

Modernist Fragmentation and Alienation through Expressionism

Meta Henty

Color, line, and contrast defined expressionist paintings like those of Paul Cezanne and Edvard Munch in the early twentieth century. This movement also crossed over into literature, translating into some of the most poignant images by Modernist masters like Sherwood Anderson, Ernest Hemingway, Jean Toomer, and William Faulkner. Expressionism, while employing color, line, and contrast, is also said to be “marked by extreme emotion, by distortion and grotesqueness... by its ‘extraordinary manic-depressive quality: visions of universal brotherhood alternating with the blackest despair’” (Nelson 3). Expressionism does not seek to portray life in mere realistic terms but to capture emotions. It is easy to see how expressionism perfectly illustrates the Modernist era, which has been defined as a time when “experience was fragmented” and “alienation and ironic detachment became common responses to the human predicament” (Moore 301). Although the specific images differ between authors due to region and style, Anderson, Hemingway, Toomer, and Faulkner each use Expressionist imagery to portray the alienation and fragmentation of the period.

Sherwood Anderson published his short story cycle *Winesburg, Ohio* in 1919. In this collection, he uses an expressionistic style to create images that beautifully portray the isolation and alienation of a small town and its inhabitants. Expressionism’s “grotesqueness” is perfect for Anderson’s collection, because in *Winesburg* he attempts to show the grotesque nature of each character, even calling them “grotesques”

(Papinchak 20). As critic David Stouck suggests, Anderson strove to express an inner truth through his images and “made it his goal to give outward expression to the intense private feelings of both the artist and the characters he created” (28). Anderson’s imagery ranges from those of characters’ physical attributes to descriptive passages which depict the sprawling landscape and encroaching industrialization.

One physical trait repeated throughout the stories, becoming a prominent symbol, is a character’s hands. Stouck explains that the hands in the stories communicate “the pain and the frustrated desire of these characters to make connections to others” (42). “Hands,” the first story in the collection, tells of the misunderstood Wing Biddlebaum, whose hands cause his downfall. Anderson likens the movement of Wing’s hands to “the beating of the wings of an imprisoned bird” (6). Anderson’s choice of imagery here is undeniably expressionistic. He seeks to express the inner workings of the man, rather than give a realistic depiction of the surface. The expressionistic imagery of the hands is key to the story and expresses beautifully Wing’s life.

Much like Wing Biddlebaum, Dr. Reefy’s hands are described through expressionist imagery in “Paper Pills.” Here, Anderson compares the man’s hands to the “gnarled apples” which grow in the Winesburg orchards and are “rejected” by most pickers (11). Anderson writes, “Only the few know the sweetness of the twisted apples” (11). Anderson’s imagery expresses not only Reefy’s grotesque physical feature but also his inner soul. Like the apples, Reefy may be slightly gnarled, but he is sweet. He has few friends and only one wife for a short time during his life, showing his sweetness is unknown to most. Despite (or perhaps because of) their distortions and grotesqueness, Dr. Reefy and the apples prove sweet and good. However, since no one knows of the

sweetness, Dr. Reefy is left alone and alienated. By describing Reefy's hands in terms of the apples, Anderson is describing Reefy's internal emotions and life.

While each of Anderson's characters is defined in terms of his or her own grotesque and often physical characteristics, Anderson also incorporates other expressionistic imagery into his stories to convey the character's inner emotions. In "Loneliness," the story of another misunderstood character, Enoch Robinson, Anderson uses an actual work of art as his expressionistic image. Like Wing, Enoch attempts to connect, but when he tries to explain the painting and himself to his friends, he is "inarticulate" (Papinchak 25). Pointing out a dark spot in his painting, he claims there is a woman hidden among the elder trees and says, "Don't you see how it is? She lies quite still, white and still, and the beauty comes out from her and spreads over everything. It is in the sky back there and all around everywhere. I didn't try to paint the woman, of course. She is too beautiful to be painted" (Anderson 102). The painting Anderson uses itself is expressionistic; the woman is described as white, contrasting with the dark patch of elders, and employing expressionist color and contrast. Furthermore, Enoch has attempted to capture the woman's beauty without actually painting her, much like Anderson is doing in his imagery. Here, more than any place else in the collection, the reader can see the influence of expressionist painters on Anderson. The image also serves to give insight into Enoch's character and life; he sees beauty in a way which others do not understand and this isolates him from society.

Enoch's painting is the key image by which readers are able to access his character and view his isolation. One of the most poignant and ironic lines comes when Enoch says of the painting, "The picture you see doesn't consist of things you see and say

words about” (101). Yet Anderson is perfectly capable of painting his pictures, including this one, using only words. It is Anderson’s ability to create images that express his character’s inward thoughts and emotions, in a time when common experience no longer existed and life was fragmented, which makes him not only a modernist master but also an expressionist artist. Anderson’s use of expressionism also influenced other modernists, such as Ernest Hemingway, who later broke away from Anderson. Despite the eventual break, Hemingway’s work is marked by an expressionist quality which can be attributed to his early appreciation of Anderson’s work.

Hemingway’s short story cycle *In Our Time* presents life as fragmented and hollow, expressing the thoughts and emotions of isolated characters. While Anderson’s text is largely influenced by the encroaching industrialization and shifting world views of the twentieth century, *In Our Time*, published in 1925, deals with the aftermath of the First World War. Hemingway’s writing is arguably realistic, but his themes and style are undeniably expressionistic in nature. Raymond Nelson states Hemingway’s images lack the “photographic precision” and “detachment” of a realist, arguing instead that “his primary concern was to communicate emotion, not rational themes which might require objectivity and disinterestedness” (ix-x). “Big Two-Hearted River,” one of the most important and anthologized stories in *In Our Time*, is filled with expressionistic imagery.

The story follows the recurring character of Nick Adams as he returns home from the war to a changed landscape. As Raymond Nelson notes in his critical analysis, *Hemingway: Expressionist Artist*, Hemingway claimed this story was a conscious imitation of Cezanne, one of his biggest influences (Nelson 43). Hemingway describes the river like a painter, in quick broad strokes. He writes, “The river was there. It swirled

against the log piles of the bridge. Nick looked down into the clear, brown water, colored from the pebbly bottom, and watched the trout keeping themselves steady in the current with wavering fins” (Hemingway 133). Hemingway’s description of the landscape is vague, a mere feeling or idea of a river is presented. Nelson notes Hemingway’s use of brown as indistinct; he does not specify the brown, leaving the reader with a sense that it could be any brown or all browns (43). Equally noteworthy is Hemingway’s description of the shape and line of the river, which is also indefinite and blurred. “It stretched away, pebbly-bottomed with shallots and big boulders and a deep pool as it curved away around the foot of a bluff” (Hemingway 134). While Hemingway includes the elements of the landscape, it is done in summary, leaving out the details a realistic author may have embraced. He does not tell the reader which side the bluffs are on or where the pools and rocks lie in relation to each other. Hemingway’s choice in this omission is definitively expressionistic. He is not as concerned with describing the scene as he is with creating a mood or feeling.

Furthermore, the expressionistic quality of the image works to illustrate Nick’s inner turmoil and feelings of alienation in the story; he is entering nature in search of healing after the fragmentary experience of the war. Nick leaves behind everything, “the need for thinking, the need to write, other needs,” in order to lose himself in nature (134). The details of this place in nature are not as important as the idea of its all encompassing, healing power: like a Cezanne painting, “a dash of brown will do for the stream, with other swift strokes for the trees and the particulars of the place” (Nelson 44). It is through the somewhat blurred image of the landscape that Nick’s emotions are highlighted. The images of charred land and black grasshoppers serve best to express Nick’s own internal

changes and wounds. Nick is internally charred and wounded, and Hemingway expresses this through the imagery of the surrounding landscape and nature. It is Hemingway's ability to express Nick's internal emotions and alienation through nature that makes this story expressionistic and poignant. In addition to short stories like "Big Two-Hearted River," *In Our Time* also contains vignettes which utilize expressionistic techniques in their imagery.

In just mere glimpses, the vignettes contain some of the most poignant imagery from the entire collection. In Chapter VI, Hemingway paints a scene which arouses in the reader "feelings of shock, horror, despair, frustration and sorrow" (25). Here, Nick, wounded in battle, "legs stuck out awkwardly," sits against a "pink wall" where "an iron bedstead hung twisted toward the street" (Hemingway 63). The color of the wall is extremely important in this scene. The pink color is very uncommon for a Hemingway piece, and can be taken to suggest "femininity and peace and quiet" (Nelson 25). This touch of femininity in the world of war not only shows the unnecessary violence but also Nick's own internal memories of home distorted by the war. Furthermore, the twisted bedstead serves as a token of the world of domesticity which has been destroyed. The contrast between the chaos and violence of the war and the domesticity implied by the pink serves to evoke a particular emotion in the reader. Hemingway uses the expressionistic techniques of contrast and color to create an image which expresses Nick's internal isolation and confusion in the midst of the fragmentary and chaotic experience of war. Nick must figure out how to live in this new fragmented world, a world once domestic and pink, now blown apart by war.

In both his short stories, like “Big Two- Hearted River,” and vignettes, like “Chapter VI,” Hemingway’s use of pinks, browns, and indistinct lines expresses the characters’ inner emotions. It is Hemingway’s intent to express emotions, coupled with his deliberate stylistic choices, that make his images expressionistic. Hemingway consciously borrows the symbolic and blurred use of color and line from expressionism to create vague yet effective images which are poignant in their depiction of the fragmentation and alienation of the early twentieth century.

Another artist influenced by Anderson’s expressionistic experiment, Jean Toomer, focuses on race relations and African American culture in both the South and North during the changing times of Modernism in his short story cycle *Cane* (1923). However, *Cane* is about more than African Americans, it is “the cry of one caught in the modern human condition; it expresse[s] modern man’s lostness, his isolation” (Fullenwider 66). While Toomer uses distinctly different images when moving between the North and South, each serves to express a feeling of alienation within society. Toomer’s writing has been labeled impressionistic by some critics due to his own personal attachment to the pieces, but his attempt to express the “higher realism of the emotions” makes his imagery expressionistic (Bone 58). To understand how Toomer’s writing from his own soul is truly expressionist, one might look to *A Handbook to Literature*’s definition of expressionism, “A movement... which followed and went beyond impressionism in its efforts to ‘objectify inner experience’” (194). Not only does Toomer express his own inner experiences, but those of his characters, focusing on their inner emotions rather than outward appearances.

Some of Toomer's most beautiful and Expressionistic imagery appears in his poetry, which is interspersed throughout the novel and designed to "arouse the most lethargic of emotions" (Holmes 47). In the first section of the novel which takes place in the South, Toomer focuses on the isolation which has been caused by slavery. Toomer's characters, both black and white, have "become Andersonian "grotesques" by virtue of their slave inheritance" (Bone 60). "Face" includes a chilling image of one such grotesque. Toomer's lyrical portrait expresses the despair of an unnamed, silver haired woman. Toomer writes, "And her channeled muscles / are cluster grapes of sorrow / purple in the evening sun / nearly ripe for worms" (10-13). It is Toomer's ability to delve into the soul of the woman that makes this image expressionistic. Toomer uses the ripe grape analogy to distort the reality of what one would see. The woman does not in reality have grapes for muscles or worms preparing to eat her, but this imagery works to express the alienation within. Toomer's focus on her muscles as sorrowful is key in understanding the woman's internal emotions and supports the idea of the characters being made grotesque through the slave experience. It is the woman's experience of slavery that both forces her to have strength while simultaneously inflicting sorrow upon her.

Like Hemingway, Toomer uses great splotches of color to distort reality, revealing inner emotions and creating an expressionist portrait of each character. In another movingly expressionistic poem in the first section, "Portrait in Georgia," Toomer describes another unnamed woman using harsh and painful images. Here, Toomer describes the woman's hair as "coiled like a lyncher's rope" (2). He goes on to describe her eyes, lips, breath, and finally her body, which is "white as the ash of black flesh after

flame” (6-7). Again, it is obvious by Toomer’s imagery that the woman’s slave heritage wounds her soul, and Toomer expresses this through the image of the lyncher’s rope. Furthermore, the images of light and dark in describing her body draw out the contrast in what should be and what is for the woman. The description of flame also expresses the woman’s inner soul as being burnt and wounded. Toomer uses raw, grotesque images to express the woman’s inner pain and isolation from white society.

The second portion of *Cane* moves to the North to focus on a different kind of alienation. In this section, Toomer’s imagery shows the African American in the modern city. Rather than just slavery, now sorrow and grotesqueness are caused by industry, in sketches which express that “[m]an’s essential goodness... his sense of brotherhood, and his creative instincts have been crushed and buried by modern industrial society” (Bone 61). The sketch “Theater” portrays a young man and woman unable to overcome their isolation and connect. In the beginning of the sketch, the man, John, is described as the light of the theater streaks his face: “One half his face is orange in it. One half his face is in shadow” (52). Not only does Toomer play with color, using the distorted shade, orange, for the man’s skin, but he also uses the contrasting light and dark to express John’s inner conflicts. The imagery here is extremely important in defining the character’s inner self, as the conflict playing out between John’s intellect and desire is what eventually hinders him from reaching out. Later, when “his whole face is in shadow” (55), the reader knows intellect has overcome desire, and he will not reach out to the girl on stage, leaving them both isolated and lonely.

Toomer’s imagery is undeniably expressionistic in its portrayal of the alienation that each character and all of mankind experiences. It is his ability to use natural and

everyday images to symbolize and portray the characters' emotions that make his art expressionistic. Toomer borrows expressionistic techniques of distorting light and color to reveal the true self rather than focusing on the realistic outer appearance. By focusing on the internal, Toomer expresses the soul of the character and sets himself apart as an expressionist artist.

Following in this line of expressionist authors, one more individual to look to is William Faulkner. Like Toomer, Faulkner often focuses on race and life after the Civil War in the South. He uses the grotesque to portray characters trapped in a small town, like Anderson. However, as critic Edmond Volpe asserts, Faulkner's all encompassing focus on "psychological misfits," often "in conflict with society," portrays the universal theme of alienation which is not unique to the South or rural life, but relates to modern man as a whole (4). Faulkner presents these isolated characters through the use of striking language and expressionistic imagery. Like Hemingway, Faulkner's images have been mislabeled realistic and precise, but it is the ability to evoke emotions in the reader while expressing an inner truth that makes the art expressionistic. Scholar Mary Cooper Robb claims that Faulkner expresses his characters' internal alienation by "dealing with them from the inside" (51). Much like Hemingway, Faulkner often uses landscape to convey the emotions of his readers. In doing this, he uses the nature of the South to express a "sense of truth about human character" (33).

One short story heavily expressionistic and symbolic in its imagery of the Southern land is "Dry September." In his attempt to express internal emotions within the story, "Faulkner depends more upon image patterns and metaphor than upon traditional narrative structure" (Volpe 122). The two main characters, Jackson McLendon and

Minnie Cooper, are isolated from the surrounding town in their middle age. Minnie accuses an innocent black man of raping her, and McLendon heads the mob that lynches him. The story focuses primarily on the events and circumstances in these two characters' lives leading up to and causing the lynching. Faulkner uses images of dust and the dry land to symbolize the characters' inner emotions and true selves. The characters are lonely, dead on the inside, spurring them to lies and violence. Faulkner writes, "The day had died in a pall of dust" (175), and later "Dust puffed about him" (179). Faulkner mentions the dusty dryness of the town more than a dozen times in the short story. The emphasis on the dust reflects Minnie and Jackson's internal dryness, felt as they age and the town disregards them, and "the psychological tensions that generate the tragic lynching" (Volpe 16). It is the extremity of the dusty dryness that makes the imagery expressionistic and successful in its attempt to convey the characters' emotions.

While Faulkner's images of the land are prominent and successful in conveying the emotional state of his characters, he does not limit himself only to nature imagery. In another short story, "Barn Burning," Faulkner uses imagery to convey the emotions of Sarty, the distanced remembering narrator, who is alienated from both society and his family. Sarty struggles to accept the fact that his father is indeed guilty of burning the barns of his previous employers and those who have angered him. The subtle "implications of the imagery" express "the young boy's emotional struggle" (233). In one particular scene, Faulkner incorporates color and movement to create an Expressionist image and express internal chaos. After the boy protagonist is provoked by bullies teasing him about his father, Faulkner describes the boy's vision: "there was a face in a red haze, moonlike, bigger than the full moon...he leaping into the red haze toward the face..." (5-

6). The red works to represent both the boy's inner rage and the blood about to come. The haze and blurred movements which follow express the boy in his own confusion over growing up. The narrator is dealing with his own anger at being mocked, alongside the intense shame of knowing the accusations are true. This, coupled with his anger towards his father, results in conflicting emotions and internal chaos. There are no distinct details of either Sarty's face or his movement, because Faulkner is attempting to create an emotion rather than describe a scene with realistic accuracy. While Faulkner may use more realistic and precise imagery at times, it is undeniable that his images take on an expressionistic air in their emotional expression of characters.

Whether depicting a child or middle aged person, Faulkner focuses on the interior nature of the characters. Through his use of color and emotion, Faulkner crafts grotesque, highly expressionistic, and stirring images which portray the alienation of his characters' lives. His successful attempt to illuminate the emotions and internal conflicts of his characters through representative imagery makes his work expressionistic.

While Anderson, Hemingway, Toomer, and Faulkner are varied in their tones, themes, and specific images, each is unquestionably Expressionistic in his choice of imagery. From the North to Midwest to South, from industrialization to war to slavery, these Modern artists express the fragmentation of the era. Whether through mastery of color, distortion, contrast, or a combination thereof, these artists each paint Expressionist masterpieces with their language. Common to each image is the overwhelming emotional response conjured when the soul of Modern man is expressed in all its fragmented and alienated glory. Working in a time of Nietzsche, Darwin, and self-discovery, these artists translated the depths of man's soul into poignant imagery, which not only portrayed the

darkness and fragmentation, but also called out for man to overcome it. Despite the differences in the authors, their imagery reached out to the alienated man in the newly Modern world, and despite the changes over the last century, the images still reach out to mankind today. Our world has changed and evolved, but the truths that were learned in the Modern era cannot be unlearned, and we are still reaching out through the fragmentation to break out of the alienated lives in which we live.

Works Cited

- Anderson, Sherwood. *Winesburg, Ohio*. New York: Dover, 1995.
- Bone, Robert A. "Jean Toomer." *The Merrill Studies in Cane*. Comp. Frank Durham. Columbus, OH: Merrill, 1971. 58-65.
- Faulkner, William. "Barn Burning." *Collected Stories of William Faulkner*. New York: Vintage Books, 1977. 3-25
- . "Dry September." *Collected Stories of William Faulkner*. New York: Vintage, 1977. 169-183.
- Fullenwider, S.P. "Jean Toomer: Lost Generation, or Negro Renaissance." *The Merrill Studies in Cane*. Comp. Frank Durham. Columbus: Merrill, 1971. 66-74.
- Harmon, William and C. Hugh Holman, ed. "Expressionism." *A Handbook to Literature*. Fifth Edition. New York: Macmillan, 1986. 194.
- Hemingway, Ernest. *In Our Time*. New York: Scribner's, 1970.
- Holmes, Eugene. "Jean Toomer- Apostle of Beauty." *The Merrill Studies in Cane*. Comp. Frank Durham. Columbus, OH: Merrill, 1971. 45-51.

Moore, Lisa, ed. "Modernism." *The Harper Handbook to Literature*. Second Edition.

New York: Longman, 1997. 300-301.

Nelson, Raymond S. *Hemingway: Expressionist Artist*. Ames: Iowa State UP, 1979.

Papinchak, Robert Allen. *Sherwood Anderson: A Study of the Short Fiction*. New York:

Twayne, 1992.

Robb, Mary Cooper. *William Faulkner: An Estimate of his Contribution to the Modern*

American Novel. Pittsburgh: U of Pittsburgh P, 1957.

Stouck, David. "Anderson's Expressionistic Art." *New Essays on Winesburg, Ohio*. Ed.

John W. Crowley. New York: Cambridge UP, 1990.

Toomer, Jean. *Cane*. Ed. Darwin T. Turner. New York: Norton, 1988.

Volpe, Edmond L. *A Reader's Guide to William Faulkner: The Short Stories*. Syracuse:

Syracuse UP, 2004.