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# Mourning, Melancholia, and the Need for Grace in Sherwood Anderson's "Godliness"

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MOURNING, MELANCHOLIA, AND THE NEED FOR GRACE IN SHERWOOD  
ANDERSON'S "GODLINESS"

by

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## ABSTRACT

Published in 1919, Sherwood Anderson's *Winesburg, Ohio* engages in the modernist project of collective grieving for social losses. This thesis looks specifically to Seth Moglen's *Mourning Modernity*, in which he articulates the various grieving strategies, mourning and melancholia, employed by modernists in order to process their rapidly changing world. I explore the various ways that "Godliness," one of Anderson's stories in *Winesburg*, engages in both mourning and melancholia, and I draw on Ruth Levitas' notion of secular grace, from her book *Utopia as Method*, in order to suggest that modernist subjects need a form of secular grace in order to mourn effectively.

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## INTRODUCTION

Sherwood Anderson's "Godliness" is a story about the modern desire for love. Characters in this story are always "wanting love more than anything else in the world and not getting it" (Anderson 44). This thesis explores the social reasons why modern subjects wanted love, but could not attain it. Seth Moglen's *Mourning Modernity* offers an explanation for modern alienation by arguing that the explosion of industrial capitalism caused vast cultural change in the early twentieth century. Individuals felt themselves severed by those changes from older forms of connectedness and solidarity, which resulted in literature that was marked by mourning or by melancholia as a means of grappling with loss. Anderson's "Godliness" explores the relations between mournful and melancholic responses to loss, and suggests that a secular form of grace is the condition for successful mourning. I adapt this concept of secular grace from Ruth Levitas's *Utopia as Method*. Levitas's conception helps us see that mourning at the collective level (rather than the individual) entails the invention of a new social world that provides the conditions for connection, equality, and solidarity. This new world functions on the analogy of the divine in theological grace: it bestows fullness and restores an experience of unalienated being within the collective—across class and gender divisions, for example—above and beyond the interpersonal connectedness of "love." This process is related to mourning in that the latter involves a recognition that

the lost object is actually gone and a retrieval of the capacity to love again; melancholic subjects can properly “mourn” only with the invention of a new world that facilitates the form of grace I have described. Anderson’s story realizes that through secular grace individuals could overcome the alienation caused by the traumas of modernity (and by capitalism in particular), in order to love both interpersonally and socially.

Characters in “Godliness” tend to express melancholia in their inability to understand the social forces of capitalism that prevent them from accessing secular grace. Jesse realizes that he wants an immediate emotional connection with his God, but he is driven from God by the processes of capitalism. He thinks that in order to get closer to God he needs to accumulate wealth and property, but he does not understand that this individualistic greed only serves to separate him more entirely from immediate connections with the family that longs for his love. Jesse’s prosperity, which he believes is the manifestation of God’s favor on him as he follows the scripts of the Bible, actually alienates him from God and—consequently—from both theological and secular grace. Jesse transmits his own sense of alienation to his daughter, Louise, because he does not value her as a successor that can increase his wealth, and this transmission cripples her capacity to name her desires. Louise tries to find secular grace through physicality, but this fails her. She does not fully understand the social forces that have caused her trauma, and thus she cannot see that her own alienation is part of a social phenomenon for which narrowly “individual” solutions are inadequate. Characters in “Godliness” fail to mourn their losses because they never attain the grace that the story knows modern individuals desperately need.

## CHAPTER I: MOURNING, MELANCHOLIA, AND GRACE IN MODERNITY

Moglen's *Mourning Modernity* argues that modernism is a literature of loss. Writers of the early twentieth century registered a shared sense of feeling lost and "unmoored" in a changing society. This sense of loss had multiple causes, including the violence and trauma of the First World War, but Moglen contends that the central structural force that changed modern society was economic. He argues that modernist forms of art "including literature, emerged in response to a staggering economic transformation" (4), one that had to do with the cataclysmic expansion of industrial capitalism at the turn of the twentieth century. The social landscape changed quite drastically as a result of this economic transformation. For instance, the working class began to experience traumas due to the rupture with older forms of work and the subjection to capitalism as a "regime of intensifying economic exploitation" (14). Class hierarchies grew because people could acquire vast amounts of wealth quickly, and traditional concepts of femininity and masculinity (conventionally bound up with social labor) were being redefined (14). As the economy became more global and complex, "individual lived experience" became less capable of offering people a clear understanding of "the vast economic structures that were transforming their lives" (4). People from all economic backgrounds, working class as well as upper class subjects, struggled to make sense of the large-scale systems that were shaping all aspects of people's lives.



Moglen contends that the modernization experienced during the early twentieth century caused “a crisis in the possibility of love...the capacity for social solidarity at the public level, and for emotional and sexual intimacy at the private” (5). Modernist subjects experienced alienation on two registers, on the social level and on the personal level. They felt estranged from their labor because they did not understand these processes of production that they were caught up in like cogs in a machine. Individuals also felt that “subjectivity was being remade with something missing at its heart” because the capitalist logic of trying “to satisfy...desires (including the most intimate) through the consumption of commodities” became widespread (5). People experienced the emptiness and loneliness that accompanies trying to satisfy all of one’s needs through the acquisition of material objects. These feelings of alienation reverberated from the social into the personal sphere, where modern subjects began to worry that they could not connect meaningfully with other people. Modernist literature often expresses a sense of hostility toward the new economic order of capitalism, and it negotiates the authors’ concern that their former ways of life had been lost.

According to Moglen’s theory, modernists dealt with this social loss in two different ways. They all grieved for their loss, but Moglen draws on Freud’s differentiation between mourning and melancholia in order to distinguish between two groups of grieving modernists. In the mournful group, he identifies Zora Neale Hurston, Tillie Olsen, Langston Hughes, Hilda Doolittle (HD) and William Carlos Williams; in the melancholic group he names T. S. Eliot, Ernest Hemingway, F. Scott Fitzgerald, William Faulkner, Jean Toomer, and Willa Cather. While schematically explaining their differences, Moglen suggests that both mournful and melancholic elements can be found

in all these authors.<sup>1</sup> His explication is meant to emphasize the dominant tendencies and the directions in which their ambivalences resolve.

Mourning and melancholia are Freudian terms that Moglen amends in order to outline how these concepts can help us understand social loss, not just personal loss. Freud's explanation of mourning and melancholia reflects how an individual psyche processes loss, but Moglen adds that the dyadic model of a mourning subject and a lost object is insufficient for an understanding of social losses (15). He explains that a third element should be considered when accounting for such losses, and that has to do with "*the social forces* that have destroyed the object or made it unavailable" (15). Moglen says that both the modernists of mourning and the melancholic modernists attend to the social forces that have caused them to experience loss. Yet the capacity to name those forces and to make them a target of resistant energy is at the heart of the distinction Moglen makes between the two kinds of modernism.

Moglen explains that according to Freud, a subject in mourning feels sorrow for her loss and finds it difficult to interact with the world and find new love. At the same time, however, the mourner remembers that the object of love is truly gone. According to Moglen, "Through this complex work of detailed and loving remembrance in the full knowledge of one's loss, one is able slowly and painfully to bring the process of

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<sup>1</sup> The way in which Moglen uses mourning and melancholia in order to explore modern grieving is part of an intense debate concerning the politics of different kinds of collective grieving. In his 2011 book, *Gender, Race, and Mourning in American Modernism*, Greg Forter explains that recent theories of grief have certain limitations because the recent trend has been to laud melancholia as a "countermemorial strategy of resistance" to what the dominant culture would prefer that people forget (10). However, Forter says that this means of understanding melancholia does not take into account the ways in which melancholia can mystify and confuse remembrance. My own essay analyzes melancholia in a manner similar to Forter's and Moglen's explication of the process— in that they call melancholia a psychically blocked form of mourning.

mourning to an end” (12). They convey the belief “that the processes of modernization were historically contingent, that the most corrosive forces at work in American life might be altered and ameliorated” (8). In this sense, they’re able to name and keep before them the main social cause of the losses they grieve. Capitalism is for them neither inevitable nor irresistible. Mournful modernists therefore believed that society could be remodeled and made better. They had a “social helpfulness” (8), and an openness to change (25). Mourning on an individual level can end when the subject finds a “renewed capacity for dynamic object relations” and hence new ways of loving (23). Moglen’s suggestion is that, for this group of writers, the social consequence of a renewed capacity to love is a society that makes materially available new forms of the old (and lost) solidarities. It is this that their writings both imagine and seek to call into being.

In contrast, there is another group of modernists whose work at heart is melancholic. Moglen recalls Freud’s suggestion that melancholia is similar to mourning in that, as in that condition, the sufferer feels disconnected from others and unable to love again. What makes melancholia distinct is that it is “a form of grieving ... blocked by *unconscious* and *displaced* aggression” (16). People experiencing melancholia are not “able to name the causes of their grief and the objects of their anger” and that inability to identify one’s object of anger often causes the subject to shift that anger onto her self (17). In the case of a melancholy aesthetic practice, what is key is that authors displace their aggression into a generalized misanthropy or a misogynist scapegoating of women, and that in doing so, they mystify the social causes of their loss. This mystification leads them to the “conviction that the human potentialities they valued most had been imperiled or destroyed by social forces that were irresistible” (7). They feel that their

losses could not have been avoided and cannot be ameliorated. As a group, modernists experienced melancholia when they both felt like their circumstances could not change, and when they did not know what social forces have harmed them.

Moglen argues that melancholic modernism is particularly notable for the ways in which the novels present a strong sense of alienation. Modernists in melancholia “imagined that the capacity for human connection in all its forms, from sexual love to social solidarity, was radically endangered” (28). Moglen suggests that authors such as Fitzgerald, Faulkner, and others feel as though modernity has broken connections of personal and social intimacy and unity. They feel lost and angry and do not know whom to blame.

But modernists of mourning recognize the proper target of their anger. Moglen says that these writers “sought to direct their anger at the social formations that seemed to vitiate the possibility of love” (45). Mourners like Zora Neale Hurston, Langston Hughes, H. D. and others, sought ways of understanding what they had lost and means of placing their anger on the social forces that impaired the possibility of human connection (46). Furthermore, mournful writing is distinct from melancholic because mourners try to forge the conditions for the social realization of solidarity and utopian love. For example, Hurston’s *Their Eyes Were Watching God* is more mournful than melancholic because Janie does not try to forget her sorrow and her grief, rather she accepts the memory of Tea Cake’s death. She grieves for her lover, but this acceptance of his death helps her remember the love that had once connected them together (Moglen 51). Because she can let him go, she can retrieve her capacity to love. Mourning involves understanding the target of one’s anger and accepting one’s loss in order to be able to love again.

I propose that Ruth Levitas' conception of utopia can help theorize the transition from melancholia into mourning by identifying what it is that social melancholia needs. In her book *Utopia as Method*, Levitas posits a new way of thinking about utopia. She explains that the word "utopia" comes from the phrase "no place" and also contains a pun on the phrase "good place." Thus, utopia has traditionally been understood as a term that refers to conceptions of a perfect place that cannot actually exist (3). However, Levitas argues that utopia should not be understood as a binary between a perfect (yet impossible) space and an imperfect (but "real") space, but rather that utopia should be thought of as a process. Concepts of utopia should be teaching us to "desire in a different way" (5). For example, she says, Ernst Bloch argues that we hunger for something missing, and art and literature have unique ability to enable the articulation of this desire. What is missing is a sense of connection.

Like Moglen, Levitas points out that societal forces have caused subjects to experience alienation. She draws on Marx to explain how capitalist labor causes workers to feel estranged from their product and from themselves. She says, "Wage labour is a system in which people sell their labour power, and both the process of work and what is produced are externally controlled and literally alienated or separated from the intention, ownership or control of the worker" (12). Imagine a factory worker who creates a product with some intention in mind, but he has no control over his product as it moves along the assembly line. A worker who sells his labor for money is alienated from what he produces. Levitas argues that this form of alienation extends beyond problems with the exploitation of the worker, into problems of separation from ourselves. She says, "In the commodification of our relationships with others they become means to our ends rather

than ends in themselves; and the treatment of ourselves as commodities distorts our humanity” (12). We are separated from others when our relationships are transformed into commodities. Levitas argues that the pursuit of utopia can be understood as a quest for restoring wholeness to our selves and our relationships with others— for understanding “why we are here and how we connect with each other” (12).

In order to explain this desire, Levitas refers to philosopher and theologian Paul Tillich’s explanation of grace. Tillich says that according to Christian theology, sin is “a state of separation” and grace restores the sinner’s connection to God (Levitas 13). Grace “entails connection, acceptance, reconciliation, wholeness” (13). Grace restores the transgressor by reconciling her to God. Levitas quotes Tillich, who says, “In the light of this grace we perceive the power of grace in our relation to others and to ourselves. We experience the grace of being able to look frankly into the eyes of another... We experience the grace of understanding each other’s words. We understand not merely the literal meaning of the words, but also that which lies behind them” (14). When one is, as Levitas says, “struck by grace,” then one is deeply connected to another person. Part of this wholeness and connection is being able to understand another person profoundly. Beyond understanding the meaning of another’s words, someone who is truly connected with another person will understand that person’s emotions, needs, and unexpressed desires. There is a supra-linguistic, practically supernatural element of this kind of connection. Levitas says that she articulates human longing for connection in these religious terms because there is an “inadequacy of secular language to encapsulate the human experience and aspiration at issue here” (13). We cannot communicate our longing for connection except through these spiritual terms. Grace is an immediate

emotional connection between the sinner and God, and social grace is an immediate connection between estranged people. The desire for connection with one another is bound up in the ways we understand the desire to be, as Tillich says, “accepted by that which is greater than we,” (14) or, in a secular sense, to be joined together in a social whole. The impulse toward utopia offers the kind of large-scale, general connection that is best understood as a kind of secular grace.

This articulation of human hunger for connection is where Levitas’ argument meets Moglen’s theories. Both are concerned with the ways in which literature has the unique ability to convey the modern subject’s alienation and sense of longing. Moglen says that when a subject is melancholic, she longs for something lost, something that she cannot name. Modernist works express melancholia when they articulate a permanent alienation from intimacy—when they insist that such alienation is the insurmountable “truth” of human life, which no social arrangement could ever ameliorate or surmount. Levitas suggests that this melancholia may be constitutive of modern subjectivity, while offering a name for what the modern self continues to long for. She says that we long for “*Heimat*,” a “desire for a settled resolution of this alienated condition” (12). We long to be “at home in the world” (12). We long to feel connected with others, and hence, for a radically different world in which the social causes of alienation—capitalism in particular—have been surmounted.

In the remainder of this thesis, I bring Levitas and Moglen to bear on a reading of Sherwood Anderson’s story “Godliness” (from *Winesburg, Ohio*). The story is one of a series in the book that acknowledges how subjects feel alienated from one another due to the forces of modernity. *Winesburg*, that is, reveals on one hand the terrible isolation

produced by capitalist modernity in the early twentieth century. On the other hand, it explores the afterlife of the modern self's yearnings for connection, the way that the "loss" of intimacy and solidarity haunts the imagination and psychology of all its characters. Anderson often imbues this longing with a quasi-mystical, spiritualized significance—linking it to the "presecular" world that capitalism extirpates and absorbs. Yet he also is critical of conventional religious feeling. His stories yearn for a mystical fulfillment that is worldly and secular in form, exploring how to transmute spiritual yearning into secular fulfillments—and what prevents the characters from attaining that fulfillment. Finally, by way of this analysis, I hope to reclaim Anderson from years of critical neglect by suggesting that his explorations of capitalist modernity and utopian desire make him a more complex and more fully modernist figure than he has been credited with being.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Anderson's early reception was favorable, influencing several major modern novelists. He then fell out of favor, Hemingway even writing *The Torrents of Spring* in 1926 as a satire of Anderson's 1925 novel, *Dark Laughter*. My own essay is part of a (small) new wave of interest that attempts to recover Anderson because *Winesburg, Ohio* is deeply engaged the grieving project that, as Moglen notes, many central modernist authors are also engaged in. Like Fitzgerald, Hemingway, Hurston, and many other modernists, Anderson is grappling with the changes brought on by capitalist modernity, and struggling to grieve for lost ways of life. As Aaron Ritzenberg says in his recent essay on *Winesburg*, "Anderson's work is important not just for its depiction of a small town facing the end of an economic era, but for the way that its very language and form respond to a deep shift in the organization of daily US life" (499). Ritzenberg recognizes the modernist concerns with alienation caused by capitalism in *Winesburg*, and he sees sentimental touch as a form of utopianism in the novel. My own essay fleshes out the many ways in which the novel desires utopian connection, and the ways in which that connection fails the novel's characters.



## CHAPTER II: JESSE BENTLEY'S AGGRESSION

Anderson's "Godliness" charts the movement from pre-modern to modern, capitalist-industrial America through the life experiences of the Bentley family. This movement is ambivalent because modernity involves the significant benefits of (for example) mechanized labor, but the story recognizes that there are costs to such benefits, including a generalized alienation and the misogynist devaluing of women. "Godliness" examines how these capitalist-induced poisons are transmitted transgenerationally—through Jesse Bentley to his daughter Louise, and on to her son David. Through the character of Jesse, the story insists in particular on the relation between what Max Weber has called the Protestant ethic and the spirit of capitalism.<sup>3</sup> The story associates Jesse's Christianity with a "pre-modern" way of life, and demonstrates how this pre-modern sensibility paradoxically inhabits his version of capitalist modernity. Above all, "Godliness" illustrates the crisis of the characters' inability to find connection at both the social and spiritual level. It charts the various attempts of characters to "realize" here in the secular realm the spiritual-utopian form of connection—the grace that Levitas describes—and how these attempts fail because the citizens of Winesburg cannot articulate their feelings to others.

Anderson begins "Godliness" with the story of Jesse Bentley. He grew up with his brothers on a farm in Winesburg, Ohio, and they worked hard to till the earth as the farm

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<sup>3</sup> See Singer's *Melodrama and Modernity*, particularly pages 22-23, for his explication on Weber's explanation of how Protestantism fostered bureaucracy.

transitioned from what Anderson calls “pioneer life” into modernity. Anderson connects the young Bentley brothers with “beasts” of the field, and says that both their work and their manners are “coarse and brutal” (30). Their “strong lusts” and passionate desires are “suppressed” by their work on the farm, and it is only when they drink that “poetic fervor [takes] possession of them” (31). Their passions are released, but even then they are unable to articulate their desires in any productive way. They channel their energy into fights, one of which almost results in their father’s, Enoch Bentley’s, death. Such details work to resist any easy romanticization of the past. Even in this pre-capitalist structure, labor entails a repression of desires that remain crude and only find expression through violence.

In Jesse Bentley’s origin story, Anderson is connecting Jesse to the rural American past. The Bentleys are farmers in a land yet untouched by industrialism. This description harkens back to a pre-modern way of life. Anderson associates this pre-modern state of being directly with a human connection with the earth and with the primitive, animalistic impulses within human nature—the desires that are repressed by labor. Anderson is alluding to pre-modern society both by setting the stage for his story on the Midwestern farm and by alluding to America’s Christian heritage. By naming his characters after biblical patriarchs, Anderson intends for his readers to connect his modern man with the even more ancient past, the times when God was personal and intimately connected with his people, when he spoke to them in dreams and in still, small voices.

Anderson’s depictions of pre-modern America and its Christian heritage are not idealized. He describes the farmland around Winesburg and the men who work it as

savagely violent, and the hard life on the farm kills Jesse's delicate wife (Anderson 32). The men are unable to feel compassion for her or for her suffering. But at the same time, Anderson describes pre-modern America in positive terms as well. He explains that industrialism brought great changes to the country. Anderson mentions that the automobile "has worked a tremendous change" in Midwestern American life (34). Cars could bring people across vast distances, disseminating new opinions and ideas. In a similar way, Anderson notes that magazines, books, and newspapers spread to the farmers in the country, and this spread of information caused the farmer's "mind [to be] filled to overflowing with the words of other men" (34). Anderson's ambivalence about this development is indicated by the way he says that this dissemination of other men's words caused "the old brutal ignorance that had in it a beautiful childlike innocence" to be irrevocably lost (34). Anderson connects this innocent ignorance to the Midwest's widespread belief in God. He says that their thoughts of God's cosmic omnipotence were "vague" and "half-formed," but also that the church was the heart of Midwestern society (34). Belief in God connected communities in however imperfect a way. The modern shift away from this faith would have shaken the community by breaking the ties that bound people together.

Jesse longs to return to a time when a personal God spoke to men face to face, but capitalist modernity has irrevocably severed him from that world. Anderson calls modernity materialistic and greedy— an age of morality rather than religion (40). Greed began to consume Jesse, and it became harder for him to feel connected to a personal God (40). The new possibilities for accruing wealth, especially the use of machines for greater efficiency in production, created in him an "indefinable hunger" that drove him in

his work on the farm and that prevented him from finding peace (33). Anderson says that Jesse “began to think of himself as an extraordinary man, one set apart from his fellows. He wanted terribly to make his life a thing of great importance, and he looked about at his fellow men and saw how like clods they lived” (33). Jesse becomes greedy in more than a materialistic sense. He wants his life to be more important than any one else’s life through the favor of God. He asks God to give him the power “to rule over men” like the biblical patriarchs of old (33). His pre-modern faith and his modern, capitalist greed begin by warring within him, but end up being merged into a singular, capitalist-spiritual impulse. Anderson writes, “Jesse thought that as the true servant of God the entire stretch of country through which he had walked should have come into his possession” (35). Jesse’s capitalist greed is manifested in his desire to be God’s chosen owner and ruler over the land around him.

Anderson fleshes out the way in which Jesse conflates his capitalist greed with Christianity. Anderson explains, “There were two influences at work in Jesse Bentley...First there was the old thing in him. He wanted to be a man of God and a leader among men of God. His walking in the fields and through the forests at night had brought him close to nature and there were forces in the passionately religious man that ran out to the forces in nature...He still believed that God might at any moment make himself manifest out of the winds or the clouds” (39). The first impulse that drives Jesse is his pre-modern connection to nature and to the divine. He has this primal, pre-linguistic connection to God, whom Jesse believes could reach out to touch him through the forces of nature. He longs to return to “a simpler and sweeter time when at the beckoning of some strange cloud in the sky men left their lands and houses and went forth into the

wilderness to create new races,” when people waged wars and built magnificent structures to glorify their God (39). He longs for a pre-modern sense of connection to the land, in a time when the God who moves in the wind would reach out and move people.

Jesse wants to be touched by this God and to serve Him, but at the same time there is another impulse within him. Anderson says that Jesse “had been touched by the deep influences that were at work in the country during those years when modern industrialism was being born” (40). He explains that as the country began to modernize, Jesse embraced technological advances that enabled him to work the earth more quickly and efficiently. With this increase in productivity, Jesse grew insatiably hungry for land, money, and power. Anderson says, “The greedy thing in him wanted to make money faster than it could be made by tilling the land,” and because of this desire, “it was harder to get back the old feeling of a close personal God who lived in the sky overhead and who might at any moment reach out his hand, touch him on the shoulder, and appoint for him some heroic task” (40). Modernity, the “most materialistic age in the history of the world” (40), causes Jesse to grow alienated from his God. He feels distanced from the deeply personal connection he wants to feel with God and nature. He experiences a state of separation and longs to feel viscerally connected to the forces of nature through grace.

Jesse feels isolated because he cannot name what he wants from God, nor can he identify the forces that have cut him off. As Anderson says, Jesse did not “succeed in getting what he wanted out of life and he did not know what he wanted” (32). The vast opportunities for wealth provided by industrial capitalism work to alienate Jesse from the divine. His alienation serves to increase his longing for a sign from God that he is a member of the elect— that he is an extraordinary individual, divinely appointed for

special purpose. In the Old Testament, material prosperity was a sign given from God that a man was a good and faithful servant of the Lord. Paradoxically, Jesse's desire for affluence distances him from the God with whom he longs to connect. Thus, he is caught in a cycle that cannot find any resolution.

According to Ben Singer's *Melodrama and Modernity*, this Protestant individualism that Jesse exhibits is intricately connected with the spirit of capitalism. Singer explains that many ideas paved the way for capitalism to thrive, such as the way that the Renaissance located "Man at the center of the Universe," and "Protestantism, while still subordinating the individual to the will of God, nevertheless cultivated individualism by giving personal conscience a direct relationship with God, bypassing and defying the religious institutions of the Church" (30). In contrast to Catholicism, under Protestantism, believers could access God directly through prayer without going through a priest as an intercessor. Singer argues that this direct access to God placed a new emphasis on the individual's relationship to God, and the importance of the individual as a member of the elect.

Singer links individualism to capitalism because capitalism affected the individual by commodifying the worker's labor power (31). In a "money economy," individuals no longer had to rely "on family, tribe, or commune" to sustain themselves (32). Singer says that according to Simmel, this independence created a "paradox" in which individuals now had more autonomy and less dependence on specific people than they previously had, but the money economy made individuals dependent on systems of people who produced goods (32). For instance, capitalism divides individuals from "specific people with whom there were long-standing personal, human, 'subjective' relationships (e.g.,

members of the family, or this particular barrelmaker whose goods would be acquired through face-to-face barter exchange),” and instead workers grew dependent on “network of merchants with whom transactions were generally ‘objective’ (governed solely by rational calculation of money)” (33). The capitalist spirit of individualism emphasized the importance of personal gain. An individual in a capitalist economy is not concerned about the success of his community, but rather with his own advancement. Singer says that under modern capitalism people are “above all else looking out for themselves, with no appreciable sense of affinity or fellowship with others” (33). In these ways, Singer argues that the self-centered concern with personal gain that flourishes in a capitalist system had its roots in the individualism of the Protestant religion—in the way that individuals thought of themselves as uniquely chosen by God.

Singer outlines Max Weber’s argument that the bureaucracy that was perfected under capitalism grew out of the Protestant ethic. He says that, according to Weber, Protestants fostered bureaucracy because they needed material affirmation that they were spiritually saved (23). Protestants believed that “the wealth they earned through arduous work in a professional calling...was a signal that they were among God’s chosen few” (Singer 23). In these ways, a paradox results from the way in which the individualist spirit of Protestantism advanced the voracious hunger of capitalism but at the same time also worked to drive a wedge between the worker and the divine.

Jesse sees himself as special in this way—as, in fact, “the only true servant of God in all the valley of Wine Creek” (Anderson 39). The way in which Jesse merges the greed of capitalism with his religion is demonstrated in the end of the story when Jesse wants to sacrifice a lamb to God. In doing so, he frightens his grandson, David, into

running away from him. He says that this terrible incident occurs because he “was too greedy for glory” (53). Jesse becomes fearsome because he fuses the biblical cadence of the old world and the ruthless logic of exploitative capital in the modern world. He desires the grace that comes from an intimate relationship with God, but his means for attaining this thwart its achievement. Jesse’s greatest desire is for God to send him a sign and give him a purpose, but that purpose is increasingly obscured by the means he uses to discover it. Jesse does not seem to recognize that his very embrace of capitalist modernity induces alienation from his God. He feels disturbed that his life does not have meaning, but he does not know at whom to direct his anger. Jesse cannot see that the very thing he embraces to “prove” God’s grace—capitalist means of expanding wealth—pushes him further away from the connection with God that he yearns for.

For all of these reasons, Jesse Bentley’s character is marked by profound melancholia. He does not recognize and cannot name the forces that are alienating him from the divine. Lacking this recognition, it is impossible for him to combat those forces—and indeed, in his case, he becomes complicit with them. Because Jesse does not know that it is modernity that has separated him from God, he displaces his aggression onto himself. When Jesse takes hold of his grandson David and cries out to God for a sign, he terrifies the boy into running away. Disappointed that God did not send him a sign, Jesse asks God, “What have I done that Thou doest not approve of me?” (43). He believes he must have committed some grave sin if God would not reveal himself to him, which causes him to experience extreme guilt. Due to his guilt over this imagined sin, he criticizes himself and this self-beratement signals the splitting off and displacement of



aggression toward capitalist modernity onto himself. This displacement of aggression is a symptom of melancholic inability to identify the proper target of his anger.

### CHAPTER III: LOUISE AND THE FAILURE OF COMMUNICATION

The effects of the melancholic structure I've described exceed the bounds of the narrowly personal. Anderson goes on to trace the intergenerational transmission of a stunted capacity to love, which he links expressly to capitalist modernity and to its gendered imperatives. Jesse's "indefinable hunger within...made his eyes waver and...kept him always more and more silent before people" (33). As his farm expands and becomes more and more thoroughly mechanized, Jesse grows insatiably hungry for wealth, and this voraciousness turns him increasingly inward, as if to nurse his melancholic absorption and self-beratement.. Louise is a first victim of this structure. She tells her father that his house "is a place for a man child, although it was never a place for me...You never wanted me" (38). Jesse does not contradict this assertion. Anderson, in fact, insists on the way that divine blessing involves for Jesse a male successor to perpetuate his name and further his prosperity. He wants a son as a sign from God that he's a patriarch blessed with a long lineage, which is bound up in the capitalist aspiration of extending wealth over time, not just space. For a son, of course, would carry on his labor, extend the father's name, and continue to accumulate wealth *in the future*. As a woman, Louise cannot further these purposes. The Bentley name will not survive her marriage, given that names descend through the son; and women remain in this story unsuited to the labors of capitalist expansion. Louise thus becomes existentially homeless and metaphorically disinherited by virtue of her gender.

Lack of affection from her father causes Louise to feel isolated. Anderson says that Louise grew up “wanting love more than anything else in the world and not getting it” (44). Jesse’s alienation from Louise stems, as Singer says, from working in a capitalist system in which people become alienated from their families, in which the profit motive comes to trump other, more affective ways of relating. This feeling of distance from her father causes Louise to desire connection. Anderson writes, “It seemed to [Louise] that between herself and all the other people in the world, a wall had been built up and that she was living just on the edge of some warm inner circle of life that must be quite open and understandable to others” (46). Louise believes that somewhere in the outside world people can and do have real, meaningful connections, but that she has been walled off from them; she dedicates her energies to breaking down or scaling that wall (44).

Louise’s desire for connection has a strong physical component, yet it is also more than physical. Anderson explains that though Louise’s fantasies of personal intimacy had not yet taken on the “definite” shape of sex (46), her fantasies were strongly connected to the physical. Anderson says, “Sometimes it seemed to her that to be held tightly and kissed was the whole secret of life” (48). Louise’s sense that physical immediacy holds a truth of life is much like Jesse’s longing for God to reach down from the clouds and touch him through the wind. If they could be assured that they are loved through a physical sign, then they would have something to tangibly hold on to and believe in. Yet even when Louise finds a sexual relationship with her husband, she remains discontented. She still feels a “vague and intangible hunger,” but her husband did not understand what she wanted (49). Her desire is sexual, but it also transcends sexual desire. She longs to be understood but like her father, Louise herself “did not know what

she wanted” (49). All she knows is that she wants to feel connected with other people, and a physical relationship did not offer her what she wanted.

Anderson suggests that physical touch offers characters a means of accessing an immediate emotional connection with others through a mode of social grace. One night David runs away from his parents’ house and gets lost in the woods. When he finally finds his way home, Louise “clutches him eagerly in her arms” and “David thought she had suddenly become another woman” (38). David saw that “her habitually dissatisfied face had become, he thought, the most peaceful and lovely thing” (38). The fear of losing her son makes her suddenly appreciate their bond. In this passage, Louise expresses her love to her son through her touch. This maternal impulse is physical and pre-linguistic. After all it is not her words that soothe him but her voice, which he feels to him “like rain falling on trees” (38). In an almost baptismal sense, her expression of love cleanses her of her former “dissatisfied,” “harsh” self and makes her new for a fleeting moment. Her caresses change her in David’s eyes into someone who surely loves him. The fact that this happens non-linguistically—through physical touch—is Anderson’s way of suggesting that some kind of (non-sexual) bodily encounter may be the condition of secular grace. It is at this point narratively that Anderson reveals to the reader that Louise is more complex than she appears to the people of her town, and even to her family. She is not just a harsh, quarrelsome wife and uncaring mother. She has an impulse toward connecting with her son in an immediate way through touch, but she has been disconnected from others by social forces that she does not fully understand.

This scene perfectly illustrates Aaron Ritzenberg’s argument in his article “Holding on to the Sentimental in *Winesburg, Ohio*” that Anderson uses sentimental

touch as a means of resisting the alienating forces of managerial capitalism. Ritzenberg echoes Moglen's and Levitas's claims that the explosion of modern capitalism caused a crisis of alienation. He says, "With the central economic change of turn-of-the-century America—the rise of managerial capitalism—bodies became opaque, abstractly-defined placeholders in giant networks," and these systems of control "rendered the sentimental touch obsolete" (498). Modernity birthed an impersonal society in which sentimental touch represents what Ritzenberg calls a "utopian ideal" (500). I would suggest that Ritzenberg's conception of sentimental touch embodies the social grace that Levitas proposes as a means of overcoming modern alienation. Ritzenberg says, "The utopian moment in *Winesburg, Ohio* appears when hands do finally have finesse enough to communicate the deepest thoughts and emotions" (500). When Louise embraces David, they do for once communicate their love to one another. This scene demonstrates Ritzenberg's theory that sentimental touch is the "only truly successful mode of communication" in the novel (502).

Yet the sentimental touch is not capable of overcoming in a lasting way the alienation these characters experience, as it does not itself entail understanding causes of their estrangement. Characters are consistently unable to name what they need or desire in "Godliness." Jesse cannot identify the forces of modernity that have alienated him from his family and from his God, and because he cannot name these forces he expresses a melancholic inability to recover from the traumas that social forces have inflicted on him. Louise too cannot articulate what forces have distanced her from others, and she does not know how to recover. At the beginning of her story, Anderson says that Louise's life "is a story of misunderstanding. Before such women as Louise can be understood and

their lives made livable, much will have to be done. Thoughtful books will have to be written and thoughtful lives lived by people about them” (43). I suggest that Anderson means by this that Louise herself is not yet able to “think” the social causation of her dilemma; her life remains “unlivable” inasmuch as it remains for those who come after her to name and lay bare the social forces that lie at the root of her estrangements.

The consistent tragedy in the *Winesburg* stories is that characters do not understand each other because they cannot articulate what they want from one another and from the world. For instance, when Louise is young she wants to reach out to John Hardy and not only touch him, but she wanted him “to tell her of his thoughts and dreams and to listen while she told him her thoughts and dreams” (47). However, even after Louise and John become lovers, Louise still cannot make him “understand the vague and intangible hunger that...was still unsatisfied” (49). Louise reached out to him because she was lonely and disliked by the Hardy girls, but John’s affection does not quell her feelings of alienation. When she tries to explain her mind to him, he, “filled with his own notions of love between men and women, did not listen but began to kiss her” (49). John is not open to understanding his wife, and believes that he can sexually satisfy all her needs.

Louise and John fail to communicate with one another. As John Updike writes in “Twisted Apples,” his own analysis of *Winesburg*, “The many characters of Winesburg, rather than standing forth as individuals, seem, with their repeating tics and uniform loneliness, aspects of one enveloping personality, an eccentric bundle of stalled impulses and frozen grievances” (193). Although Anderson’s characters do seem to be a bit more differentiated than Updike implies, he does point out a consistent factor in “Godliness,”

which is the ways in which the characters have what Updike calls “stalled impulses.” In this scene, Louise does seem to be paralyzed by the way John silences her desire to express herself. The fact that her grievances do seem “frozen” is illustrated through the way that Anderson says Louise felt “tricked” into marrying John by the pregnancy that hurries their wedding. Anderson says that Louise did not want to marry John, but she did hope to find the grace of being able to connect with him on a deeply personal level. As Levitas says, the utopian impulse involves the “grace of being able to understand each other’s words” (14). This understanding is what Louise wants but cannot access. She wants the grace of being understood by her lover, but he ignores her words. He is filled with his own notions of love and does not listen to what she wants. He does not comprehend what lies behind her words and does not understand what she wants from him. She hoped that she could make herself understood, but Louise cannot explain herself when she does not know what she wants from life, which stems out of a lack of understanding why she feels alienated. In this story, both Jesse and Louise convey the melancholic modernism that Moglen describes because they cannot recover from their social traumas when they do not know what has traumatized them.

However, Anderson illustrates that Louise’s story is more complex than Jesse’s because she demonstrates symptoms of both melancholia and mourning. She does not know what she wants out of life, but she does recognize that her father’s warped sense of value for sons rather than daughters has caused her psychological trauma. She says that because her child is male, the boy “will get what [he] wants anyway;” but, she adds, “had [he] been a woman child there is nothing in the world I would not have done for [him]” (49). She directs her anger at the appropriate targets, which are her patriarchal culture and

the men who perpetuate it. However, she still does not understand that she should also direct her anger at the systems of capitalism that cause Jesse to value a male child over a female child. She does not recognize that patriarchy is linked to the greed of capitalism. After all, Jesse wants a male child because he needs an heir to take over the land and make money. She does not know that she should resent that capitalist, economic aspiration. She feels a sense of loss for something, but does not know what that something is. In this sense, she cannot recover.

Jesse's absorption in capitalist induced toxins of alienation and greed affect not only Louise, but they also affect David and both characters react to Jesse in different ways. Louise inherits Jesse's alienation from others due to his maniacal need to prosper. He is depressed when his wife gives birth to a son rather than a daughter because he wanted a son to inherit his land, and Louise recognizes his disappointment and lack of love for her, which drives her to seek out connection because, as Levitas says, she longs to feel "at home in the world." In turn, Louise's disappointment in her marriage affects her son, who seeks connection with his grandfather. However, Jesse's need for a direct revelation from God, which stems from his own "passionate self love" (51), severs his relationship with his grandson. At the end of the story, Jesse plans to sacrifice a lamb as an offering to God, but he ends up frightening David into running away from him. David sees his grandfather become someone primitive and fearsome when he seeks out a sign from the heavens. As he runs from Jesse, David takes on the role of his biblical namesake by picking up a stone from the river and hurling it from his slingshot at Jesse, whom David mistakenly thinks is trying to kill him. In this role reversal, Jesse, who thinks he is a divinely chosen servant of God, becomes the Philistine giant who wages war against



David, the man after God's own heart. David has to symbolically kill the ogre-ish, sacrificial spirit of modernity that Jesse embodies. While Louise inherits and extends the alienations suffered by her father, David reacts violently against the father's delusions. It is telling that David, and not Louise, reacts so violently towards him. David was the son Jesse always wanted, the intended male successor to inherit his estate and carry on his family name. His existence was supposed to demonstrate that God had blessed him, even to the third and fourth generation; but this blessing backfires. The intended inheritor of capitalist modernity rejects his role and seeks out his own narrative. He flees his home for good in a way that suggests some possibility of escape from the capitalist greed that Jesse represents—however ill-defined that escape remains in the story itself.

#### CHAPTER IV: CONCLUSION

I have argued that Moglen and Levitas' theories can offer a nuanced understanding of the social grieving that occurs in Anderson's "Godliness." Moglen sheds light on the ways in which social forces can provoke melancholia and mourning, and Levitas articulates the social grace that is necessary for productive mourning. "Godliness" illustrates how modern subjects collectively grieved for losses in human connection, driven in part by the explosion of capitalism; yet at the same time they are driven to seek profound and intimate connection.

However, try as they will, characters in this story consistently fail to access a utopian form of connection in the secular sphere because they cannot express their needs and desires to one another. Jesse longs for connection with the divine, but he simultaneously struggles with an impulse of greed. He believes that God casts his favor on his elect servants by making them prosperous, so he struggles to acquire more wealth. As Singer says, the Protestant faith, particularly as it pertains to the Christian's divine calling as an elect servant of God, fostered a capitalist hunger for riches. But this focus on accumulating material wealth made it "harder to get back the old feeling of a close personal God who lived in the sky overhead" (Anderson 40). Jesse cannot identify the social forces, such as his capitalist greed, that have separated him from the divine. He is caught in social melancholia, misdirecting his anger at himself and unable to direct it at the proper target—the social forces causing his alienation. Jesse transmits his inhibited ability to love to his daughter, spreading melancholic structures intergenerationally.

Louise recognizes her need for profound connection with others, but like her father, she cannot name her desires. Although she does focus her anger at the appropriate target, which is the patriarchal culture that devalues her gender, she needs to also recognize the social forces that have alienated her. "Godliness" serves to demonstrate the ways in Anderson's stories offer insight into the modernist conversation about the ways in which modern subjects were inhibited from attaining the social solidarities that they desired.

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