It is interesting to note how very often particular ideas or images from the testaments will find their way into these prose works. Detailed comments and comparisons of these similarities will be made later in this paper. For now it is enough for us to recognize that while these many prose works were being written, the testaments were always at Anderson's fingertips. It is not presuming too much to suggest that though his ideas, as expressed in the unusual testaments, found little audience and less critical acclaim, they did, when they made their way into the more conventional novels and short stories, contribute strongly to these works.

When the testaments were to be collected and printed in book form, Anderson was still afraid they would fail to find the sort of recognition he felt they deserved, and for several months prior to the book's publication he suffered through long periods of depression. The feeling that he was not accomplishing all that he wanted to accomplish was weighing heavily on him. Finally, he seemed to lack the desire to write at all. Even a vacation of four months in Europe failed to stimulate his writing arm, though he must have been somewhat consoled to learn of the widespread interest being shown in his books there. A French edition of Winesburg,
Ohio was to be published in June of 1927, while Insel Verlag had contracted for the rights to print German translations of Poor White, The Triumph of the Egg, and A Story Teller's Story.\textsuperscript{58}

After his return home his depression was only deepened by the death of his brother Earl. The little work he did now was mainly on his book of testaments, and it must have been painful for him to confide almost in despair to his good friend, Paul Rosenfeld: "I'm afraid my Testament won't be all I want it to be."\textsuperscript{59}

This fear was clearly realized when the book was published and it failed to sell. It was hardly the sort of book which one would expect a great many people to buy. Even Anderson knew that its sales would not be tremendous. He had grown accustomed to finding, at best, a medium-sized audience. Still, the reaction of the public to this particular book was especially distressing to him. In it he was still trying to unite himself with everyone, everything, in order to help bring a kind of inner peace to himself and to those around him. Perhaps even more important to him than anything else...

\textsuperscript{58} Ibid., p. 236.

\textsuperscript{59} Jones and Rideout, p. 170. Letter to Paul Rosenfeld. (Dated April 29, 1927).
was his feeling of having here laid himself wide open so that everyone might read his most intimate thoughts. The very personal hurt, the blow to his extremely sensitive pride, came with the realization that very few people even cared enough to give these pages a glance.

All of his writings had had about them an autobiographical element. They had all attempted to give something of himself, to expose him in some way. Never before, however, had he given so much, revealed so much of self, as he did in these very subjective poems. That his critics approved or disapproved of his work was, though certainly of interest to him, not his primary concern. He was more interested simply in putting these pleadings or confessions or testaments on paper and having them read by all of those who, he was certain, were as lost as he was.

Most of the critics who reviewed A New Testament were, if not always complimentary, at least fairly accurate. The poems were labeled as being "fragments of distilled ego," or merely the work of a "very self-conscious artist allowing the public to see the turmoil inside his head." One of the more observant reviewers called the book

---

60Bookman, LXV (August 27, 1927), 710.

61Boston Transcript, June 22, 1927, p. 4.
a self-revealing document which tells more about Sherwood Anderson than meets the eye. It reflects his sensitivity to life, his deep introspection, his groping for the essentials of human existence behind the clothes and masks we wear.... The mood of the artist to get inside people, to see beyond their coats and hats, to read their inner life, is here revealed.62

Anderson was not surprised that his poems, because of their subject matter, tone, or form, failed to find a large audience. What is surprising is the fact that scholars and serious students of American literature have let this poetry go almost entirely unnoticed and uninvestigated. Over thirty years ago, when A New Testament was published, the reviewer for the New York Times made this penetrating, but apparently ineffectual analysis:

The sensitivity of A New Testament is patent on every page. It is a book that tells a great deal about the mind of Sherwood Anderson and for that reason it is of value to any student of contemporary American letters. Certainly he is one of the few emphatically American types in our literature, a type molded by the agricultural stretches of the Middle West and influenced by the burliness of the Chicago scene.... The running stream of poetry behind his intellectual gestures, therefore, deserves to be hailed, for choked as it sometimes is, it gives the substance of the man.63


This "substance of the man" and even more particularly, the substance of the artist is clearly revealed in his testaments as well as in several of his other works. The remainder of this paper will concern itself with setting forth examples of the influence which his poetry had on his prose.
CHAPTER III

We have already seen that Anderson wanted to believe that in all of his works he was "planting song," creating, as it were, "song seeds in prose." He hoped always that "...if I'm any good at all, there should be music at the bottom of my prose." This basic concern for a kind of rhythmic prose style manifested itself strongly in all of his works. He thought like a poet from the start of his career to the finish of it; and though his first two novels showed only hints of the poetic style which he was to develop later, even in these early works one finds examples of the poet's mind at work. His methods of expressing himself became more and more those of the poet. It was only, however, when he could properly suit this poetic style to his seemingly unpoetic subject matter that he achieved his greatest satisfaction and success. This struggle of setting down his poet's thoughts in prose forms became for him an obstacle which he was to overcome only occasionally. But when the poet was able to rise above the limitations placed on him by the conventional prose forms in which he worked, he created his masterpieces.

49
Very early in the development of his style, more specifically in the method of his use of language, he was perhaps directly influenced by no single person more heavily than he was by Gertrude Stein. Her unique way of handling words, her tremendous consciousness of what words were and what they could do, appealed to his experimenter's nature.

Certainly, strong influence of styles both Biblical and Whitmanesque become immediately apparent to anyone reading Anderson's *A New Testament*, but this work, and especially his earlier poems, *Mid-American Chants*, owe much to Miss Stein's methodology. He said himself that "she taught me to recognize the second person in myself, the poet-writing person."\(^1\)

Schevill notes:

She admired the best of his work for the new values he derived from simple words and sentence constructions. Analyzing his stories with him, she made him more conscious of what he was striving for, the color and rhythm of poetry carried over into prose.\(^2\)

Of his first serious consideration of Miss Stein's methods, Anderson was to write later:

One evening in the winter some years ago, my brother came to my rooms in Chicago

---

\(^1\) Jones and Rideout, p. xviii.

\(^2\) Schevill, p. 144.
bringing with him a book by Gertrude Stein. The book was called *Tender Buttons*. I had already read a book of Miss Stein's called *Three Lives* and thought it contained some of the best writing ever done by an American.

what I think is that these books of Gertrude Stein's do in a very real sense recreate life in words.

There is a city of English and American words and it has been a neglected city.

For me the work of Gertrude Stein consists in a rebuilding, an entire new recasting of life, in this city of words.3

Irving Howe reminds us that Anderson's first reaction to Miss Stein's work was unfavorable but that "though he laughed at Stein when he first read her, she seems to have stimulated him in a way few other writers could."4 He states even further that: "Stein was the best kind of influence: she did not bend Anderson to her style, she liberated him from his own."5

Her letters to him, most of which are unpublished, are filled with encouragement and good criticism. After


4Howe, p. 95.

5Ibid., p. 96.
reading his Many Marriages she wrote him that it was "a fine piece of work and has in it some writing that I find far better than anything you have done before." Her criticism of this novel was not totally complimentary, but even in its most pointed remarks it retained a constructive point of view. His new novel, she said,

does not fall to pieces nor does it hold together artificially, on the other hand there is to my thinking a little too much tendency to make the finale come too frequently that is to say you the writer know a little too frequently that there is an ending. May I say that there should be a beginning a middle and an ending but you have a tendency to make it a beginning an ending an ending and an ending. Then perhaps there is a bit too much tendency to mix yourself and the hero together, it is a little your weakness in your long things, you do a little tend to find yourself more interesting than your hero and you tend to put yourself in his place.7

Her admiration for his work was made very clear in an interview which appeared in the Atlantic Monthly magazine. She said:

---

6 Letter to Sherwood Anderson from Gertrude Stein. (The letter is undated but in it she mentions having just finished reading his new book Many Marriages which was published in February of 1923.)

7 Ibid.
Sherwood is really and truly great because he truly does not care what he is and has not thought what he is except a man, a man who can go away and be smaller in the world's eyes and be perhaps one of the very few Americans who have achieved that perfect freshness of creation and passion, as simple as rain falling on a page, and rain that fell from him and was there miraculously and was all his. You see, he had that creative recognition, that wonderful ability to have it all on paper before he saw it and then to be strengthened by what he saw so that he could always go deep for more and not know that he was going. 8

Among the critics who saw the Stein influence on Anderson's works was Edmund Wilson. He noted that "Anderson seems to have learned from her...both his recurrent repetitions with their effect of ballad refrains and his method of telling a story in a series of simple declarative sentences of almost primer-like baldness." 9

This simple, effective style, so dependent on his careful and studied use of words was to become one of the special characteristics of his works, just as it was also to become the reason for many of his disappointments. The poetic elements of his songs and testaments found their way more and more into his prose until often sections of his novels read like pages torn from his books of verse. These elements of


9 Edmund Wilson, Axel's Castle (New York, 1954), p. 239.
style—repetition of key words or phrases, simplicity of language and sentence structure, and heavy usage of imagery and symbols—while they might be expected to be found in the poems of many authors, serve to illustrate that in Anderson's case they are as essential to his prose as they are to his poetry. These elements, working together, achieve for him the kind of "singing prose" he was striving for. His paragraphs often took on the characteristics one might more naturally expect to find only in stanzas.

Some of the similarities existing between the poetry and prose will here be looked at with the single intention of demonstrating that the poems do have a worth which has gone unexplored.

The frustration experienced by men who sought only love and understanding was a subject common to many of Anderson's works, and it will be used here to serve as a basis for selecting and comparing several samples of his special style. These selections will be taken, for the most part, from Mid-American Chants, Winesburg, Ohio, A New Testament and Many Marriages.

In Mid-American Chants, the singer, in hopes of having his voice heard and perhaps even answered by others who are as alone as he is, identifies himself with everything and
everyone around him. He pleads for recognition and acceptance. He recognizes that he has been living in a world filled with complex and distorted values, and now he would return, and bring his fellows with him, to a world whose values are simple and orderly. The two differing worlds are signified on the one hand by "cities" and "industry," and on the other hand by "cornfields." There are forty-nine chants in this volume, and in almost all of them Anderson uses these same symbols to say that:

All of the people of my time were bound with chains. They had forgotten the long fields and the standing corn. They had forgotten the west winds.

Into the cities my people had gathered. They had become dizzy with words.

I will renew in my people the worship of gods. I will set up a king before them.

I was determined to bring love into the hearts of my people. The sacred vessel was put into my hands and I ran with it into the fields. In the long cornfields the sacred vessel is set up. 10

10 Mid-American Chants, pp. 11-12.
"Don't you see we're all part of something?" the poet asks.

We have to sing, you see, here in the darkness. All men have to sing--poor broken things. We have to sing here in the darkness in the roaring flood. We have to find each other.\(^{12}\)

The language here is simple and certain. The repetitions effectively demonstrate the urgency Anderson hoped to convey to his readers. He states what he considers to be a grave problem, and then he tells us how he hopes to set it right. The people of his time "were bound with chains. They had forgotten.... They had forgotten.... They had become dizzy...." But he will "renew" their faith, "set up" new gods, because he knows his men "have to sing...have to sing...have to sing...have to find each other." Of the thirty-six sentences in the poem, thirty of them are simple sentences. Frequent compound predicates, simple prepositional phrases, and an occasional reversal of the normal order of subject and predicate are the only "adornments" Anderson offers here. Pure, simple, crude structure is his aim and his strength.

In another of his chants, "Song of the Mating Time," simplicity is again the dominant characteristic. An urgency

\(^{11}\) Ibid., p. 18.

\(^{12}\) Ibid.
is once more stressed. It is the necessity of love and companionship that is emphasized here.

Out of the cornfields at daybreak
...I come.

Eager to kiss the fingers of queens,
Eager to stand with kings,
To breed my kind and stand with kings.

Come, tired little sister, run with me.

Come, tired little sister, run with me.

Come, tired little sister, run with me.

Let's be running.
Let's be running.

Come, tired little sister, run with me.
Let's be down on the hillside here.
Let our soft mid-western nights creep into you.
See the little things, creeping, creeping,
Hear in the night, the little things creeping.
Let's be creeping.
Let's be creeping.

I've got a strong man's love for you.

Let's be running.
Come along.\textsuperscript{13}

Certainly the effect of a "ballad refrain," as mentioned by Edmund Wilson, is achieved here. The repetition of whole sentences, together with a heavy reliance on very brief sentences coming in quick succession gives a rhythm to his

\textsuperscript{13} \textit{Ibid.}, pp. 58-59.
poetry that is also carried over into much of his prose. One of the most effective devices Anderson employs in his prose, for the purpose of making his paragraphs "sing," is the studied and conscious use of the brief, meaningful declarative sentence.

A further example of the "ballad-like" construction of his songs can be very clearly seen in his "Chant to Dawn in a Factory Town." Close to the end of the poem the singer says:

In the fields
Seeds on the air floating.
In the towns
Black smoke for a shroud.
In my breast
Understanding awake.

In my breast the growth of ages.
In my breast the growth of ages,
At the field's edge,
By the town's edge,
In my breast the growth ages.

I hail thee, 0 love!
I hail thee, 0 love!
In my breast the growth of ages. 14
In my breast the growth of ages. 14

14 Ibid., pp. 56-57.
This excerpt is typical not only of his strong use of repetition but also of his constant awareness of the contrasts between "fields" and "towns." Here the pleasantness of "seeds on air floating" is set against the vivid "black smoke for a shroud."

Continuing with the symbol of "industry" and the harm which Anderson at this time felt it to have brought his fellows, he imagines it to be

My mistress
Terrible
Gigantic
Gaunt and drear.

. . . .

Our fathers in the village streets
Had flowing beards and they believed.
I saw them run into the night—
Crushed.
Old knowledge and all old beliefs.
By your hand killed—
My mistress grim.\(^{15}\)

This mistress, industry, had seduced a generation, more than a generation, of men from the cornfields. She had lured Anderson's fellows from their farms and was contaminating them, inside and out, with her black smoke. The elders, the wise men with "flowing beards," were driven out and "crushed," just as "old beliefs" were either replaced by new manufactured ones, or "killed" outright by this "mistress grim." Yet even in the midst of this time of

\(^{15}\)Ibid., p. 31.
destruction the singer tells his readers that if they will look beyond the distractions of the city, they will find "Corn that stands up in orderly rows, full of purpose." He continues to remind them that the "gods wait in the corn." Anderson asked in the foreword to his book of chants "only that it be allowed to stand stark against the background of his own place and generation." He recognized that his generation, like the one preceding it was in need of new ideals and goals.

The men and women among whom I lived destroyed my ability to pray. The sons of New Englanders, who brought books and smart sayings into our Mid-America, destroyed the faith in me that came out of the ground. But in my own way I crept out beyond that. I did pray—in the night by a strip of broken rail fence—in the rain—walking alone in meadows—in the hundred secret places that youth knows I tried to find the way to the gods. Now you see how confusing life is.

There were my cornfields that I loved—what whisperings there—what daring dreams—what deep hopes... And all this in the cornfields.

16 Ibid., p. 47.
17 Ibid., p. 60.
18 Ibid., p. 69.
This was the song that Anderson sang for his generation. He would be the one to give voice to the loneliness of his brothers. He would speak for them in the simple, crude language they would all understand. He hoped his cry might rise above the distracting sounds around him.

I look far into the future beyond the noise and the clatter.
I will not be crushed by the iron machine.

Sing.
Dare to sing.
Kiss the mouth of song with your lips.
In the morning and in the evening
Trust to the terrible strength of indomitable song.19

Here in the chants Anderson gave his outspoken, and frankly emotional, confession of frustration. He let himself explode. He revealed his personal yearnings, convinced as he did so that they were universal not merely personal needs. He had opened himself up not only that he might better understand himself, but also that his fellows who were in a similar condition might see themselves in him and so be purged of their confusion and distrust. The personal motion, the need for writing these things down, exposing himself to the world, was made clear when he wrote

19Ibid., p. 82.
What cunning fingers I have. They make intricate designs on whitepaper. See the designs are words and sentences.

There is a song in the pencil that is held in my cunning fingers. Out--out--out--dear words. The words have saved me. There is rhythm in the pencil. It sings and swings. It sings a great song. It is singing the song of my life. It is bringing life into me, into my close place.

By the running of the pencil over the white paper
I have made myself pure. I have made myself whole.
I am unafraid. The song of the pencil has done it.20

Whether or not anyone would read his poems, these works had served the purpose of permitting Anderson to say things which he felt he must say. The writing of these songs, in an attempt to understand himself and all men, had given him the opportunity to make himself "pure" and "whole" and "unafraid."

The simplicity of his sentences and the almost naive quality of his ideas were in evidence on every page of Mid-American Chants. The repetition of his idea-words was always a conscious repetition, and it added strength to the poetic style he was attempting to develop. It is significant to note that at the very time he was composing these poems he was also writing the Winesburg stories. The atmosphere in
which they were created certainly shows itself clearly in the simple, beautiful language of these prose works.

In each one of the stories in this collection of related tales, at least one of the characters is troubled by some sort of inner, fearful problem of whose existence even he himself is often unaware. Anderson in telling these very private stories either permits his character for a moment at least to battle his frustrations with the result that he feels even guiltier about himself than he had previously felt; or else he has the character, upon being confronted with a situation which might cause repercussions, simply curl up and bury himself deeper in his repression rather than act at all.

While in the chants it was "he," as "man," who was searching for understanding, in the Winesburg stories Anderson came out of himself and gave these yearnings and desires to other people whose reactions he might observe and study with some objectivity.

The simplicity of the language in Winesburg, Ohio seems to make even more effective the terrible frustrations which fill the characters involved. The child-like quality of Anderson's style in handling these very unchildish situations gives an almost unbearably frank appearance to the torments he exposes. He gives us a kind of "out of the mouths of babes"
view of his subject matter. It is at once simple and intense. This very quality is the one which gives credence to T. K. Whipple's saying of Anderson that "he has the power to convey feeling directly, as it is conveyed in lyric poetry." 21

George Willard, the main character in Winesburg, Ohio, had, in the enfoldin[g] of these stories, reacted to or at least been acted upon by the various troubled people in his town. Like the "singer" of Anderson's chants, George, too, professed the basic belief in brotherhood that is so strong in the songs.

The desire to say words overcame him and he said words without meaning, rolling them over on his tongue and saying them because they were brave words, full of meaning. "Death," he muttered, "night, the sea, fear, loveliness."

George Willard came out of the vacant lot and stood again on the sidewalk facing the houses. He felt that all of the people in the little street must be brothers and sisters to him and he wished he had the courage to call them out of their houses and to shake their hands. 22

This passage acts as almost an echo to the foreword to Anderson's chants, repeating in a very similar way the desire for a universal brotherhood.

21 T. K. Whipple, Spokesmen: Modern Writers and American Life (New York, 1928), p. 120.

22 Winesburg, Ohio, pp. 221-222.
Like all other Anderson-creatures, George Willard wanted to "belong," to feel that "all of the people in the little street must be brothers and sisters to him...," to know that he was being loved and understood. His longings are expressed in a fine, simple prose highly reminiscent of the style already familiar to the readers of Anderson's chants. The similarity continues throughout the book:

With all his heart he wants to come closer to some other human, touch someone with his hands, be touched by the hands of another...\(^2^3\) He wants most of all, understanding.\(^2^4\)

Again, like the "singer" George hopes that there will be some way of uniting himself with those around him. His mother, too, tells of how in her youth she longed for some kind of hope. Thinking that perhaps she would be happy if married to Tom Willard, a clerk in her father's hotel, she consented to be his wife. "I thought of what the girls who were married had said of it and I wanted marriage also. It wasn't Tom I wanted, it was marriage."\(^2^4\) The happiness she expected was never found; on the contrary, very soon after


her marriage took place she began showing signs of emotional frustrations. She recalls:

It was cloudy and a storm threatened.... Black clouds made the green of the trees and the grass stand out so that the colors hurt my eyes. I went out Trunion Pike a mile or more and then turned into a side road. The little horse went quickly up hill and down. I was impatient. Thoughts came and I wanted to get away from my thoughts. I began to beat the horse. The black clouds settled down and it began to rain. I wanted to go at a terrible speed, to drive on forever. I wanted to get out of town, out of my clothes, out of my marriage, out of my body, out of everything. I almost killed the horse, making him run, and when he could not run anymore I got out of the buggy and ran afoot into the darkness until I fell and hurt my side. I wanted to run away from everything but I wanted to run toward something too.25

In this vivid recollection Anderson permits Elizabeth Willard to be especially forceful in her description of her feelings. She speaks in quick, strong sentences as simple as they are powerful. The incident is simply told. It is "under" told, and by understating her story Anderson makes Elizabeth's frustrations even more apparent to us. The style, upon even a hurried reading, strikes the reader as being something more exciting than a normal prose rendering. It should not come as a surprise to the reader of these stories that they were being written while Anderson was also composing his chants. The effects of the poems on the prose are unmistakable.

25 Ibid., p. 277-278.
Another example of what was quickly becoming Anderson's "singing prose" is the very delicately handled scene that takes place between George Willard and Helen White shortly before he leaves Winesburg. They go for a long walk together and they find a kind of peace in simply being with each other.

With all his strength he wanted to understand the mood which had come upon him... In the mind of each was the same thought. "I have come to this lonely place and here is the other," was the substance of the thing felt.

They went along a path past a field of corn that had not yet been cut. The wind whispered among the dry corn blades.

In the darkness they played like two splendid young things in a happy world. Once, running swiftly forward, Helen tripped George and he fell. He squirmed and shouted. Shaking with laughter he rolled down the hill. Helen ran after him. For just a moment she stopped in the darkness. There is no way of knowing what woman's thoughts went through her mind but, when the bottom of the hill was reached and she came up to the boy, she took his arm and walked beside him in a dignified silence. For some reason they could not have explained they had both got from their silent evening together the thing they needed.

Again the direct and straightforward telling of just what happened in the very simplest way he could express himself.

---

26 Ibid., p. 296ff.
is Anderson's way of making this passage a beautiful and memorable one. Once more the search for companionship in "the lonely place," the finding of it only after they had passed through the "fields of corn that had not yet been cut," and finally the puzzled awareness of having discovered "the thing they needed" in each other's quiet, instinctive affection, are as simply and poetically stated here as they are in many of the chants of which this particular prose passage is so reminiscent. This and many other equally simply told incidents crowd the pages of Winesburg, Ohio with the kind of "hidden poetry" and "singing prose" that Anderson was so concerned about creating. Because of passages like this one, Oscar Cargill is justified in saying that Anderson had advanced tremendously in his prose style. Again recalling the Stein influence Cargill states that "the naive simplicity of Anderson's first style is gone, and a studied, conscious simplicity of style is in its place, a style suggested by Three Lives, yet in a sense original and the author's own." 27

Rebecca West was to see the beauty of his works and also recognize the problems he faced in writing them. She saw that the conflict between the poet and the novelist in

Anderson was one that he was struggling to subdue. Writing of her literary contemporaries in general she said:

The people who wanted to write about man's private adventures, those that go on within his own breast, used always to write verse. But now they are impatient of using metre and rhyme. They like to sport among the subtler rhythms of prose.... the transition has had the disadvantage that it made the poet turn to the novel, which had had its standards set when it was used by people with logical minds to tell a story; and unfortunately he [the poet] very seldom has the courage to reject those standards altogether and set up new ones. 28

Though she continues to say that Anderson, when he writes novels, is out of his element, she commends him for the poetic values they contain—"glorious patterns of sight and sound and feeling"—29 and she only wishes that he would concentrate on writing poetry and not be shackled by the standards of the novel. She concludes by saying that "his art has always shown itself at its worst in his novels, at its best in short stories and the go-as-you-please rhapsodic form of A Storyteller's Story. When he follows his bent he may seem to be violating the tradition of fiction, but he is being loyal to the tradition of poetry." 30

29 Ibid.
30 Ibid., p. 320.
His testaments were perhaps as close as he was ever to come to freeing himself from the conventional prose forms.

Although *A New Testament* was not printed in book form until 1927, individual testaments began appearing in the *Little Review* as early as 1919, the year in which *Winesburg, Ohio* was published. Anderson's main intention in writing these poems was the same one he fostered in his chants. He was still trying to unite all men by the bond of understanding. In these later works, however, he became more the mystic; the testaments, as a consequence, became even more subjective and introspective than the earlier songs were. These strange, experimental works were directed toward the imaginations of all men. Anderson had said earlier that perhaps man lived more in the world of imagination than he did in the world of reality. Well, in these testaments Anderson attempted to enter into this hidden world and communicate not with men but rather with their imaginations.

The subject of frustration is in these poems even more significant than it was in the chants. The language used here, however, is more figurative and symbol-filled than it was in the earlier verses.
Two of the most important symbols used are those of the "walls" and the "house." These "walls" in most instances stand for the fears or frustrations which have served to separate men from each other. The "house," on the other hand, stands for man himself,--sometimes his body, sometimes his inner being. These images, though they are found very often in the testaments and in Many Marriages, had been used also in his other writings though with neither the frequency nor the force with which one finds them in these two particular books.

That these walls exist and that they must be either surmounted or destroyed were two of Anderson's main arguments as he wrote his verses. In A New Testament he was concerned with the problem as a universal one applying to all of his contemporaries, while in Many Marriages he concerned himself with the more particularized walls which were shutting his main characters off from each other.

In his testaments he tells us:

It is my passionate desire to shatter distances.
It is my passionate desire to distill, to condense.

Push my wall over and a world will be destroyed and new worlds will emerge.31

31 A New Testament, p. 49.
There are several ways that these walls of fear, frustration, misunderstanding, and distrust might be overcome. If, as in the poem above, they cannot be destroyed or completely obliterated by a mutual accepting of one person by another, at least these barriers might be made less effective by the person who is willing to reach out and offer, almost blindly, to help another who seems to find it impossible to break down the walls of his prison. Such a method is described by Anderson in one of the most simple and yet meaningful of his testaments. He says:

I am a tree that grows beside the wall. I have been thrusting up and up. My body is covered with scars. My body is old but still I thrust upwards, creeping toward the top of the wall.

It is my desire to drop blossoms and fruit over the wall.

I would moisten dry lips.

I would drop blossoms on the heads of children over the top of the wall.

I would caress with falling blossoms the bodies of those who live on the farther side of the wall.32

32Ibid., p. 89.
Still his need to identify himself with everything around him prevails. He would be a tree, a scarred tree, hoping that his "blossoms" of love and understanding would nourish people "on the farther side of the wall." This sustained image stands as an especially fine poetic statement. He tells us once more that by trying to know each other we might better know ourselves, that while men are surrounded by walls of distrust and fear they become more and more frustrated in their attempts to live a normal life. Because they become afraid to know what exists beyond their walls, they repress their desires. These wants, which at first are only normal and good, take on the aspects of evil and ugliness because the minds in which they try to grow are enclosed in a stifling and unhealthy atmosphere. Instead of going out to meet his fellows, man has gone deeper and deeper into himself. In the darkness of his ignorance he has stunted himself. He has neglected to grow. Anderson would say that man has permitted his house, the house behind the walls, to deteriorate, to become dirty and musty with suspicion and guilt. When these walls are all knocked down, man's house, that is, man's self, will stand in the sunshine of knowledge and understanding.

I saw it in the morning when all was silent.  
I walked in the streets.  
Men and women were silently washing the doorsills of houses. All the openings to the houses were being made clean.
When a guest came in at the door of one of the houses he stooped to kiss the doorsill. Women had brought soft furs and had dropped them on the steps before the houses. Inside the houses the air was warm with life. The floors had been washed. A fragrance arose.

In every eye there was a light shining. Wine was poured forth. Lips met. There was laughter.

Before there had been a great meaningless noise. All was in disorder. The inner walls of houses were black and the doorsills were foul.

Now old walls had broken down and the dust of old walls had settled. The dust had become black fertile soil. Dust to dust and ashes to ashes.

It was a new day. Morning had come. 33
Again the simplicity of the language is immediately apparent. In this particular poem, "Der Tag", the symbol of the house is greatly elaborated upon. The heavy usage of house-words (door, doorsill, walls, floors) serves almost to construct an edifice in the reader's imagination. On "the day" Anderson writes about here, men will clean up their houses, put them in order, rebuild them if necessary, in preparation for the entering in of his "guests" (understanding and love) which have for too long a time been locked out. Now they will be welcomed in and they will illuminate areas that previously had been dusty and dirty.

33Ibid., pp. 113-114.
Many of the testaments contain passages so filled with conscious and effective repetition that they read like litanies. In "The Healer" Anderson says these things of his body:

    My body does not belong to me. My body belongs to tired women who have found no lovers.

    It belongs to half men and half women.

    My body belongs to those who lust and those who shrink from lusting.

    My body belongs to the roots of trees. It shall be consumed with fire on a far horizon.

    The smoke that arises from my burning body shall make the western skies golden.

    My body belongs to a Virginia mob that runs to kill negroes. It belongs to a woman whose husband was killed in a railroad wreck. It belongs to an old man dying by a fire in a wood, to a negress who is on her knees scrubbing floors, to a millionaire who drives an automobile.

    My body belongs to one whose son has killed a man and has been sent to prison. It belongs to those who have the lust for killing and to those who kill.

    My body is a stick a strong man has stuck in the ground. It is a post a drunkard has leaned against.

    My body is a cunning wind. It is a thought in the night, a wound that bleeds, the breath of a god, the quavering end of a song.34

This poem is one more very striking example of Anderson's need to identify himself with all things and all people in the hope of finally finding a place in which he might stay

34 Ibid., pp. 26-27.
and rest and grow. He unites himself with everything in order that he might feel the satisfaction of knowing that he is a part of a whole.

It is interesting to note that in the closing lines of this testament he calls himself "the quavering end of a song" just as years before in his chants he said: "I'm a song myself, the broken end of a song."35

The "house" and "wall" images are used with special force in Many Marriages, a novel in which the leading character decides that he cannot live with his wife any longer because of the walls that have through the years been built up between them. Before he leaves, however, he tries to explain to their young daughter that the sexual side of marriage should not become a wall between man and wife but rather that it should be a means of bringing more and more love into the lives of the partners. He leaves; his wife kills herself. Their daughter, feeling that her father has freed her from what might have become walls of sex frustration, decides not to notify the police of her mother's death until her father is safely out of town.

The language Anderson uses in the telling of this story

---

35Mid-American Chants, p. 18.
is extremely simple and similar in many instances to the style of the testaments. Certainly the reader of this novel will see whole paragraphs that might easily have come straight from the book of poems. For instance, John Webster, the main character in the novel, thinks these testament-like thoughts:

...one could at least play with the notion that one could become something more than just one individual man and woman living one narrow circumscribed life. One could tear down all walls and fences and walk right in and out of many people, become many people. One might in oneself become a whole town of people, a city, a nation.36

Webster, like Anderson himself, is trying to eliminate the barriers that exist between people who should be able to love one another. In this passage Webster is merely repeating the desire which Anderson has already been quoted as having expressed: "to crawl inside the life of every man, woman and child," and then to "be born out of them." The life of the imagination, the unreal but still certain plane of existence in which Anderson feels man spends perhaps more time than he realizes, is here exposed. Webster can see what Anderson would have all of us see. He acts, consequently, as Anderson himself would act.

Mary, Webster's wife, on the other hand, is not willing to let the walls which surround her be destroyed. She is

36 Many Marriages, p. 191.
incapable of attaining her husband's understanding of what their problem is. She is terribly hurt when John tells her in front of their daughter that she (Mary) has built a wall around herself shutting him out. She knows it is true, but she does not want to hear it. Hearing it destroys her.

If one lived behind a wall one preferred life behind the wall. Behind the wall the light was dim and did not hurt the eyes. Memories were shut out. The sound of life grew faint and indistinct in the distance. There was something barbaric and savage in all this business of breaking down walls, making cracks and gaps in the wall of life. 37

Mary Webster has been living in the dark so long that the "cracks and gaps" made in her wall by her husband's statements are too much for her to stand. She commits suicide. She cannot survive this exposure to an understanding of self; she crumbles beneath it.

The "house" image is very strong throughout the book. If Mary's "house" and his own had been made musty and dirty in the walled-in atmosphere they had created for themselves, Natalie, the girl with whom Webster goes away, would, because of the love she offered him, cleanse and brighten his "house."

"The rooms of his house would echo with new sounds, joyous sounds." 38

37 Ibid., p. 153.
38 Ibid., p. 57.
In his musings, Webster often thought of himself and others in terms of "houses" which needed to be investigated, opened up. When he looked at Natalie he thought:

It was an odd sensation to be able to look thus, directly into another person's eyes. It was as though Natalie were a house and he were looking in through a window. Natalie herself lived within the house that was her body. What a quiet strong dear person she was and how strange it was that he had been able to sit very near her every day for two or three years without ever before thinking of looking into her house. "How many houses there are within which I have not looked," he thought.

This simple prose handling of a symbol which could so easily have been destroyed by a complex treatment once more underscores Anderson's concern for the simple way of expression which lends strength to his style.

Just as Webster applied these symbols to others, he likewise applied them to himself when he began to recognize that his opening up, his feelings for Natalie, were doing something to him.

"I think I know what all this business is I'm going through," he concluded. "A kind of house-cleaning is going on. My house had been vacant now for twenty years. Dust has settled on the walls and furniture. Now, for some reason I do not understand, the doors and windows have been thrown open." 46

39 Ibid., p. 7.
40 Ibid., p. 23.
The realization that he has been living in the dark too long becomes strong enough to force him into leaving his wife for Natalie. The "house" being vacant for twenty years reflects the fact that for the past two decades he and his wife had felt no real love for each other. His meeting with Natalie has brought light into the dusty rooms of his being. Natalie's love has "thrown open" the "doors and windows" of his self.

For Jane, the Websters' daughter, the same symbols are used to convey similar meanings. She finds herself, at the conclusion of the novel, suddenly alone for the first time in her life. Her mother is dead upstairs and her father has gone away with Natalie. Jane, holding in her hand a colored stone (signifying the secret of life) which her father has given her, reacts to these strange and tragic events in the puzzled way one might expect.

There was a heaviness, a deadly heaviness. All life had become gray and cold and old. One walked in darkness. One's body fell with a soft thump against soft unyielding walls.

The house in which one lived was empty. It was an empty house in an empty street in an empty town.... Now she was quite alone. Her father had gone away and her mother had killed herself. There was no one. One walked alone in darkness. One's body struck with a soft thump against soft gray unyielding walls.

The little stone held so firmly in the palm of her hand hurt and hurt.

Before her father had given it to her he had gone to hold it up before the candle flame. In
certain lights its color changed. Yellowish green lights came and went in it. The yellowish green lights were the color of young growing things pushing their way up out of the damp and cold of frozen grounds, in the spring. 41

This passage is filled with familiar symbols. Again the "unyielding walls" are referred to. Contact even between persons as close together as parent and child is blocked by these walls. The "house" which here is "empty," while it stands for the building in which Jane is now left alone, also is symbolic of the house of her self. She is empty now, ready to be filled up with a new kind of life--the life symbolized by the colored stone which "in the palm of her hand hurt and hurt" because she grasped it so tightly. Of course, in describing the aspects of the stone, this secret of life which Jane held on to with such tenacity, Anderson returns to the use of the much earlier symbol of the promise and optimism of "growing things" that was so strong in his first book of songs. In the chants he had seen the remedy for all of man's ills in the good things symbolized by the "cornfields." In Many Marriages he sees the secret of life in "growing things pushing their way up out of the damp and cold of frozen grounds, in the spring." Jane herself is one

41 Ibid., pp. 239-240.
of these "young growing things" who has been liberated from the "damp and cold" of what later might have become serious emotional problems for her.

Jane is puzzled by all that has happened, but the reader feels that she has somehow been released and that she might at least hope for something good to come of life. She represents a new generation, one which has been, to some extent, freed from a few of the restrictions under which the preceding one had to struggle. Especially is the sex taboo weakened. As Webster taught his lesson to his adolescent child, so also did Anderson teach a lesson to his readers. Anderson simply wanted to free his generation from the walls of repression which surrounded it. This treatise on sex, as unorthodox as it might be, would, he hoped, cause at least one wall to fall down.

Jane has been freed. The bonds that linked her to a past which was filled with doubt and suspicion have been broken. Now it becomes her duty to find out more about those around her; to know others like herself who have been freed; to help in the freeing of those still bound to the past. She must learn how to communicate with her fellows, to love and understand them. Similarly, the heroine of Kit Brandon.\textsuperscript{42}

\textsuperscript{42}Kit Brandon (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1936).
Anderson's last major work of fiction (published more than a dozen years after *Many Marriages* was printed), finds herself, on the last page of that novel, liberated from self, and in a position to seek out others.

She had been carried out of herself and her own problem and into the life of another puzzled human. There were people to be found. She would get into some sort of work that did not so separate her from others. There might be some one other puzzled and baffled young one with whom she could make a real partnership in living.43

This search for "the baffled young one" in order to become partners with him in the business of finding the basic good things of life is, of course, another echoing of the foreword to the chants in which Anderson states that he sang his songs "only because [he] hope[d] and believe[d] they might find an answering and clearer call in the hearts of other Mid-Americans."

Anderson is certain that in spite of the puzzling world they live in, his people will find their way back to a way of life they are all searching for. His works show a consistent confidence in love's being the solution not only to his particular problems but also to the problems that exist for those who have for one reason or another barricaded themselves behind walls of frustration.

43Ibid., p. 373.
A great hope flared up in him. "A time will come when love like a sheet of fire will run through the towns and cities. It will tear walls away. It will destroy ugly houses. It will tear ugly clothes off the bodies of men and women. They will build anew and build beautifully," he declared aloud.\[44\]

The key to man's salvation, Anderson was convinced, was to be found in the understanding of one's self, together with the love of one's fellows. Love would purify men, would tear down the undesirable selves in which they lived, would permit them to build new selves on the foundations of true knowledge and understanding. Many Marriages says it all again and says it beautifully. It is not difficult to see why Edmund Wilson would say of this that Anderson at his best was "closer to the art of the poet than to that of the writer of fiction."\[45\]

\[44\] Many Marriages, p. 78.

CHAPTER IV

The intimate relationship existing between Anderson's poetry and prose, shown clearly in just these few excerpts from his works, demonstrates the importance that must be attached to his poems before any serious analysis of his prose style can be made. Before either the poems or the prose can be fully appreciated and validly criticized, both areas of his work must be studied for the help each can give toward the understanding of the other. This statement, it might seem, is nothing more than the most basic and obvious kind of fact. It is one that takes on considerable significance, however, when one realizes that during the more than thirty years have elapsed since Anderson's second volume of poems was published, neither of these two books has been given any serious consideration whatever. On the contrary, Anderson's fine and poetic prose style was considered by some critics, to be "amazing" or mysterious. The growth of this "singing prose" style has been considered to be a miracle rather than a studied, conscious attempt on Anderson's part to make his prose more poetic. The fact that, during the years in which
his style developed to its greatest heights, he wrote two volumes of poetry, has been completely ignored. The tremendous influence that these two volumes of poems had on his prose works has gone almost entirely unnoticed and uninvestigated.

Even though Anderson's good friend Ben Hecht found fault with the poems, he saw the poetic style of Anderson's prose as a kind of musical accompaniment to the stories which were being told. He considered the "hidden poetry" in Anderson's prose so basic to his style that he said:

It was this undernoise, this never ceasing song beneath, that filled his fictional wool-gatherings with beauty.... Life, as he had confided to me, was something precious, a secret, a dream, a child in hiding. And through his pages, even the most garbled of them, there was the reach of the poet for mysteries.

Through letters written to the friends with whom he would be most frank and honest in discussing his work, Anderson continually showed how seriously and enthusiastically he composed his songs and testaments. His searches for literary expression in styles considered experimental and unorthodox by many critics were always examples of his attempts to reconcile his poet's thoughts with the prose forms he could never completely accept.

2 Ibid.
The simplicity, the crudity, with which he wrote, was, he felt, a necessary and not undesirable aspect of his work. If his songs did not always attract a large reading public, if they did not always satisfy his critics, they must at least interest the student of American literature. They tell us too much about Anderson the artist to permit them to go unstudied.

Acting almost as a kind of "idea-book" for him during almost ten of his most productive years, A New Testament serves to give us a look inside of a poet's mind. His testaments, in many cases, were simply more intense treatments of themes which he also included in his prose works. When he wrote them in his testaments they were distilled, they were stripped bare, they were poetry. And when these same images or ideas appeared in prose they invariably read as though they had come from the pen of a poet. He found "hidden poetry" in prose and by his consciously using his language as a poet would use it, he exposed this poetry for the readers of his prose to see.

The influence of his poet's mind on the creation of his prose works grows increasingly more obvious in the work he produced during these years.

The enthusiasm he displayed while composing his poems turned always to disillusionment upon their publication. But
despite the disappointments he suffered because of his verses, he continued to try new forms, to say things he felt had to be said. As a consequence, his prose became more and more poetic.

We have seen examples of this poetic prose quality in *Winesburg, Ohio* and *Many Marriages*, but these two novels are only representative of the great number of his prose works which contain illustrations of this strong poetic influence. Upon investigation it becomes clear that if one is to appreciate Anderson's works fully, he must consider a careful studying of the poems a basic step toward a thorough understanding of the novels and tales. It is a fact, however, that this consideration has not, as yet, been given either to the chants or the testaments.

Perhaps Anderson will finally see his poems "legitimated by time" as he hoped they might be. Perhaps he, himself, foresaw this long period of internment for his poetry when he wrote:

```
While you can see me you shall not have me.  
While you can reach out your hand and touch  
my fingers you shall not know I am alive.  
In the time of my death and decay life shall  
come out of me and flow into you.  
```

SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY

I. PRIMARY SOURCES

A. SPECIAL MATERIALS

The Anderson Papers. This collection, housed at the Newberry Library, contains over 3,000 letters written by Anderson, more than 7,000 written to him, and some 1,100 of his manuscripts. Many of these items are still unpublished.

B. WORKS

There is no complete collection of Sherwood Anderson's works. The following is a listing of his principal works, all of which were read and studied during the preparation of this paper.


-----. Kit Brandon. New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1936.
-----. Mid-American Chants. New York: John Lane Company, 1918.

C. OTHER


II. SECONDARY SOURCES

A. BOOKS


**B. ARTICLES**

**Bookman, LXV** (August 27, 1927), 710.

**Boston Transcript,** June 22, 1927, p. 4.

**Fadiman, Clifton.** "Sherwood Anderson: The Search for Salvation." *Nation,* CXXV (Nov. 9, 1932), 454-456.


**New York World,** June 29, 1927, p. 8.


C. OTHER


APPROVAL SHEET

The thesis submitted by Winfield Scott Lenox has been read and approved by a board of three members of the Department of English.

The final copies have been examined by the director of the thesis and the signature which appears below verifies the fact that any necessary changes have been incorporated, and that the thesis is now given final approval with reference to content, form, and mechanical accuracy.

The thesis is therefore accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Degree of Master of Arts.

1/20/61
Date

Signature of Adviser