Chapter V

Autobiographical Elements in Anderson’s work

Anderson’s own life worked as a source for his works. He derived material from his own life. A Story Teller’s Story reveals the beginning of his search for the purpose and meaning of his own life. He tries to know himself, to search his own identity in the context of time and place.

His critics and biographers have opined several times that the accounts of his sudden abandonment of his business career are pure fictional accounts that are at once reasonable and mystic, contrived and intuitive. He feels that being the son of a storyteller he is compelled to become a storyteller and that he must get rid of the business as this buying and selling makes him face the overwhelming feeling of non cleanliness. He feels that he is by nature and soul a tale – teller, the son of a tale – teller and believes that if he keeps on buying and selling, he will be destroyed.
The conflict that resulted in his breakdown and subsequent recovery revealed some of the basic American experiences and rendered him the raw material for some of the most piercing, sagacious and appealing analysis of mid American life in American literature. The most obvious, perhaps, his progress from utter poverty to a modest prosperity as a businessman was a realisation of the Horatio Alger Myth, an accomplishment of the cherished popular belief that hard work and personal virtues would be rewarded with material success. But his subsequent breakdown also provided him a basis in personal experience for the representation of another concept that was characteristically American, for it was easily transformed into conscious rejection of success - a traditional symbolic gesture of American literary idealism which D.H. Lawrence called the "myth of America".

Anderson's conflict also made him closer to a number of representative social, historical and geographical situations; for his periodic movements back and forth from small country towns to the rapidly developing industrial metropolis of Chicago as a labourer, a
commercial writer, and a businessman provided him opportunities of getting firsthand experiences with a broad cross-section of life in the Midwest during its transition from the calm and simple agrarian to the tumultuous industrial era. As he moved through the spectrum of midwestern life, he amassed the experience and materials for the highly original and incisive portrayals of grotesque individuals found in *Winesburg, Ohio; The Triumph of the Egg; Horses and Men; and Poor White*.

There was a thin line between Anderson's life and work but any effort to sort out the facts of his life that most clarify his fiction may lead in utter darkness and confusion; for as his misnamed "autobiographies" show, he was often hostile to facts and commonly - at times, indeed almost perversely – deformed changed or molded facts to suit his imaginative purposes.

In my own experience, for example, and in my work as a writer I have always attempted to use materials that come out of my own experience of life. I have written a good deal about my father, my mother, a certain grandmother
who touched my imagination and about my brothers and sisters. (Augusto, 149)

But while deriving material form his own life he does not stick to facts. He prepares a unique mixture of fact and fiction by using this imagination. He believes that naked use of facts leads to imperfection. One cannot remain loyal to one's art for a long period if one uses facts only. As he, himself admits in his Memories "Facts elude me. I cannot remember dates. When I deal in facts, at once I begin to lie. I can't help it". (Kazin, 212)

It is well known, too, that he consciously designed a legend about himself and his abandonment of business, which romanticised his life and affected critical interpretations of his works. Yet a brief survey will serve our purpose to find out the conflicting patterns of his life: both before and after 1912, that saved the vital narrative features of his works and framed them in a moral circumference. The survey will be most profitable if seen in terms of the various roles Anderson adopted as he attempted to create an identity for himself,
roles which often conflicted with one another and generated the tension that exists within his work.

His father who drank and boasted too much and worked too little at his trade is described vividly and repeatedly in his works. The father of *The Triumph of the Egg* comprises some traits of Anderson’s father as he possesses grandiose ideas, his craving for success seems ill-starred, he brags of being able to do things he cannot accomplish.

Anderson presents in his works like *A Story Teller’s Story*, *Tar: A Midwest Childhood*, and *Memoirs*, Irwin as a wildly fanciful man, unpredictable by nature and given to narrating fantastic tales that not only enchanted village and country audiences but also signified his habit of running away from the hard economic facts and obligations due to which his family problems that he should have faced as a father and as a husband, were escalated. While young Sherwood felt a certain pride in his father’s gift as a tale-teller, he could not then accept Irwin’s imaginative qualities as satisfactory substitutes for success as a provider for the family. He showed his resentment against the poverty and indignity he believed Irwin’s improvidence imposed
upon the family, and he was especially bitter about the hardship it
brought to Emma. His critical feelings toward his father may be seen
in his devastating portrayal of Windy McPherson as a braggart and a
fool whose ridiculous boasting brings disgrace to his family in the
presence of the whole town of Caxton, Iowa and whose drunkenness
and negligence indirectly caused the early death of his overworked
wife and who behaved impetuously and remained indifferent to the
sufferings of his wife.

In *A Story Teller’s Story*, he recalled more generously that his
father was born only for romance and for him there was nothing like
fact.

It is worth noting in connection with Anderson’s attitude
toward those defeated by life – as seen in such works as
*Winesburg* and *The Egg* – that his later tolerance and
sympathy for his father grew concurrently with a change
from his earlier belief that Irwin himself was responsible
for his “failure” in life to the conviction that his father
was made grotesque by the society in which he lived. (Rex, 35)

When once the sheer power of egg to frustrate the father is taken into account, the extent to which he may be seen as standing for Anderson’s own father seems striking. Irwin Anderson had a robust heartiness, the character in the story does not have, but there were moments in his life when he too collapsed in despair at his own ineptness and the world’s unwillingness to take him seriously. From that aspect of his father Anderson has built his character – a poignant gesture of filial reconciliation, sharply in contrast to murderous aggression of Windy McPherson’s Son and the self-conscious romanticizing of A Story Teller’s Story.

To Anderson his father Irwin Anderson remained a grotesque figure, a detached fellow whose position becomes ludicrous due to the chasm between his pretension and his real world. His self-exaltation even in public places proves to be disgusting to a critical and realistic mind which Anderson possesses. In most of the works the father figure resembles to Irwin Anderson. Anderson’s first book Windy
*McPherson's Son* begins with a vindictive portrait of his father and is full of direct resentment and aggression.

In the Memoirs Anderson was more restrained, trying to achieve a balanced memory of boyhood: it was “only after I had become a mature man long after my mother’s death, that I began to appreciate our father and to understand somewhat his eternal boyishness, his lack of the feeling of responsibility to others, his passion for always playing with life... (Irving, 170)

It is also significant that he himself was later compelled to abandon the responsibilities that as a boy he condemned his father for failing to accept. Anderson equated himself with his father but could not cultivate positive feelings for him while contrastingly he cherished his mother but could not identify himself with her. To him his mother was less puzzling and more gratifying than his father. He felt that by idealizing his mother in his works he could pay a tribute to her sufferings and endurance which as a boy he failed to see. He felt
as if, he could not cherish her enough as he could not decipher her silences which were pregnant with agony.

Anderson was deeply devoted to his mother. To him, Emma seemed to have all the desirable qualities that his father lacked; and as he rejected Irwin's irresponsibility, he embraced the qualities of stoic endurance, self-sacrifice, and sympathetic curiosity that, to his mind, his mother possessed. He credited her with instilling in him her own penetrating insight and sympathetic understanding of people. But despite her moral qualities, Emma Anderson remained to Sherwood a symbol of broken dreams, of a life spent in a dreary routine of washing and cooking and childbearing, a life starved for affection from her husband and devoid of adventure and excitement.

"In his most moving portrayals of her, in "Mother" and in "Death" in *Winesburg*, she is shown wasting away spiritually as well as physically in a life which was barren of intimate and significant adult human relationships. To Sherwood she embodied the most pathetic and beautiful qualities of the grotesque; a woman broken by a hard and
sterile environment, by the callous disregard shown by others, and by the reticence and passiveness that accompanied such of her virtue as stoic and uncomplaining resignation, she was a prototype of the lonely person whose inner beauty "shines forth" in a strangely twisted fashion. (Rex, 20)

While travelling through the South where he went to take an active part in Southern labour movement, he identified the factory women with his mother and due to this reason was ready to fight for them.

Anderson dedicated his most famous work, *Winesburg, Ohio* to his mother as he thought that it was she who awakened in him "the hunger to see beneath the surface of lives". In the later phase of his life he admitted that she stimulated him to probe into the lives of working women.

"I have seen my own mother stand all the day over a washtub, washing the dirty liner of pretentious middle-class women not fit to tie her shoe laces, this just to get
her sons enough food to keep them alive, and I presume I shall never in my life see a working women without identifying her with my mother. (Gregory, 115)

Sherwood pictured Emma, his mother in many tales as a woman who becomes emaciated behind the wall, unnoticed and neglected by others. She is pictured as the embodiment of endurance, devoid of meaningful intimacy, a woman for whom this society proves to be a barren land where due to the lack of love and care no human seed can become an affectionate plant, a women crushed by the burden of hard work, child-bearing and loneliness. *Death in the Woods* becomes the most powerful expression of woman’s frightening loneliness and man’s insensitivity and apathy towards them.

Even though Anderson draws material from the treasure of his life, he never let them present before a reader as it is rather he throws a thin veil to fictionalise the events and characters in order to make them impersonal and universal. He had made creative use of his parents’ memory. In his fictional world both Irwin and Emma are projected as the victims of loneliness. They represent the same human
situation, the result of which is same (i.e. loneliness) but causes are different. Irwin is isolated because of his inability to adjust himself to the changing pattern of the society while Emma becomes alienated because of her passiveness due to which she endures everything and instead of trying to break out, submits to barren and loveless life. They personify defeat and loneliness. Hence – they appear in his work as characters embodying a cultural and human situation rather than specific individuals.

The trustworthiness remains absent from his autobiographies as he puts no effort to maintain accuracy. He tries to decipher the legend of his life rather than its mere facts. He maintains that this procedure is a dubious theory of art but his justification seems unreasonable and irrelevant because when he felt a strong desire, he penned a carefully organised legend about his family and boyhood.

But if his autobiographies cannot be read as records they can be taken as evidence, and if they often deviate from factual accuracy they as often penetrate to psychological truth. Anderson’s portraits of his life in Clyde, of his mother and father, were retributive and
nostalgic qualities hardly conducive to accuracy; But here is in them nonetheless, a some-what buried group of insights which is partly a conscious issue of his mind and partly derived from the subterranean working of his memory.

Almost all of his works are crowded with the echoes of his memories and at least five of them are directly related with his youth. Anderson’s penchant for transcribing his own life into his own life into his works was due to the belief that his life because of its complexities could represent the crucial American era. He incorporated into his autobiography the most widespread patterns of American life: the childhood facing paucity in every respect, the embarrassed adolescence, and a continuous struggle for every positive thing, struggle to get success, struggle to maintain it, struggle for expression, struggle to comprehend and above all the brooding concern for the fate of nation.

In *Windy McPherson’s Son*, Sherwood’s autobiographical novel, “Sam McPherson is an essentially accurate portrait of Anderson, the ambitious go getter as a youth. Like Sam, Anderson
was impressed while very young with the value of 'getting ahead' (Rex, 21). The economic and social facts of his boyhood impelled him, as they do Sam McPherson, toward pursuit of middle-class comfort rather than a career in the arts.

In the opening chapter of the semi autobiographical *Windy McPherson's Son*, young Sam McPherson performed an unprincipled but astute maneuver which enables him to outsmart one of his youthful rivals in their competition for newspaper customers in the village of Caxton, Iowa. Anderson's sketch of Sam in this episode brings to light clearly and accurately one of the most important leading factors in his own early life: the extreme drive to bring order to a badly disorganized life. Initially a response to family poverty, the need for order which finally made him a writer manifested itself at first in a competitive struggle for success – perhaps the only avenue of escape for a boy of his time and circumstances.

In it American success fable is worded along with a daydream version of his own career. The last two – thirds of his novel is a pretensions affair, it's fumbling deteriorated by his painful effort to
achieve sophistication. Sam McPherson leaves his home for Chicago, marries his boss's daughter, gets material success rapidly, finds himself uncondensed with his business life and childless marriage, gives up business and wife just to wander throughout the country in order to get material success rapidly, find himself uncondensed with his business life and childless marriage, gives up business and wife just to wander throughout the country in order to seek meaning and peace and to console his spirit (soul). Sam's dissatisfaction with his married (sexual) life does not seem too farfetched from Anderson's personal experience as during his Elyria years he too felt that the problem of sexual fulfillment did harass him.

In *Windy McPherson's Son and Marching Men*, the heroes, Sam McPherson and Beaut McGregor, as they move (much as Anderson himself did) through three successive stages toward maturity and moral consciousness: the youth spent in a small town, the escape to the city and pursuit of success, and the sudden desertion of the success ethic. Unlike Anderson himself,
whose break with convention was clearly a case of psychic necessity, McPherson and McGregor repudiate the individualistic values of a materialistic society for moral reasons; but, whereas Anderson’s struggle was primarily one for psychological wholeness, theirs represent moral journey first to consciousness and then to conscience. (Rex, 48-49)

In “Hands” the second Winesburg selection, Anderson introduces a youthful character named George Willard, who is a reflection of the younger persona of Sherwood Anderson. The old writer of “The Book of the Grotesque” resembles Anderson in several respects. Like Anderson, the old man was once an affectionate, sociable, individual who experienced a close and friendly relationship with a single room. The old man even had his bed elevated (as Anderson had), in order that he might look out of his window and thus feel less isolated from the world.

In Marching Men Anderson poured his own agitation and desperation. In its pages he used his own life, a few recollections of
Clyde, many more of Chicago, his life there and his analysis of the enigma of sex and of women’s lives as raw material. He never let his work be an actual picture of his life. He maintains

But the story of novel will not be an actual picture of life. I will never have had any intentions of making it that...There is a reality to your book, your story people. They may, in the beginning, be lifted, once become a part of the book, of the story life, realism, in the sense in which the word is commonly used no longer exists. (Augusto, 7).

Always refracting the careers of his characters through the prism of his own feeling and experiences, Anderson created subjective stories in which inarticulate men women, craving emotional and spiritual release from the psychic starvation of their public lives, conflict with the containing pressures of social mores.

Anderson’s material is somewhat unfortunately limited to his own experiences and his own reactions to life. Since the publication of his autobiography, *A Story Teller’s Story* (1924), it has been
possible to determine the great frequency with which he has thrown a thin veil of fiction over actual characters and incidents. The judge of the autobiography appears as a minor character in several novels and under several names, Anderson’s father, who obviously played a very important part in the boy’s psychic development, appears as Windy McPherson’s father and in disguise as well. Anderson’s heroes, moreover, seem to be variations of his own introverted personality most sensitively projected, perhaps is the hero of Poor White. His heroes recapitulate each other’s experiences. They tend to run away almost without warning, usually from their wives. Suffering vaguely from a profound dissatisfaction with the universe, they go blundering off a quest of some meaning to life or some solution of their personal problems. Sometimes the hero’s quest ends in a woman, as in Dark Laughter (1925) and sometimes, as in Marching Men in a vague social idea.

In the novels and short stories of Anderson, the chief characters were all “slip of sections of himself”. They were small – town people tame and dull in aspect, but inwardly tortured and longing for
togetherness, worked upon by forces only dimly realized. It was his purpose to uncover and reveal this hidden life.

.... Often I fall into a half dream state and when I do, the faces of people begin to appear before me. They seem to snap into place before my eyes. Stay there, sometimes for a short period, sometimes longer. There are smiling faces, ugly faces, tired faces, and hopeful faces. Almost always they seem to be faces of people I cannot remember ever having met. (Norman, 1445)

He further simplified his concept and stated there were two kinds of writing: one that set out to put down as closely as possible the realities of life which he terms as reporting or journalism. The other is story telling in which the stories begin on the plane of reality. Sometimes something happens that is interesting to the writer – there is some person, a man or woman whose experiences or adventures in life fascinate the writer and seem to him suitable as a character for a story or a novel.
Kit Brandon the protagonist of novel named after her was a real living being; Anderson got interacted in the hill country of Virginia. One evening Mr. Henry Morgenthau, the secretary of the Treasury, made him a call telling him that a certain Virginia country, less than fifty miles away from his home had gone into bootlegging rather immensely. The prohibition laws were enforced by the Treasury Department in the hill country of Virginia. There was a peculiar situation as this very Virginia country where the farmers were all poor, suddenly became an industrial center. Liquor was being made stealthily. One man, a typical industrial overlord was ruling over the county by terror and the poor farmers were facing a situation in which they were to make, liquor, turn over to this man and concurrently face the chances of a prison sentence, for just a wage of less than two dollars a day.

The Treasury Department send their secret agents into this country and they suddenly started arresting, making practically the whole country under arrest. Among the people arrested in the Virginia country, mostly all of them were poor and innocent men. Mr.
Morgenthau wanted this human story to be told. So Anderson went there and tried to get at the human side of what had happened in that particular community. There he spent some weeks and got acquainted with people. Among them there was a young woman rum - runner. He was interested in her, therefore rode with her in a car, dined with her and had many long talks and later on portrayed her as Kit Brandon, changing her name and some facts.

Through the power of his imagination Anderson fictionalised this young woman rum - runner and managed to make her exist in the imaginative life of his readers. He didn’t represent the young woman rum - runner as she was because he felt that neither too much life nor too little life made good art; rather it is the artistically controlled imagination that held the balance. This is the main cause that he fictionalised his own life. He molded the facts picked up from life and in a rare, beautiful and attractive moment gave them the shape of a novel.

Borrow tells that Anderson’s own chief interest was in “the social implication of the neurosis and it was this aspect of our talk that
took a strong hold with Anderson.” Borrow emphasised once more what he had told Hoffman that Sherwood Anderson was an original psychologist in his own right and, if he profited by any insight of his (Borrow’s), he also profited in no small measure by the exceptional insight of his (Anderson) literary genius. Borrow further comments in his letter to Hoffman that “Anderson was a man of amazing intuitive flashes but... like Freud, the chief source of his material was his own uncanny insight”. He analyses his characters in the story without setting forth in narrative terms his thesis that the ills of the world could be cured by a greater consciousness of the “dark blood”. Anderson repeatedly rejected Freudian formulas, for he resisted what he regarded as the oversimplification of the human mind and heart. He resented the tendency of the popular psychoanalysis he was acquainted with to generate self-consciousness and inhibition by labeling an individual’s expressions and gestures with pat phrases. His steadfast refusal to accept such systematisation and oversimplification is what Burrow found most engaging and brilliant in him.
The romance was clearly not Anderson's form. When he wanted to deal with "ideas", he did his best work in the imaginative autobiography or "confession" a form admirably suited to his best narrative style of intimate, subjective commentary. Such a work is *A Story Teller's Story*, while it hardly deserves to be classed with *Walden* or with *Leaves of Grass*, it does share two qualities with those masterpieces. First, it has an intangible but pervasive quality which suggests the presence of an authentic person and of a vital, sensitive inner life moving through successive stages of struggle with the world of fact but left finally to nourish itself with rare "moments" of beauty of life and art. As in *Walden* and in *Leaves of Grass*, one is aware at all times of an immediate and sustained link with a personality who dominates his material but is inseparable from it and whose essential life has been fashioned out of the great struggle of his imagination to achieve integrity. Second, it shares with two books a structural cohesion and movement which have unfortunately gone unappreciated by most critics but which make the book a significant expression of the "American myth". Admittedly-almost defiantly – an imaginative biography, it deliberately scorns the primacy of the world
of fact and compels an imaginative, mythical interpretation. The point of view is that of the self confident, successful author who nostalgically recalls his development as a writer, recollects the factual and fanciful life of his youth, points to the facts of life which misdirected his imaginative endowment and sent him into the "ugly" world of facts, relates the struggle between his imaginative nature and the demands of business and society that led to his break from business, and tells of his quest for critical guidance and for esthetic and moral integrity in America. In typical Anderson fashion, the narrative sequence moves back and forth in time; but, overall, the book has a discernible development which is psychological and chronological as well as mythical.

Anderson had four phases in his life

(1) His childhood in a small town, the time of fancy, sentience, purity and innocence.

(2) His young manhood in Chicago, the realisation of something wrong and a reaching out for a meaningful relation with life.
(3) His involvement in the world of fact, of business and the success ethic, and the rebellion of the inner life and purification ("a sweet clean feeling") and rebirth in the act of becoming a writer.

(4) The construction of a new life, the "pilgrimage" of the artist, as the prototype of the "whole man", in search of psychic and sentient integrity and simplicity.

Each stage of development is constructed loosely about a symbolic character or group who has contributed to his imaginative heritage or growth. In Book I Anderson sees in his father's childish innocence, a symbol of America in its immaturity: a person still unable to bring the needs of the fancy for love and beauty to bear upon its material life. In Book II at the stage of the Artist's pilgrimage, the fancy shrinks away from "a world where only men of action seemed to thrive" and which was symbolized by Ford. In Book III the chief symbols, the virgin and the Dynamo, represent the culmination of his new conscious quest for a symbol of good life. At the end of chapter when with Rosenfeld he sat entranced before the great cathedral and found at last the symbol of imaginative fulfillment
in love and art, the symbol of a whole people welded together for the creation of beauty. Anderson had at last found his symbol of human perfection. It remained now to turn from the past to the future— with the qualities embodied by the cathedral as a goal—to America with a new understanding of the nature and possibilities of art.

Anderson's stories depend not upon detachment, but upon the artist's personality. In three major autobiographical books (A Story-Teller's Story, Tar and Memoirs), in many essays and lectures and in thousand of letters, Anderson talked about his craft. His statements about his art are consistent and form a body of views which can be described as expressive, focusing on the poet and his creative act rather than on such matters as the nature of his "imitation" or the psychology of his audience. He had a sense of form, but his notion of it tended to be very subjective and intuitive.

Under the influence of Twain, Anderson brought his vision of the puzzled boy or boy-man to near perfection in a handful of tales that combine a carefully controlled point of view with a painstaking attention to the subtleties of the colloquial diction of the narrator, who
betrays both a touching naiveté and a profound sensitivity to the confusing paradoxes of the adult world. Like Huck Finn, "I Want to Know Why", "I'm a Fool", and "The Man Who Became a Woman" are related from the first person point of view. A boy - or a man looking back upon his youth, has experience or witnessed a baffling admixture of beauty and ugliness, purity and corruption, success and failure. The narrator himself is either unable to explain precisely what the experience means or - in the case of "I'm a Fool" - fails to understand his own role in it and misinterprets it, and, in his groping efforts to explain what he does not fully comprehend he rambles in his narrative, feeling about for details he vaguely perceives to be significant. Typically his narrative digresses as he searches confusedly for explanations which fellow his feelings rather than a logical or chronological sequence, and in his digression he reveals the pain of entry into adult life in the perplexity he feels at seeing for the first time the ambiguities of life.