THE STRENGTH OF THE ID IN "THE STRENGTH OF GOD"

Toshiyuki Kozono

In a letter from Sherwood Anderson to George Freitag (1) on August 27, 1938, Anderson says:

When I wrote my Winesburg stories — for the whole series I got eighty-five dollars — such critics as Mr. Floyd Dell and Henry Mencken, having read them, declared they were not stories. They were merely, it seemed, sketches. They were too vague, too groping. Some ten or fifteen years after Mr. Mencken told me they were not stories, he wrote, telling of how, when he first saw them, he realized their strength and beauty. An imagined conversation between us, that never took place, was spoken about.

And for this I did not blame Mr. Mencken. He thought he had said what he now thinks he said.

There was a time when Mr. Dell was, in a way, my literary father. He and Mr. Waldo Frank had been the first critics to praise some of my earlier work. He was generous and warm. He, with Mr. Theodore Dreiser, was instrumental in getting my first book published. When he saw the Winesburg stories, he, however, condemned them heartily. He was at that time, I believe, deeply under the influence of Maupassant. He advised me to throw the Winesburg stories away. They had no form. They were not stories. A story, he said, must be sharply definite. There must be a beginning and an end.(2)
Dell and Mencken, however, later praised *Winesburg, Ohio.*

Prior to this praise Dell had thought enough of the Winesburg stories to print three of them in *Masses:* “The Book of the Grotesque,” “Hands,” and “The Strength of God.”

In prose “homely and unemphatic,” Anderson tells in *Winesburg, Ohio* of rebellion against convention. The Winesburg stories give to American short story writers a new form that replaces the old plot-story.

With a full appreciation of the true value of the Winesburg stories Walter Allen assesses Anderson’s place in the history of American literature: “Though there had been great American short story writers — Hawthorne, Poe, James — before Anderson, he stands out as the founding father of the modern short story in America.”

In his shorter writings “Excellent Fiction for Summer Reading” which is included in *New York Times Book Review* (29 June 1920) William Lyon Phelps refers to Freud and Jung, and further, Frederick J. Hoffman says: “At the peak of his career, in the mid-twenties, critics hailed Sherwood Anderson as the “American Freudian,” the one American writer who knew his psychology and possessed a rich fund of knowledge and experience to which it could best be applied.”

In *Winesburg, Ohio* Anderson writes with understanding love of lives comprehended through the new psychologies of Freud and Jung.

This paper is intended as an investigation of the components of “The Strength of God,” and of psychoanalysis of the protagonist in the story.

The summary of “The Strength of God” is as in the following.

(A) The Reverend Curtis Hartman was pastor of the Presbyterian Church of Winesburg, and had been in that position ten years. He was forty years old, and by his nature very silent and reticent. To preach, standing in the pulpit before the people, was always a hardship for him and from Wednesday morning until Saturday evening he thought of nothing but the two sermons that must be preached on Sunday. Early on
Sunday morning he went into a little room called a study in the bell tower of the church and prayed.

(B) The room in the bell of the church, where on Sunday mornings the minister prayed for an increase in him of the power of God, had but one window. It was long and narrow and swung outward on a hinge like a door. On the window, made of little leaded panes, was a design showing the Christ laying his hand upon the head of a child.

(C) One Sunday morning in the summer as he sat by his desk in the room with a large Bible opened before him, and the sheets of his sermon scattered about, the minister was shocked to see, in the upper room of the house next door, Kate Swift lying in her bed and smoking a cigarette while she read a book. Curtis Hartman went on tiptoe to the window and closed it softly. He was horror stricken at the thought of a woman smoking and trembled also to think that his eyes, just raised from the pages of the book of God, had looked upon the bare shoulders and white throat of a woman.

(D) In the soul of the minister a struggle awoke. From wanting to reach the ears of Kate Swift, and through his sermons to delve into her soul, he began to want also to look again at the figure lying white and quiet in the bed. On a Sunday morning when he could not sleep because of his thoughts he arose and went to walk in the streets. When he had gone along Main Street almost to the old Richmond place he stopped and picking up a stone rushed off to the room in the bell tower. With the stone he broke out a corner of the window and then locked the door and sat down at the desk before the open Bible to wait.

(E) When the shade of the window to Kate Swift's room was raised he could see, through the hole, directly into her bed, but she was not there. She also had arisen and had gone for a walk and the hand that raised the shade was the hand of Aunt Elizabeth Swift.

(F) The minister almost wept with joy at this deliverance from the carnal
The minister put the thoughts of the woman in the bed out of his mind and began to be something like a lover in the presence of his wife.

Now began the real struggle in the soul of the brown-bearded minister. By chance he discovered that Kate Swift was in the habit of lying in her bed in the evenings and reading a book. A lamp stood on a table by the side of the bed and the light streamed down upon her white shoulders and bare throat. On the evening when he made the discovery the minister sat at the desk in the study from nine until after eleven and when her light was put out stumbled out of the church to spend two more hours walking and praying in the streets. He did not want to kiss the shoulders and the throat of Kate Swift and had not allowed his mind to dwell on such thoughts. He did not know what he wanted.

One night in January when it was bitter cold and snow lay deep on the streets of Winesburg Curtis Hartman paid his last visit to the room in the bell tower of the church.

Along the street to the church went the minister, plowing through the drifts and thinking that this time he would utterly give way to sin. "I want to look at the woman and to think of kissing her shoulders and I am going to let myself think what I choose," he declared bitterly and tears came into his eyes. He began to think that he would get out of the ministry and try some other way of life.

In the room in the house next door Kate Swift had not yet appeared. With grim determination the man sat down to wait.

On the January night, after he had come near dying with cold and after his mind had two or three times actually slipped away into an odd land of fantasy so that he had by an exercise of will power to force himself back into consciousness, Kate Swift appeared. In the room next door
a lamp was lighted and the waiting man stared into an empty bed. Then upon the bed before his eyes a naked woman threw herself. Lying face downward she wept and beat with her fists upon the pillow. With a final outburst of weeping she half arose, and in the presence of the man who had waited to look and to think thoughts the woman of sin began to pray. In the lamplight her figure, slim and strong, looked like the figure of the boy in the presence of the Christ on the leaded window.

Curtis Hartman never remembered how he got out of the church. Along the street he went and ran in at the door of the Winesburg Eagle. To George Willard, who was tramping up and down in the office undergoing a struggle of his own, he began to talk half incoherently. "The ways of God are beyond human understanding. I have found the light. After ten years in this town, God has manifested himself to me in the body of a woman. I did not understand. What I took to be a trial of my soul was only a preparation for a new and more beautiful fervor of the spirit. God has appeared to me in the person of Kate Swift, the school teacher, kneeling naked on bed. Do you know Kate Swift? Although she may not be aware of it, she is an instrument of God, bearing the message of truth."

Reverend Curtis Hartman turned and ran out of the office.

(M) At the door he stopped, and after looking up and down the deserted street, turned again to George Willard. "I am delivered. Have no fear." He held up a bleeding fist for the young man to see. "I smashed the glass of the window," he cried. "Now it will have to be wholly replaced. The strength of God was in me and I broke it with my fist."

The above is the summary of "The Strength of God."

The narrator in "The Strength of God," outside the story, penetrates and reveals the minds of all characters in the story; moreover, he presumes to know all and takes the liberty of telling all. This method is what call the omniscient point of view.

In this story Anderson uses each word deliberately to indicate states
of mind of the central character because this story could not be told in first-person style.

(A) shows the introduction. The opening part of a story, called the introduction, acquaints us with the characters and shows us their condition in a certain setting.

In (A) we are informed of characterization of the protagonist.

The following further show us the physical description of the Hartmans, the description of their environments and personal history and Hartman's view of woman.

The Reverend Hartman was a tall man with a brown beard. His wife, a stout, nervous woman, was the daughter of a manufacturer of underwear at Cleveland, Ohio. The minister himself was rather a favorite in the town. The elders of the church liked him because he was quiet and unpretentious and Mrs. White, the banker's wife, thought him scholarly and refined.\(^7\)

Reverend Harman's experience with women had been somewhat limited. He was the son of a wagon maker from Muncie, Indiana, and had worked his way through college. The daughter of the underwear manufacturer had boarded in a house where he lived during his school days and he had married her after a formal and prolonged courtship, carried on for the most part by the girl herself.

The minister had thought himself fortunate in marriage and had never permitted himself to think of other women. He did not want to think of other women. What he wanted was to do the work of God quietly and earnestly.\(^8\)
Judging from Jung's theory, the Reverend Hartman is an introvert; namely his character is as follows: compassion, kindness, a warm heart, pure, sympathy, tolerance, passion, conscientiousness, devoutness, a desire for worship, fanaticism, care, phenomenon of possession, etc.

(B) shows the setting of the story.

(C), (D), (E), (F), (G), (H), (I), (J) and (K) show the Development of the story.

The opening part of (C) begins with "... as he sat by his desk ..." and the next moment a new event, "... the minister was shocked to see ... a woman lying in her bed ..." happens: this is the very beginning of the plot.

In the next paragraph of the story we are informed of characterization by externals and the physical description of "a woman lying in her bed." It is as follows. The house next door to the Presbyterian Church was occupied by two women. Aunt Elizabeth Swift, a grey competent-looking widow with money in the Winesburg National Bank, lived there with her daughter Kate Swift, a school teacher. The school teacher was thirty years old and had a neat trim-looking figure. She was the very woman "lying in her bed." She had few friends and bore a reputation of having a sharp tongue.

(D) shows the complication. (C) and those situations that follow (C) develop the conflict. This section of the story is called the complication, the plot as conflict. In the opening part of (D) the word "a struggle" means intrapsychic conflict in psychoanalysis. The word "conflict" means the simultaneous occurrence of two or more mutually antagonistic impulses or motives.

The relation between the id, the ego and the super-ego must be examined in order to seek the roots of Curtis Hartman's behavior in motivation and conflict. In Dictionary of Psychology James P. Chaplin says:
Freud's account of mind and personality follows a tripartite schema, which in the case of mind, involves three levels of consciousness, called the unconscious, the subconscious, and the conscious respectively. The unconscious — the seat of the libido and of repressed memories — is considered by Freud to be the most important level of mind. Personality is considered to have developed out of the primitive id, or the original, animalistic aspect of the self characteristic of the infant. From the id develops the ego, or that part of personality which attempts to deal with reality at the same time that it strives to allow the id as many of its demands as possible. The ego is also under pressure from the super-ego — Freud’s equivalent of the conscience — which originates from the internalization of parental prohibitions and restrictions and which continues to be a kind of ideal aspect of the self that seeks to govern the id through its mediator, the ego. Thus, in Freudian theory, mind is a three-way battleground. (9)

The id wanted to look again at the woman lying white and quiet in her bed, while the super-ego which is roughly equivalent to conscience wanted to abandon the carnal desire and only to pray to God. The ego mediating between the demands of the id and the super-ego perfectly admitted the immoral demand of the id, but on the other hand, the ego let the super-ego admit the id's demand for the reason that through his sermons to delve into her soul he need to look again at the woman lying white and quiet in her bed.

It was the strength of the id that let him pick up a stone and with it break out a corner of the window.

(E) shows that the demand of the id miscarried.

(F) shows the figure of the ego which recovered consciousness and almost wept with joy at this deliverance from the carnal desire to “peep”
because the demand of the id was cut off under the external condition. It is, however, under the strength of the id that he forgot to stop the hole in the window.

(G) shows that the super-ego surpasses the id. The id wanted the carnal to the women lying in her bed, while the super-ego forbade the carnal desire to women other than his wife. The ego examined the insistence of the id and the super-ego closely and mediated between the id and the super-ego which embodied the critical and moral aspects of the self, so that the ego began to satisfy the carnal desire by changing alloeroticism.

In the paragraph just before (G), the minister talking to his congregation of his temptations is the very figure of the ego confessing earnestly the desire of the id:

He talked to his congregation and in his talk said that it was a mistake for people to think of their minister as a man set aside and intended by nature to lead a blameless life. "Out of my own experience I know that we, who are the ministers of God's word, are beset by the same temptations that assail you," he declared. "I have been tempted and have surrendered to temptation." (10)

(H) shows that Hartman's mind is a slave to Kate Swift. The last part of (H) shows the pathetic figure of the ego placed in a dilemma between the id and the super-ego.

(I) shows that the ego is a slave of the id.

(J) shows that the ego prostrates itself before the id. In the last part of (J), his getting out of the minister shows neither more nor less than a defeat of the super-ego. His next words of (J) shows that the ego will be left to the mercy of the id:
"I shall go to some city and get into business. If my nature is such that I cannot resist sin, I shall give myself over to sin. At least I shall not be a hypocrite, preaching the word of God with my mind thinking of the shoulders and neck of a woman who does not belong to me." (11)

(K) shows that the ego has no longer the energy to resist the id and is a limb of the id.

In the next paragraph of (K), the id is governed entirely by the pleasure principle, and behaves as if the id conquered both the ego and the super-ego:

Sitting in the chair and gripping the edge of the desk on which lay the Bible he stared into the darkness thinking the blackest thoughts of his life. He thought of his wife and for the moment almost hated her. "She has always been ashamed of passion and has cheated me," he thought. "Man has a right to expect living passion and beauty in a woman. He has no right to forget that he is an animal and in me there is something that is Greek. I will throw off the woman of my bosom and seek other women. I will besiege this school teacher. I will fly in the face of all men and if I am a creature of carnal lusts I will live then for my lusts." (12)

(L) shows the climax. As soon as the minister watched the woman begin to pray, he recovered his senses. The super-ego has grown up more strongly than before under the mask od God. Judging from his words "God has manifested himself to me in the body of a woman," Curtis Hartman is no doubt the fanatic psychopaths.
(M) shows that the final part of the story, the *denouement*, or *resolution* shows how the conflict is settled. His words "The strength of God was in me and I broke it with my fist" shows that the strength of the super-ego was in me and the ego broke it with the ego's fist by employing the super-ego’s assistance. Curtis Hartman has grown into a *developing character*.

Judging from psychoanalysis of the protagonist the theme of "The Strength of God" is *human isolation*.

This paper has just been finished, still there are some mysteries: "Why did Kate Swift begin to pray?" "The problem is whether Kate Swift is an instrument of God or not." etc. To solve all the problems we need to read "The Teacher." "The Strength of God" and "The Teacher" are the most closely interwoven narratives in *Winesburg, Ohio*. Part of "The teacher" overlaps with the climax of "The Strength of God." If the climax of "The Strength of God" is the face, the hidden back should exist. The back of the story is described in "The Teacher." It is as follows:

On the night of the storm and while the minister sat in the church waiting for her, Kate Swift went to the office of the *Winesburg Eagle*, intending to have another talk with the boy [=George Willard]. After the long walk in the snow she was cold, lonely, and tired. As she came through Main Street she saw the light from the printshop window shining on the snow and on an impulse opened the door and went in. For an hour she sat by the stove in the office talking of life. She talked with passionate earnestness. The impulse that had driven her out into the snow poured itself out into talk. She became inspired as she sometimes did in the presence of the children in school. A great eagerness to open the door of life to the boy, who had been her pupil and who she thought might possess a talent for the understanding of
life, had possession of her. So strong was her passion that it became something physical. Again her hands took hold of his shoulders and she turned him about. In the dim light her eyes blazed. She arose and laughed, not sharply as was customary with her, but in a queer, hesitating way. “I must be going,” she said. “In a moment, if I stay, I'll be wanting to kiss you.”

In the newspaper office a confusion arose. Kate Swift turned and walked to the door. She was a teacher but she was also a woman. As she looked at George Willard, the passionate desire to be loved by a man, that had a thousand times before swept like a storm over her body, took possession of her. In the lamplight George Willard looked no longer a boy, but a man ready to play the part of a man.

The school teacher let George Willard take her into his arms. In the warm little office the air became suddenly heavy and the strength went out of her body. Leaning against a low counter by the door she waited. When he came and put a hand on her shoulder she turned and let her body fall heavily against him. For George Willard the confusion was immediately increased. For a moment he held the body of the woman tightly against his body and then it stiffened. Two sharp little fists began to beat on his face. When the school teacher had run away and left him alone, he walked up and down in the office swearing furiously.

It was into this confusion that the Reverend Curtis Hartman protruded himself. When he came in George Willard thought the town had gone mad. Shaking a bleeding fist in the air, the minister proclaimed the woman George had only a moment before held in his arms an instrument of God bearing a message of truth. (13)

Curtis Hartman, a minister and Kate Swift, a school teacher regard their personal loneliness and need for love as sin. George Willard, in his roles as an observer in “The Strength of God” and a catalyst in “The
Teacher," begins to realize that there is a truth about human life that he is missing. (14) Anderson's portrait of the teacher, Kate Swift is an embodiment of his ideal woman, endowed with "intelligence, education, energy and passion for life, independence of spirit." (15) Further, she is the avatar of "continuity of life, in both the creative and spiritual realms." (16) Kate Swift is probably modeled after Tennessee Mitchell, his second wife who was married to Anderson on July 31, 1916 though their marriage failed in April, 1924 because of his egotism.

Notes

(1) George Freitag of Canton, Ohio, entered into correspondence with Anderson in the summer of 1938 on problems of the young writer. He published "The Transaction" in the Atlantic for August, 1938.


(3) Henry Mencken wrote a laudatory review of Winesburg, Ohio in Smart Set, August, 1919, and he also praised it at the time of its publication in an article in the Chicago American headed "Anderson Great Novelist, Says Mencken." Furthermore, Floyd Dell wrote in "American Fiction," Liberator, II (September, 1919), 47, that Winesburg, Ohio was "a magnificent collection of tales."


(8) Ibid., pp.149 — 150.
(10) *Winesburg, Ohio*, p.151.
(12) Ibid., p.154.
(13) Ibid., pp.164 — 165.
(16) Ibid., p.141.
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