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**'Shake That Thing': A Study of Seriality in Banjo by  
Claude McKay and Winesburg, Ohio by Sherwood  
Anderson**

François Garcin

► **To cite this version:**

François Garcin. 'Shake That Thing': A Study of Seriality in Banjo by Claude McKay and Winesburg, Ohio by Sherwood Anderson. Literature. 2014. dumas-01016919

**HAL Id: dumas-01016919**

**<https://dumas.ccsd.cnrs.fr/dumas-01016919>**

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# **‘Shake That Thing’: A Study of Seriality in *Banjo* by Claude McKay and *Winesburg, Ohio* by Sherwood Anderson**

**GARCIN  
François**

Sous la direction de Mr Vincent Bucher

Laboratoire : Centre d’Étude sur les Modes de la Représentation du Monde  
Anglophone (CEMRA)

UFR de Langues, Littératures et Civilisations Étrangères  
Département d’Anglais

Mémoire de master 1 recherche - 18 crédits

Spécialité : Littérature Américaine

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## **Remerciements:**

Ce mémoire n'aurait pu être finalisé sans l'aide précieuse de Madame Isabelle Mazzilli, Mademoiselle Hannah Murray, et enfin Monsieur Vincent Bucher.

Merci pour votre aide et votre patience.



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## Introduction:

Entitled “*Shake that thing*”, this master’s dissertation is based on the novels *Winesburg, Ohio* by Sherwood Anderson and *Banjo: A Story Without a Plot* by Claude McKay. These novels were written respectively in 1919 and 1929. Their main common trait is the use of a serial format; the different chapters could be assimilated as short stories, which could be read on their own. Studying these two books in parallel is especially interesting because they both raise the issue of Seriality in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century.

In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Victorian authors in Britain popularized the serial publishing format. Their narratives were divided into chapters and then published in instalments. The rise of periodicals and magazines in the USA encouraged American authors to adopt this style of writing –and editing- in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. However the production of a novel made of short chapters assimilated as short stories as just one book remained quite odd in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Neither “*Banjo*” nor “*Winesburg, Ohio*” were published in instalments. This prevented them from needing cliffhangers, and influenced the authors’ styles. Unlike writers such as Charles Dickens, they consciously made the choice of seriality and used this form as a tool to express their beliefs. It is therefore relevant to study these two books together in order to explore the notion of seriality and to study how far its influence can go.

*Winesburg, Ohio* and *Banjo* question the essence of what makes a book: are they novels or collections of short stories? In both books most of the chapters can be read separately, and carry their own signification. The ambiguity is made obvious by *Banjo*’s full title: ‘A Story Without a Plot’. The notion of plot has to be discussed in both novels in order to understand their structures and the means used by the authors to convey a message. Could we read the chapters in any order and still have the same meaning? Or is it essential to read them in a specific order? We will see that if these books do not always have a clear guideline their chapters are organised in a methodical way, and carry a certain momentum leading to a crucial outcome.

We find here the reason for our title ‘Shake That Thing’. *Banjo* is a musician and this title is his most appreciated Jazz song. We use it to express how McKay and Anderson

played with the literary codes of the time. Both novels instituted new standards, for American Realism, the short story cycles and the literature of the Harlem Renaissance. The verb 'shake' symbolises the uncommon structure of both novels; if the reader is not used to it, he might get lost between the different chapters. Indeed, the brutal change of settings, characters or even time periods are at first disorientating. However, to a certain extent, this is exactly the authors' desire; the reader is lost while reading the books, the way the characters themselves are lost in the novels.

This study focuses on *Winesburg, Ohio* and *Banjo* as its primary sources. The process of selection started a year ago, when I studied Claude McKay's book in a course named 'Migrating Fictions'. This class gave me great insight to the dynamics of the book. However, we focused on the aspect of diaspora in the novel. The focus was on the displacement of the characters; we did not tackle the issue of seriality -We will nevertheless see in this dissertation how the two notions are closely linked. I therefore pursued the topic myself, and became increasingly fascinated by it. Because the book is always seen as a novel about race, it is interesting to go beyond the racial issue to study the structure of the novel.

In order to understand the serial format better, putting *Banjo* into parallel with another book appeared as the best idea. That way I could study the differences and the similarities between the two novels, in order to understand to what extent the serial format was necessary to the message conveyed, and vice and versa.

Claude McKay's books are renowned for their contribution to the Harlem Renaissance. The author was born in Jamaica in 1889. If most of his works were written and published in the United States, his origins remain preponderant and influential in his writing. He was a leader figure of the New Negro Movement. The explosion of culture in Harlem in the 1920s encouraged African-Americans to publish books, expose their arts and to play their music in the bars of the neighbourhood to affirm themselves.

In 1929 Claude McKay wrote *Banjo*, one of four novels; alongside his poetry and his essays, all of which aim to promote African-American culture. The story depicts the life of Lincoln Agrippa Daily, known as Banjo, in the late-twenties city of Marseilles. Originating from the United States, the main character encounters colourful people in the 'bum square'

of the French city. He is respected for his entertaining personality and his ability to play the banjo. In a microcosm where the need to survive does not prevent one from celebrating life, Banjo has to deal with his friendship with a Caribbean writer named Ray, his love affair with Latnah, and the effervescence inherent to the life of part-time dockers. The story ends with his departure on a cargo ship, accompanied by Ray.

In our study we will explore and understand the notion of seriality in comparison with *Winesburg, Ohio* by Sherwood Anderson.

Maybe more widely studied, this book is known as the serial representation of the life of a small all-American town. It is famous for inspiring American authors such as William Faulkner or Ernest Hemingway. The two books therefore picture two different continents, two very different cities. They possess however two main characters which, as we will prove later have a lot in common. While reading *Winesburg, Ohio*, I found clear resemblances to *Banjo*, but also some very different representations. Reading one sheds a new light on the other, which is why I decided to study them together.

*Winesburg, Ohio* introduces the character of George Willard, a journalist living in the small American town of Winesburg, Ohio. Writing articles depicting the lives of the inhabitants, George appears as a recurrent character but is rarely a prominent character of the stories. At first a young journalist, he gradually enters manhood and ultimately leaves Winesburg.

Born in the small town of Camden in Ohio in 1876, Sherwood Anderson known his greatest success with *Winesburg, Ohio*, published in 1919. In this novel he aims to unveil the idealised American nostalgic conception of a small town in the Mid-West. Surrounded by characters suffering from loneliness and alienation, George seems to liberate himself when he finally gets in the train to leave Winesburg. Anderson is often considered a literary naturalist; however in this study we will see that this notion has to be contradicted since the novel is based on lived experiences but does not necessarily lead to the creation of laws.

The most striking difference between *Banjo* and *Winesburg, Ohio* lies in the place of action, the surrounding city. In the former, Lincoln flees Harlem to 'settle' in Marseilles and live with other beach boys who come from different origins. The focus here is on

cosmopolitanism and Banjo has to learn how to live in a vibrant environment mixing Africans with Europeans and Americans. As for George Willard, he lives in a typical American city of the mid-west, without any foreigners. The notion of a developing urban landscape in the 1920s United States is abandoned for a French city in *Banjo* and for a small all-American town in *Winesburg, Ohio*, both marginal environments. The place is of central importance in both novels, it is a landscape to explore bit by bit rather than a picture to be depicted. This works against the linear logic of the plot and highlights the need for seriality as a way to sequence the surroundings.

Our first part will focus on how the stories are tied together. If the books are divided in small different chapters, almost like short stories, then could we find a link to unite the stories together? Moving back and forth from articulation to disarticulation we will unveil how the alleged absence of plot is replaced by series of events linked together by the experiences lived by the characters.

However, unlike naturalism, these experiences do not result in the creation of laws, they do not follow the pattern: Idea, experience, results. They are repeated but do not seem to lead to any form of knowledge, creating a perimeter rather than a trajectory. A perimeter the main characters try to consider and then ultimately leave.

This will lead us to our second part, where we will consider the environment as an enclosing force to escape from. Evolving in these settings are flawed characters whom are described as being 'grotesque'.

According to Bakhtin's *Carnivalesque*, the grotesque emerges in an upside-down world, modifying social standards but also introducing the notion of sacred time, a never-ending period normally inaccessible to common people. Here, because of the grotesque, characters enter an infinite loop of time from which they cannot escape. This is linked with the notion of seriality, small stories put together again and again. This provokes the impossibility for Winesburg citizens to communicate and the hopeless life of bums in Marseilles, unable to escape their social class.

The characters find themselves unable to express the thing living inside them. When they do they become outsiders and are rejected from society. In *Banjo* the characters do not know how to live outside of their "bum square" and cannot mix with the locals. Their life

in a group is driven more by survival than by choice. The main characters are the key to unify both the different protagonists and the stories.

This final notion will be extended in our third part where we will explore the role of the main characters as catalysts. Presented with a picaresque hero on one hand and with a figure belonging to a bildungsroman on the other, we will study the similar roles of the main characters. Banjo is an outsider living overseas but still trying to live his own American dream. George can also be considered marginal, but by his aspirations rather than by his behaviour.

Both living in a state of liminality, George and Banjo also behave differently, but both remain unifiers through their acts of writing and playing music. The former allows the inhabitants of Winesburg to finally express their voices. On the other hand, Banjo uses his music to bring together not only his 'partners' but also the visitors of the bum-square in Marseilles. They tie the stories together, justifying the use of seriality in novels that were not published in instalments.

Our last part will focus on the failure of the American dream. Studying the treatment of women sheds light on their ambivalent roles and their depiction as lost potentials. They are seen in their social roles more than as actual people and are often cast apart, hopeless to fulfil their dreams. They either represent mother-like figures, or highly sexualised individuals; in both cases, they are a supportive force for men.

Music is greatly important in the study of *Banjo*, as it is a unifying and liberating force. Jazz music, throughout its origins, symbolises the expression of an inner voice. Bars and restaurants are given a rich festive atmosphere and are omnipresent in the book. They are places where outsiders meet and celebrate together, dancing to Banjo's music. In *Winesburg, Ohio* creation resides more in writing and pictorial accomplishments and is also used to link the inhabitants together and help them to express what lies inside them. Artistic creation carries metafictional elements that give us an insight into the authors' conceptions on the act of expressing oneself in order to complete their expectations. This part encourages us to reflect on the serial format as a collection of short stories put together to form a whole in which lies the truth. The artists appear to have the key to redemption,

but because of flaws inherent to their society, they cannot exploit their potential completely.

Finally, we will see that the only way to achieve the American dream is to leave one's environment; George Willard only truly becomes a hero at the end of *Winesburg, Ohio* when he leaves the town: Departure here is a way to escape confinement and predestination. Banjo has to leave to live the life he wants and cannot completely find in Marseilles. If they do not leave, their lives might keep repeating over and over again until the end, just like the chapters of the book. When they finally decide to escape, the books both end.

Our study problematizes the notion of seriality itself. Its use in the 1920s started a new literary trend in the United States, encouraged by the books we studied and mostly by *Winesburg, Ohio*. Between the collections of short stories and the novels, the books we study use a singular format that is dependent on their meanings but also models them. How and why seriality is used are the most profound questions we are going to explore in our study. In order to do so we will have to establish parallels between the two novels but also find what is inherently singular in them.

## **Part I**

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**Stories tied together by experience**

The literary unity of *Banjo* and *Winesburg, Ohio* cannot be found in their formal organization. For most novels, the characters and the settings are introduced at the beginning of the book, and then the story unfolds and leads the reader to a conclusive outcome. The text is articulated around a central figure, often the main character.

The serial form induces a major shift in the act of writing; Claude McKay and Sherwood Anderson cannot rely on a continuous plot to unveil their stories. With seriality, characters, settings, topics and atmospheres are subject to a constant change. The reader is taken from one point of view to another, and even from a certain time period to another; we will therefore explore what articulates and disarticulates the books.

Some intransitive moments serve as places of disjunction. They are 'holes' in the stories in which the reader might fall, wondering how he got there. Accomplished readers also share this feeling; Hemingway for instance described Anderson's writings as gauche because of the pauses in the narrative used to address the reader directly (Stouck, 1985, 303). This confusion in the narrative is also seen in the unfinished cliffhangers or abrupt changes of settings. The serial format is the cornerstone of this disarticulation; the authors play with the alleged absence of plot to shift the building of the narratives from a continuous evolution to a set of recurrent patterns. The plots are not constituted by a series of events linked together but by the experiences lived by the characters. Certain motifs are dependant on the particular settings of the city of Marseilles and the small town of Winesburg, but we will see that sharing a serial format creates constraints that force the writers to use the same patterns.

These recurrent images create a sense of immobility. Confronted with the same motifs over and over again, the reader is enclosed in an environment in which there is no way out. How could we find the exit when the characters themselves are trapped? Both *Winesburg, Ohio* and *Banjo* possess certain undeniably naturalistic characteristics. However they drift away from naturalism to the extent that they bear no knowledge. Confronted with recurrent patterns, most characters do not learn from their experiences.

## I-I The importance of the motif

The most obvious motif in *Banjo* is Jazz music, which reaches an almost religious status. The bodies frenetically dancing to the rhythm seem to access salvation.

*Black skin itching, black flesh warm with the wine of life, the music of life, the love and deep meaning of life (McKay, 52)*

Since it is the main motif, Jazz is a recurrent presence: Banjo's passion offers the Ditch –the neighbourhood inhabited by the characters - an escape from daily life. Different events happen during the day but, at night, the bums almost always go to a bar to drink and dance until dawn. Music is, in that sense, liberating; as the characters go, 'rearing and riding together with the speed and freedom of two wild goats' (McKay, 56) they appear immortal thanks to the 'primitive rite' (De Barros, 308) of dancing to Jazz music. This notion of rite is also present in *Winesburg, Ohio*, more precisely represented by the characters of Jesse Bentley. In 'Godliness', he tries to invoke God twice, by the use of rites.

*Into the old man's mind had come the notion that now he could bring from God a word or a sign out of the sky, that the presence of the boy and man on their knees in some lonely spot in the forest would make the miracle he had been waiting for almost inevitable.*  
(Anderson, 85)

Here Jesse is awaiting divine guidance, a sign from above. It is different from *Banjo* in the sense that David, the young boy, does not know what is happening: Jesse is the only one aware of the rite. This is also the reason why it fails: David escapes, 'shaking himself loose from the hands that held him' (Anderson, 86) He flees the sort of dance Jesse is leading. However, the same rite takes place a second time, with the additional sacrifice of a lamb. The religious connotation is clear. Mimicking Abraham, Jesse is about to sacrifice the animal in a ritual involving a young boy named David. Running away from the scene, the young boy becomes a man; hurting Jesse with his sling, he stands up for himself before running away forever. Like in Claude McKay's novel, the rite is a liberating force for David.

These rites are influenced by the serial format. As we have seen before, they happen at least twice, in different short stories. This is established clearly in *Banjo*, where one of the first stories is named ‘Jelly Roll’ after the song ‘Shake that thing’ and one of the last ones is entitled ‘Shake that thing again’. The chapters succeed each other, and because of that the rites in them do the same. Like a never-ending dance which only disobedience can stop; David is freed when he hurts Jesse and escapes, and Banjo’s song is interrupted by a violent murder.

Rites are meant to be liberating acts, but because of seriality, they are condemned to repeat themselves infinitely. The only way to transcend them is to break them.

In every rite we find an active figure, a person who initiates the ceremony. This is Jesse and Banjo in our example. The rite can only be complete with the presence of a scapegoat; of a sacrificial victim.

The motif of the scapegoat is vital to understanding how the stories are articulated. The choice of David and of the dancers in the bars is a meticulous selection. According to René Girard’s theory, the scapegoat is a victim of human’s mimetic desire. We tend to copy our own desires according to what someone else has or wants. This triggers sentiments of jealousy; a tension within a society. When the tension becomes too strong, society is in danger. In order to find relief, a sacrificial victim has to be executed: the scapegoat.

What it important to notice is that once the victim is expelled or killed, a climate of peace is restored. However the cycle will start again, matching perfectly the role of seriality in our two novels. Sacrifices are recurrent, because they are present in a great number of short stories. Since the novels are not articulated around one clear plot but rather around different motifs, the characters cannot understand the issues provoked by mimetic desire. Jealous of Banjo’s success and popularity, Buggy, one of his companions, comes to him accusing him of deliberately ignoring his own race to befriend white people. The argument eventually turns into a fight, when Buggy ‘opened a large pocket knife and cried, “I’ll cut you all ways and don’t miss your throat.” (McKay, 170). Their friends eventually interrupt the fight and the chapter ends. In the next short story, the exact same pattern is repeated, this time with Banjo and Latnah; his part-time lover. She accuses him on the same grounds: ‘So what Buggy say is true, eh? You prefer help ofay [white people] than

colored boys. You no proud of race, no like your own color.’ (McKay, 182) And again, ‘she whipped her little dagger out of her bosom’. Twice, Banjo is confronted with the same issue. Because situations take place in a different short story, the process happens all over again, with the same ending: The main character being threatened by a someone with a knife.

This pattern articulates the stories of *Banjo* but also of *Winesburg, Ohio*. As we have seen before, Jesse Bentley calls for God for the first time in the second part of the ‘tale’ ‘Godliness’. David escapes his grandfather, breaking the rite. In the last part of the tale, entitled ‘Terror’, a new rite occurs. Same place, in the woods, and again are the same characters. The recurrence of the rites goes along with the serial form of *Winesburg, Ohio*. From story to story, the ritual sacrifices give the story its tempo. However, something changes during the second rite. The young boy not only escapes once again, but this time knocks his grandfather up with his sling. This act of rebellion frees him, as he breaks from the role of sacrifice. Having reached transcendence, David is able to leave forever, placing Jesse as the real scapegoat of the rite.

## I-II Stories without a plot?

Claude McKay's novel's full title is: *Banjo, A Story Without a Plot*. We have seen that using recurrent motifs was a mean to replace a linear succession of actions for a novel in a serial format. We can however wonder if the absence of plot is really absolute in both our books. To study this question, we have to analyse the reasons why McKay and Anderson abandoned the idea of a story following a concise guideline.

A good place to start looking for an answer is the chapter 'Storytelling' in *Banjo*. As the title suggests, this story gives us valuable information on McKay's view on the format of his own novel. In this chapter the beach boys, Banjo's companions, are in a Senegalese café. They exchange several tales, everyone narrating a story from his hometown. What is interesting to notice is how one tale succeeds another. A 'discharged Senegalese sergeant' (McKay, Page 124) narrates his military past in Africa. Immediately after the end of his story Ray declares: 'I'll tell one of the African folk tales we know at home'. No time is spent debating the precedent story, which had no apparent influence on the beach boys. Another tale simply takes his place, reflecting the reality in *Winesburg, Ohio*, in which from one story to the next we can observe a complete change of setting and characters. The absence of plot causes the stories to abruptly shift from one to the other.

This introduces the notion of cliffhangers, which designates the last lines of a chapter or novel maintaining the suspense. The reader is left hanging, wondering what is going to happen. This technique was very popular amongst writers whose books were published in instalments for purely commercial purposes; when deprived of a clear and definite ending, the reader is avid to know what is going happen next and is more likely to buy the next issue. In *Great Expectations*, published in instalments, Dickens ends his fourth chapter with:

*'But, I ran no further than the house door, for there I ran head foremost into a party of soldiers with their muskets: one of whom held out a pair of handcuffs to me, saying, "Here you are, look sharp, come on!" (Dickens, 30)*

Soldiers catch the main character, but we do not know what is going to happen next. Will he be found guilty or innocent? Released or imprisoned? The only way to know is to buy the next issue of the magazine in which will be published the story.

Both *Banjo* and *Winesburg, Ohio* were intended to be published in their complete forms. However, several chapters of Anderson's novel were published independently. The presence of cliffhangers is therefore a consequence of seriality and a mark of the absence of plot. Utilised to keep the reader waiting for the next instalment, they strengthened the formal singularity of the novels.

The story 'Bugsy Comes Back at Banjo' ends with Latnah threatening Banjo with a knife, the latter 'eyes and mouth popped open, his face wearing horror like an African mask' (McKay, 183) This the climax of the story, and the reader is caught in the action. The next line however, is the beginning of a new story, 'Telling Jokes'. Not only is the incident not to be evoked, but also the new chapter constitutes a flashback for Banjo, who remembers the first arrival of one of the beach boys. Claude McKay takes us back in time compared to the previous story. The 'plotlessness' of the stories is reinforced by these discontinuous cliffhangers and brutal changes of focus. 'The Thinker', part of the *Winesburg stories*, ends with Seth Richmond thinking that his future relation with Helen White will probably be complicated. 'She'll begin now to look at me in a funny way. [...] She'll be embarrassed and feel strange when I'm around.' (Anderson, 142) We never get to know how the future will actualise, since the story ends and the next one, 'Tandy', focuses on the new character of Tandy Hard. Neither Seth Richmond nor Helen White feature in this chapter.

We can therefore wonder why the notion of plot is very hard to catch in these two books. The story goes from one chapter to another without any direct link between them, apart from the presence of the main characters, Banjo and George Willard. A closer reading of the novels gives us several hints about the mystery of the plot.

First, would a clear, definite plot be a clear depiction of what life really is? Maybe not for the authors, and surely not for Ray when he witnesses a woman singing *Carmen*:

*'Comic opera was ever a thing of great joy to Ray. It gave him such a perfect illusion of a crazy, disjointed relationship of all the arts of life. Singing and acting and orchestra and all the garish hues. Fascinating mélange of disorder. No one part equal to the other. Like life... like love. All the world on a stage just wrong enough to be right.'* (McKay, 180)

Ray's point of view is shared by the main character in 'The Book of the Grotesque', the first story of *Winesburg, Ohio*. An old man gets into bed, thinking about his theories. He depicts in his 'Book of the Grotesque' the various characters he has met in his life. The essence of his reflexion is summarised in this statement: 'each truth was a composite of a great many vague thoughts'. (Anderson, 22) This would imply that McKay and Anderson, thanks to the serial format, are actually closer from the truest depiction of life than most writers following a 'classic' format. Life is not equal; life is not predictable. It does not flow from a beginning to an end, but is made of incoherencies, of several moments completely different from one another. These moments resemble the chapters of our two novels; they are not clearly linked together, but because of that they are the most accurate depiction of life imaginable.

We will study in our third part how Banjo and George Willard unify the stories by linking the other characters together. It is nonetheless relevant to integrate them in our reflexion on the notion of plot:

In one of his most quoted interventions, Banjo declares being a 'right-there, right-here baby, yestiday and today and tomorraw and forevah. All right-there right-here.' (McKay, 35) This attraction towards the present time influences McKay's narration. We follow Banjo for a chapter in which an event occurs, but we are not given any information on what happened or after. What is of key importance is what Banjo lives. Therefore, what happens in between the chapters has no reason to be mentioned, since it is of no importance. Seriality is therefore the most adapted writing format.

Banjo and George Willard still have hopes for the future. The latter wants to become a writer, and Banjo's 'plan of an orchestra' (McKay, 49) fills his imagination. The plot is the question of their success. Will they achieve their dreams? The events dispersed in different chapters condition the outcome of their destiny. The discussion with his parents in

'Mother' convinces George to leave his family to 'go away and look at people and think' (Anderson, 48).

This shadow of a plot is present enough to induce of feeling of movement towards an end, but not enough to form an actual clear evolution. Banjo's tendency to live in the present takes over and when Ray asks him about his orchestra in the second part of the book Banjo answers: 'The orchestry! What you wanta remember it now for? You'd fohgotten it as well as I and everybody did, becausen theah was so many other wonderful things in this sweet poht to take up our time'. (McKay, 229)

Banjo abandoning his first objective is symbolic of the serial format: taken from event to event without a clear guideline, he forgot about his orchestra. As Bridget Chalk puts it, he 'considers his identity to be constructed out of multiple sites and moments of existence in which past, present, and future are collapsed; he lives in a state of dispersal that defies traditional temporal coordinates on which developmental narrative operates.' (Chalk, 366)

The notion of plot is blurred in *Banjo* and *Winesburg, Ohio*. Due to the serial format, both Anderson and McKay use literary techniques normally absent in narratives. Separating their novels in distinct chapters often temporally disconnected from each other, they approach a certain definition of life, which is vague and unpredictable. They put their main characters in charge of the plot. Their aspirations for the future give them a goal to reach, and give the reader a final outcome to look forward to.

It is however hard for Banjo to focus on his aim, as he is taken by the vivid life of the Ditch. This difficulty to focus is symptomatic of a recurrent issue that brings the stories together: the absence of knowledge.

### **I-III The absence of knowledge**

*Winesburg, Ohio* is often associated with naturalism. Indeed, like Claude McKay, Sherwood Anderson depicts society through his characters. They all live different experiences, important enough to be depicted in a whole short story. Wing Biddlebaum for instance is the central figure of the chapter entitled 'Hands'. A former schoolteacher, he was exiled and accused of molesting children. We are presented with his life story through the character of George Willard, to whom Wing depicts his past. A victim of his own hands that he is now afraid of, his situation remains identical at the end of the chapter.

The hands are closely linked to cosmic values, which were at the root of the naturalist philosophy. Naturalism consists in believing that only natural, physical forces, as opposed to a spiritual influence, can rule the world. Empiricism, on the other hand, is the belief that knowledge emerges from sensory experiences. For Ralph Waldo Emerson, 'instinct and intuition are at the base of knowledge' (Michaud, 81). Using one's hands can be assimilated to a sensory discovery, often following a form of primal instinct. The logical naturalist outcome of these discoveries is the creation of laws. The interpretation of reactions draws conclusions that are to be learnt and understood in order to move on. Régis Michaud confirms that 'what interests Emerson the most in a philosophical system is the intuition at its origin and the moral conclusion at the end' (Michaud, 78).

This knowledge acquired through physical experience is an element of plot development for writers. In most narratives and more obviously in Bildungsromans; novels of education; the characters learn from what they observe and modify their behaviour or thoughts accordingly. This evolution of the characters helps to unveil the story and leads to the resolution of the plot. In *Winesburg, Ohio* and *Banjo*, the characters do not learn from their experiences. In that sense these novels cannot be defined as naturalist; Wing Biddlebaum, as we have seen, remains in exile at the end of his short story, and still cannot control his hands. Banjo's attraction to sensory experiences betrays him: Too excited by

his jazz music, many times he forgets to collect money after playing in a bar. Simply interested in the present, he spends all his money on fancy sets of clothing items and women, before being poor again. In both books, the recurrence of the same mistake made by various figures justifies the use of seriality: They cannot learn from their experiences, and cannot therefore advance towards redemption, here the resolution of the plot. The novels have to be organized in various small tableaux picturing the different characters.

This quest for knowledge is followed by all characters and is therefore a recurrent pattern, tying the stories together. In both novels alcohol intervenes as a liberating force. However controversial because of its nature, this help allows the characters to reach knowledge. In the *Winesburg Story* 'Drink', Tom Foster at first 'never asserted himself. [...] In an odd way he stood in the shadow of the wall of life, was meant to stand in the shadow'. (Anderson, 212) After getting drunk for the first time he confesses to George Willard:

*'It was like making love, that's what I mean. [...] That's why I did it. I'm glad, too. It taught me something, that's it, that's what I wanted. Don't you understand? I wanted to learn things, you see. That's why I did it.'* (Anderson, 219)

Getting drunk is for Tom Foster 'an initiatory loss of innocence and gaining of knowledge' (Mellard, 1305). Alcohol is a way to transcend empiricism, in a perverted yet necessary way. Unlike Wing Biddlebaum for instance, Tom Foster is able to reach a new level of connection with the world thanks to his beverage.

Drinking conveys the same in *Banjo*, where the beach boys get to know each other around a stolen barrel of red wine. Thanks to the omnipresence of bars and dancing clubs, alcohol is with Jazz the main motif of Banjo's life. The main character does not only drink to celebrate a social reunion but like Tom Foster, as a way to acquire knowledge. It is his 'way to take every new place and every new thing for the first time in a hot crazy-drunk manner. He was a type that was never sober [...] and now the first delirious fever days of Marseilles were rehearsing themselves, wheeling round and round in his head.' (McKay, 14) Drinking allows him to acquire a better consciousness of his arrival in the French city.

This knowledge originating from the consumption of alcohol is real, but also highly personal. When naturalism encourages the creation of generalist laws, drinking can only

liberate a single individual in his personal quest for awareness. It cannot therefore be considered a satisfactory replacement for the characters' inability to learn.

This retention of knowledge is an issue for Ray Pearson, who in 'The Untold Lie', simply cannot answer Hal Winters who declares 'Well, old daddy [...] come on, advise me' (Anderson, 205) about his possible engagement with Nell Gunther. Not sure whether or not to marry the girl, he asks Ray. We learn that the latter has been reflecting on these questions about marriage all his life. When he finally feels ready to advise Hal, he finds him 'all dressed up' and 'could not have told what he thought or what he wanted.' (Anderson, 208). The story ends and the piece of advice is actually never explicitly given, the knowledge is retained. By keeping knowledge to themselves when they find some, the characters prevent the story from coming to a satisfying end. Hence they justify the need for seriality: unable to help their companions, each character is destined to have his story, but the next one will not benefit from his knowledge, starting from scratch.

The characters are not all necessarily doomed. Banjo and George Willard succeed in gathering enough knowledge to escape their environments. The last lines of the story depict Banjo about to embark on a ship for the United States, taking Ray with him. Here, he shares his knowledge, insisting that his friend to come with him. At the end of *Winesburg, Ohio*, George Willard leaves the town in a train, finally following his mother's advice to leave and become a writer. The absence of knowledge is inherent to the characters, but the main figures of the books are at the end able to escape. They are fleeing a perimeter they were enclosed in.

## **Part II**

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**Trying to escape a Grotesque environment**

The characters in both *Banjo* and *Winesburg, Ohio* evolve in an environment that could equally be considered a perimeter. The place is a concept of capital importance as it affects the protagonists' behaviour and success. During one of Banjo's musical performances the narrator tells us that 'if it had been possible to transfer him and his playing pals and dancing boys just as they were to some Metropolitan stage, he might have made a bigger thing than any of his dreams' (McKay, 101). The setting influences their destiny even more than the characters' actions. If Banjo was to play somewhere else he might have become famous; the way George Willard could turn into a successful writer only if he leaves Winesburg for a city of more opportunity.

*Winesburg, Ohio*'s original title was 'The Book of the Grotesque', a concept that does not only describe a funny-looking individual but an individual in a moment of transgression or transformation. Because they are grotesque, the protagonists cannot express the thing living inside them. If they finally do, like Wing Biddlebaum did, they are rejected by society. They are therefore doomed to an inescapable loneliness, a feeling of solitude inherent to the cities of Marseilles and Winesburg. If escaping the hometown is the only way to redeem oneself, the short story 'Tandy' presents a stranger who left Cleveland for Winesburg in order to quit drinking. We learn that 'his sojourn in Winesburg was not a success. [It] led to his drinking harder than ever.' (Anderson, 143)

The environment appears not as an opening force but as an enclosing one. We are not provided with information about the actual towns or neighbourhoods, therefore the limits of its perimeter are essentially defined by the experiences lived by the inhabitants. If they do not find a way to transcend their existences, their lives are at risk because of their grotesqueness. The serial format makes the chapters repeat themselves in an infinite loop, reminding us of an eternal return that the protagonists may have accessed thanks to a social overturn. They have to escape this perimeter otherwise they can only wait for death to liberate them from their loneliness.

## II-I The environment as a perimeter to escape from

*Banjo* and *Winesburg, Ohio* are both set in cities whose recurrent backgrounds for their stories do not provide the reader with extensive descriptions of their environments. We only know few things about the towns of Winesburg and Marseilles. The latter is enclosed by its surroundings; 'Abruptly, as if it rose out of the heart of the town, a range of hills ran out in a gradual slope like a strong argent arm protecting the harbor' (McKay, 73). The fact that the hills emerge from the city of Marseilles itself reinforces the feeling that the French harbour protects but also encloses the characters. The conception of the landscape as a confining force is highly relevant to the notion of seriality; being taken from one chapter to another without any clear spatiotemporal links between them creates a feeling of enclosure for the reader. Unlike novels with a clear development, we cannot really foresee an end to the books; we are held hostage to the serial format. Forced to read the characters' stories, we are moving back and forth in unchanged settings.

The characters themselves are part of the environment: In 'A Story-Teller's Story' it is an experience of profound alienation for the boy; Anderson writes "for us there could be no home now that mother was not there." Similarly in *Winesburg, Ohio* it occasions George Willard's departure from the town in which he has grown up'. (Stouck, 1977, 528) Indeed, George only finds the strength to leave the town after his mother passes away. Life for him was where Elizabeth Willard was; therefore the figure of the mother, alongside the environment, is forcing him to stay. The characters are enclosing themselves.

The proximity of the maternal element is shared by the characters and also by the readers. We understand this familial link preventing George from leaving. It is an instance of Anderson destabilizing the reader, by twisting common images: he 'effectually take[s] familiar, knowable landscapes-that of the rural, agrarian town and the developing city-and de-familiarize[s] them through their emphasis on the irrational and their highlighting of oppositions and changes. The resulting discomfort contributes to the reader's questioning of his or her conception of these spaces and to the acknowledgment of a destabilized world in transition.' (Gniadek, 28) The result is even more disconcerting for us since we already have an image of what a little all-American town and a buzzing French harbour should be like. These preconceptions are not entirely rejected, but are rather modified by the authors, in order for the reader to feel the uneasiness of the characters.

This echoes the choice of the serial format; these books exist in a state of liminality, on the threshold of being collections of short stories. However, the recurrence of various patterns and the presence of a certain type of plot we have discussed previously allow them to be considered novels. The reader is destabilized by his recognition of novel-like properties in a serial format. Claude McKay and Sherwood Anderson transcend the form of their novels in order to echo their appropriation of rather classic environments. As mentioned before, Winesburg is a typical town of the mid-west, on the verge of mechanization – Jesse Bentley ‘began to buy machines’ - (Anderson, 81) and Marseilles is pictured as a multicultural city built around the docks, a recurrent image in novels of diaspora.

Claude McKay gives the readers a few hints about where the action takes place; Michel Fabre tells us in his postface of the 1999 edition that *Boody lane* is actually the Rue Bouterie, in the Quartier La Fosse. These are real places in a real city; some readers could therefore feel a certain familiarity with the setting. McKay, like Anderson, wanted his landscape to be unsettling. The solution he found was to conceal some places’ names, the cafés for example. In the story ‘A Carved Carrot’, ‘the boys came together to a café that they called Banjo’s hang-out’ (McKay, 99). This bar will remain anonymous, as many others in the book, named after characters or ethnicities such as the Senegalese Café. We are not given any information on the aspect of these buildings; we only know them for what happens inside, or whom we might encounter there.

The characters are therefore the cornerstones of the environment. The serial format reminds us of their importance on a regular basis:

*‘The stories in Winesburg, Ohio frequently begin, like this, with a generalized account of a person’s early life, or even with the life of his parents [...] with slightly more particularity the author then brings us nearer to that time in his character’s life when the climactic speech of the narrative is to occur. Thereupon the site of the action is indicated [...] finally the action, that is the talk, commences.’ (Maloney, 247)*

This recurrent pattern is to be found in almost every Winesburg story. We are here reminded of a very theatrical setting; we are introduced with the characters and the localisation of the action, like the scene of a theatre play that cannot be changed. At the beginning of every story we know who the chapter will discuss, and where. We are also conscious that it will only be true for this chapter, for the next one will observe a complete shift in focus in setting. The serial format encloses the reader in that he is unable to hope for any opening of perspective; the environment is actually a perimeter he cannot escape, much like the characters. *Banjo* goes even further when the first two stories are entitled 'The Ditch' and 'The Breakwater'. Only by reading the title, the reader knows what setting he is about to discover.

Even if the fight appears hopeless, the characters still try to escape their perimeter. Soon after they meet, Ray takes Banjo to 'the Corniche' where he 'would watch the ships coming in from the east, coming in from the west, and speculate about making a move to some other place'. (*Banjo*, Page 72) Looking into the horizon, Ray and Banjo dream of embarking on a ship to leave Marseilles, a premonitory dream.

We have seen that the incipits of the chapters define the setting for it; they also convey a sense of movement, though not inherent to the characters. If the first pages of a chapter are introductory for the reader to understand the rest of the action, a brief summary of the characters and the settings should be enough. However, in order to reinforce this feeling of enclosure in a perimeter, Anderson and McKay add a sense of movement, an image of people actually moving. Unlike the main characters, these people appear unchained. In the introduction of 'Hands' we observe the 'public highway along which went a wagon filled with berry pickers returning from the fields.' A 'boy in the road kicked up a cloud of dust that floated across the face of the departing sun' (Anderson, 27). The wagon on the road here resembles the ships entering and leaving the harbour of Marseilles. We do not get any information on their passengers, they are used as symbols of a world in movement inaccessible to our characters, stuck in their environment. 'By contrast Wing Biddlebaum ventures only as far as the edge of the road, then hurries back again to his little house' (Stouck, 1977, 533)

The characters are torn between their need to leave and their inability to do so. The references to motion at the beginning of the stories contrast with the situation of the inhabitants; in that extent seriality allows the authors to use these images of the characters

being immobile in a world in motion as landmarks on a perimeter enclosing them. We are constantly reminded that Wing and others cannot escape their condition, even if they try.

Their attempts to revolt against their environment hence logically implies setting themselves in motion. Elizabeth Willard rode a bicycle down the main street and 'after she married and still found no communion with another human being, she drove her horse and buggy at a terrible speed through the country until she met with an accident' (Stouck, 1977, 537).

Like animals in a hunter's trap, the characters sense that they are deprived of their freedom of movement but can only agitate themselves within their confinement. Like Elizabeth, her son eventually revolts when 'his way homeward led him again into the street of frame houses he could not bear the sight and began to run, wanting to get quickly out of the neighbourhood that now seemed to him utterly squalid and commonplace'. (Anderson, 189)

The inhabitants try to escape but cannot do so, as symbolized by Banjo who eventually leaves Marseilles only to return a few pages after, or by Ray: who dreams of otherness as discussed previously, but who also praises the lyrics of a song entitled 'Stay', consisting of the word repeated over and over again in the chorus. Goosey judges it as being 'so easy and [with a] tune so slight, just one bar repeating itself', but Ray answers: 'Why, it's splendid, you boob! It's got more real stuff in it than a music-hall full of American songs. The words are so wonderful.' (McKay, 100)

The focus on staying particularly speaks to Ray, a character almost out of place in the relentless agitation of Marseilles. Being a writer himself and a lover of the arts he is unable to leave the harbour and the group of beach boys until the very end of the book when pushed by Banjo.

He is indeed one of the very few characters that escape the cities of Marseilles and Winesburg. Apart from him, Banjo, George Willard and David –the young boy running away from his grandfather Jesse Bentley- are amongst the only lucky ones. The other characters cannot follow them, or would simply not consciously think about it: they are grotesque figures.

## II-II Flawed characters

The term ‘grotesque’ should not be understood as meaning ‘laughable’, or ‘ridiculous’. If frightening at times, the grotesque mostly designates the notions of transgression, distortion and exaggeration. We are here going to prove that the characters in both books are grotesque because of their appearance but also because of their place in society; their grotesqueness allows them to enter an infinite loop, reminding us of Eliade’s ‘Sacred Time’.

As was explained in our introduction, *Winesburg, Ohio* was at first meant to be entitled *The Book of the Grotesque*, which is the title of the first short story. From the start the reader is therefore able to understand that the novel focuses on depicting grotesque characters. Many figures in the book possess odd physical traits. Instead of making a long list, we will simply evoke Jesse Bentley’s strange twitch in his eye (Anderson, 81). ‘There are also Wing Biddlebaum’s mobile expressive hands, Kate Swift’s blotched face, or Elmer Cowley’s pale, pale hair and colorless blue eyes. There are Doctor Reefy’s extraordinary knuckles, Wash Williams’ apelike obesity, and the flaming strawberry birthmark on the hand of the saloon-keeper, Tom Willy.’ (Laughlin, 99). Claude McKay uses the same process, picturing a main character as being somehow colour-blind. ‘The colors were always getting him mixed up, shading off, fading out, running into one another so that it was difficult to perceive which was which.’ (McKay, 177).

Simply highlighting the funny traits of the characters and describing them as physically grotesque would be a shallow analysis. Indeed, the first story of *Winesburg, Ohio* makes us understand that the grotesques ‘are not necessarily ‘horrible’, some being ‘amusing’, ‘beautiful’, and even, like the old carpenter, ‘understandable and lovable’ (Mellard, 1304). Being flawed allows the characters to access a particular status and a special recognition, explained by Bakhtin and Nietzsche and accounting for the choice of seriality.

In Mikhail Bakhtin’s study of François Rabelais’ Carnavalesque, the Russian philosopher explains to the reader that the original meaning of the world ‘carnival’

designates festivities during which social order was overturned. In short, the king would become a jester, while a beggar would impersonate a figure of the court.

We have seen that *Winesburg, Ohio* and *Banjo* deal with grotesque characters. ‘McKay represents the "great Provencal port" not as a grand symbol of the French Empire but as the site of the excluded, and the characteristic spaces of the city are the distorted, seedy mirror images of ocean liners, restaurants, and hotels.’ (Chalk, 365) Coupled with the notion of Carnavalesque, this status allows them to become the most important figures of the books. Instead of odd figures in the shadow, these characters have whole chapters dedicated to them.

According to Mircea Eliade, a Romanian author, all humans yield for a sacred, mythical time. Our grotesques would normally be completely unable to enter this type of spiritual life, but thanks to Bakhtin’s Carnavalesque, their new status allows them to live in a sacred time. But because they are inherently flawed -as shown by their silhouettes- they become trapped in this mythical time and are unable to escape it. This joins our last point concerning the characters enclosed in a perimeter, facing the impossibility to leave. Here, the perimeter is temporal but for the same reason –their grotesqueness- the inhabitants of Marseilles and Winesburg are also unable to flee.

This joins the notion of eternal return described by Friedrich Nietzsche; according to the German philosopher the most complete affirmation of one’s life is to be ready to live it over and over again, without any change. The University of Washington lists on its website an extract of *The Gay Science*:

*‘What, if some day or night a demon were to steal after you into your loneliest loneliness and say to you: "This life as you now live it and have lived it, you will have to live once more and innumerable times more; and there will be nothing new in it, but every pain and every joy and every thought and sigh and everything unutterably small or great in your life will have to return to you, all in the same succession and sequence—even this spider and this moonlight between the trees, and even this moment and I myself. The eternal hourglass of existence is turned upside down again and again, and you with it, speck of dust!"*

Would you not throw yourself down and gnash your teeth and curse the demon who spoke thus? Or have you once experienced a tremendous moment when you would have answered him: "You are a god and never have I heard anything more divine."

The characters of our two novels are not willing to affirm their position in life, but because of their grotesqueness and their new status as leading figures of a novel, they are condemned to live the same events in an infinite loop. It is here that seriality intervenes: indeed, a great amount of characters endure the same ordeals. Banjo is betrayed twice by two different women, and is drawn a knife on at least twice. David is victim of Jesse Bentley's rituals twice in the forest. These recurrent events are symbolised by the infinity of chapters in the books. 'The episodic nature of each book enables the grotesques to flit past the reader's eye, dropping an image or association before moving on toward the fringes of the narrative. These characters seem to stretch out over a thin, horizontal surface, 'a long procession of figures', like the grotesques that pass before the eyes of the old writer in the prologue of *Winesburg, Ohio*.' (Gniadek, 26) The serial format highlights the grotesque of the inhabitants, not only in their physical aspect but also in their treatment of time. Enclosed in a time that repeats itself, they are helpless against series of recurring events, presented to the reader in short stories. 'As Ihab Hassan has shrewdly observed, grotesque-ness is "a kind of inwardness gone sour, a perverse insistence on subjectivity. It is innocence deformed and preying upon itself. The aim of the grotesque, in fact, is to perpetuate the victim in the self.'" (Ciancio, 997)

Because of their flaws, the characters tend to turn inward, away from the world, believing that "a wall had been built up" between them and others, one of Anderson's favourite metaphors. Or, as Howe states, the symbol of their condition is the "room, frequently used to suggest their isolation and confinement". (Ciancio, 996) They are principally described as grotesque in their failure to communicate with each other. Elmer Cowley testifies in 'Queer': 'I go to the post office [...] and no one says anything to me. They talk but they say nothing to me. Then I feel so queer that I can't talk either'. (Anderson, 197) Here Elmer's 'flaws' prevent him from communicating with others: the ultimate representation of the grotesque is not a freak-like person, but a lonely figure.

## II-III An inescapable loneliness

The key to understanding the characters' loneliness is again to be found in the first story of *Winesburg, Ohio*. In 'The Book of the Grotesque' the old writer pictured possesses a 'thing inside him' (Anderson, 22). It is finally described as absurd to try to put into words what was living inside the character. We want to consider this thing as an inner voice that has to be expressed in order to communicate with other people. Because they are grotesque, Anderson's and McKay's protagonists are unable to reveal what is inside them and are therefore condemned to an inescapable loneliness.

We have seen before how Emerson influenced Anderson's thoughts. It is interesting to notice that Emerson's works also deal with an inside message. It is the "still small voice" within himself: "Who says the heart's a blind guide? It is not. From God it came. It is the deity" (Michaud, 76). Emerson's inner voice is closely tied with a godlike presence. In that he is joined by Jesse Bentley in *Godliness*, who is seeking to communicate with god through rituals.

A divine feeling is not the only voice in the books; far from it, it is actually overshadowed by the voices of omniscient unnamed narrators. George Willard and Lincoln Agrippa Daily are both central characters and key to the expressions of their companions' feelings, but they are not the narrators of the novels. The latter are not a part of the events in the books. Neither in *Banjo* nor in *Winesburg, Ohio* is the reader given any information on the real storyteller. It is even harder for the characters to express their voices when they are completely overshadowed by the narrators'. 'Throughout *Winesburg, Ohio* the voice of the author predominates over the characters' voices in a proportion of about five parts to one.' (Maloney, 246) The same observation is to be made for *Banjo*. Even worse for the latter, the narrator uses a rather formal Standard English throughout the book, when all the characters are given different dialects, hints of their origins. "'My mother was Negresse", said Latnah. "Sudanese or Abyssinian- I no certain. I was born at Aden. My father I no know what he was nor who he was".' (McKay, 293). The voice of the author is clearly different from the characters' one, making it even harder for them to communicate.

As a symbol of this tense relationship between the author and his protagonists, we learn in 'Story-telling' that 'many common people, like many uncommon people, fearing or hoping to be used in a story, are always unnatural and apt to pose in the presence of a writer.' (McKay, 120). In the same way, Wing Biddlebaum declares to George: 'I must be getting along home. I can talk no more with you' (Anderson, 30). This contentious relation between the characters and their authors is the symbol of the impossibility of expressing themselves.

This inability follows the protagonists all their life, even towards the end of it. When Banjo is about to undergo an operation in a hospital he declares: 'Ise gwineta get down and under the knife, it does make me feel better for all of us to be as we uster befoh.'" (McKay, 264) When Elizabeth faces death alone in her bed she addresses it as if it was a living thing and says 'Be patient lover'. (Anderson, 228) We can see in this example the difference between the doomed character of George's mother, and the soon-to-escape Banjo. Loneliness can follow the characters all their life, until their death.

In our last example and earlier in our study we mentioned a great number of different places in the cities of Winesburg and Marseilles. We can notice that most of them are closed spaces. Whether it is a room of a café, most of the action occurs in a delimited and reduced setting. The only places evocating movement are the ships in *Banjo* and the train station in *Winesburg, Ohio*. They come under the spotlight at the end of both books when the main characters leave their environments, but until then they are only evoked.

The recurrence of the individual space such as a room is omnipresent in Anderson's novel: After his conversation with George, Wing hurries back to his home to be on his own. The characters appear trapped in their small personal space; a feeling enhanced by seriality since the protagonists can really blossom in a long continuous plot but are rather condemned to a few pages chapter. In *Banjo*, cafés are known to regroup certain ethnicities, or to be reserved for a certain type of people, affluent for instance. The different groups have a hard time communicating with each other and mostly stay between themselves.

Banjo, thanks to his music and his conversation skills, succeeds in gathering people together; in the same way George Willard gathers the inhabitants' stories working as a journalist. Both main characters are the only chance for the others to escape their loneliness.

## **Part III**

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### **The main characters as catalysts**

In order to understand the serial structure of both books, it is essential to analyse the treatment of the two main characters by the authors. On one hand, the characters' own condition and representation justify the use of seriality. Banjo is pictured as a Picaro, the hero of a picaresque novel. He is of a low social class, and on the verge of criminality. He is an outsider because of his origins and because of the setting of the novel: The French city of Marseilles. Along with the beach boys, he stands out as being an Afro American resorting to pan handling and stealing wine in order to survive and enjoy his life. His adventures are best presented as different pictures showing his reactions to certain events. As a Picaro, his life lacks continuity: he always has to be on the move to survive in a world controlled by the police, but also to survive as a literary character; a Picaro is prevented by his condition as a rogue from being part of a continuously developing plot. His life is erratic, so is the structure of the novel of which he is a part.

Much like his creator, Banjo embodies the figure of the outsider. Claude McKay was a man on the move himself. Born in Jamaica, he left his native land for the United States. After developing close ties with the communist party, he left for London and then for the Soviet Union. As shown by Mary Conroy, Banjo's experiences have convinced him that the black man can only rely on himself and his 'own ingenuity' (Conroy, 15): A conclusion that came to McKay himself after his numerous travels. Still reminiscent of his past in Harlem, he is trapped in a state of liminality, trying to live the American dream with his banjo in a French city. His condition as a 'bum' simply does not match his aspirations to be a successful and recognised musician. Frowned upon by the French police and the law in general, he is left with wit as his only tool for survival.

George Willard is also a marginal character in the novel *Winesburg, Ohio*. It's not only the case for his behaviour like Banjo- He indeed behaves in a way quite similar to the other inhabitants'- but rather for his aspirations. Throughout the book he develops the need to become a writer, thanks to his mother's advice but also because of his encounters with the town people. The latter are used as experiences for George to evolve and ultimately leave Winesburg. He progresses in his work as a writer but also as a man. He rejects his father advice to ensure a financial success and rather follows his mother's recommendation to develop his creative writing. To that extent George can be considered a character of a bildungsroman, a novel of education. The serial format allows us to have an insight into

the experiences that led him to develop himself, and ultimately to leave the town of Winesburg.

Not only are the characters the symbols of seriality, but their function in the novel also justifies the choice of the format. Both Banjo and George are catalysts: They encourage the other characters to meet, linking the stories together. Through his writing, George unifies the stories told by the inhabitants of Winesburg and allows the characters to express their voices. Banjo, through his music and his wit, gathers the beach boys and the inhabitants of the Ditch, becoming responsible for the profusion of anecdotes that is the novel *Banjo, a Story Without a Plot*. The role of the two characters is therefore to prevent the novels from being only collections of short stories. By linking the different characters and stories together, they bring unity to the books.

### III-I Lincoln Agrippa Daily, a Picaresque hero

The term picaresque appeared in literature in 1554, with the novel *Lazarillo de Tormes* which was published anonymously. The word applies to stories starring a 'Picaro': a rogue. This main character is often confronted with injustice, and has to rely on his wit to survive.

Thrall and Hibbard further defined this new genre in 1960; they established a list summing up the main components of a picaresque novel (Thrall and Hibbard, 1960). Amongst their points we find many parallels with Banjo's story. A Picaresque hero is of a low social class, and cannot hold onto a job. Lincoln Agrippa Daily is indeed an immigrant in Marseilles and would often be looked upon as a bum by the local population. Like his friends who work on the docks when a new ship comes into the French harbour, Banjo cannot rely on a regular salary. In order to provide for his needs and desires, he resorts to panhandling, depending on the women he seduces. Using his attractiveness, his joy and his natural ability to make connections, he mostly relies on generous patrons. Sometimes because of his music, they take a fancy on him and finance him for some time. This however never lasts and the cycle starts all over again. This justifies the serial format to the extent that Banjo's economical life is composed of ups and downs, of episodes of wealth and of poverty. This relation with money parallels the erratic form of the novel.

This lack of regular sources of income is made up for by activities on the verge of criminality. Indeed, Banjo earns money playing his music in brothels, and even steals wine or food. Not only in order to survive, but because he is attracted to what is forbidden, almost out of reach. He therefore sometimes resembles a rogue, but always remains sympathetic to the reader. He can be an outlaw but essentially for petty crimes; he is only the victim or the witness of serious aggressions or even murders. In that extent he fits the definition of the Picaro: He is a lovable character, on the verge of criminality.

Thrall and Hibbard also define the Picaro as a character who is not easily subject to change. Hence the character development is limited. The situations, the settings may change but the behaviour of the hero is unlikely to evolve. This is what we find in *Banjo* with Latnah and Chère Blanche. Twice, Banjo seduces a woman, and twice he ends up being forced to leave her. In both occurrences, his perspective on life is intrinsically

different from his partner's, but he ignores it. Therefore Chère Blanche abandons him when he runs out of money, and Latnah eventually rejects him because he is not involved enough in the relationship. His philosophy on life is to take woman light-heartedly, but when he tries to get involved more seriously he always fails. This triggers a need for seriality; Banjo mostly remains the same outsider we are presented with at the beginning of the novel, and we can only expect to be witnesses to his different adventures, without any real possibility of moral evolution. In their *Handbook to Literature*, Thrall and Hibbard therefore define the Picaresque novel as being often written in serial format. The evolution of the plot is inherent to the evolution of the main character; if the latter stays the same throughout the book, the author can only depict loosely connected episodes of the protagonist's life.

It is interesting to note that Banjo does not fit exactly the standard definition of the Picaro. In this last particular example, it would be inaccurate to declare that Banjo is not subject to any evolution at all. The most obvious instance to compare is the arrival in Marseilles with the end of the novel. In the first chapter Banjo appears ecstatic to be in the French harbour and is pictured as a lonesome traveller, even though he has a natural talent for companionship. In the last chapter, during the very last lines actually, Banjo announces his departure to Ray and invites him to join him in his travels. Even though the evolution is limited and slow, it is still present. The extent to which Lincoln Agrippa Daily drifts away from Thrall and Hibbard's definition of the Picaro encourages us to compare him furthermore to the remaining standards of this Picaresque genre.

The Picaro's story often possesses realistic elements. Far from romanticizing his characters' life, the author depicts scenes of everyday life. He also uses settings which could be qualified as banal. Here, Claude McKay depicts the life of bums in the city of Marseilles. He uses real names to picture neighbourhoods or streets, as we discussed previously. The bums' adventures consist of police raids, tension within their group of friends and their celebrations. Nothing extraordinary or non-realistic happens. Most of the action takes place on the docks when new ships arrive, or in bars where Banjo and his companions meet. To that extent Claude McKay definitely uses realist elements in his book.

Thrall and Hibbard, however, associate realism with a plainness of language. If a realist context prevents fantastic events to happen, it should also prevent any extravagant language. In *Banjo*, the main character is presented as an Afro-American with a strong southern accent. Unlike the narrator, he would use a very specific language during all his interventions. He exclaims himself in Buggy's Chinese Pie: 'Look at that poah kid! Starving, and we just done ate moh'n we could finish! Oh, Gawd! What a life!' (McKay, 169). Here the main character uses a loose grammar and McKay reports the variables of his vocal speech.

Claude McKay therefore transcends the notion of the Picaro by putting him in a context of diaspora. Banjo could represent the classic character of Picaresque novels, but because he is a southern Afro-American living in a French city, he belongs to a unique genre of protagonist that could be defined as a Picaro in a diaspora.

Banjo's skin colour is a crucial element of his relationships with his companions. All black, they face racism on a daily basis and therefore develop a sense of community based on their skin colour. A community that gathers, but also excludes: Buggy is a character that is always distrustful when addressing locals or the police. He opposed Banjo on the race issue, antagonizing the white inhabitants of Marseilles. He praises Marcus Garvey's work, a Jamaican politician promoting Black Nationalism and Pan-African movements. Banjo declares 'Garvey had a white man's chance and he done nigger it away. The white man gived him plenty a rope to live, and all he done do with it was to make a noose to hang himse'f.' (McKay, 79). Always using his colourful language, Banjo joins here his creator, Claude McKay. Fundamentally supporter of the Afro-American community, Banjo is nevertheless ready to mingle with white locals. He even has an affair with a white woman, 'Chère Blanche'. Claude McKay also disagreed with Garvey, who he thought was too much of a nationalist. Along with Caribbean writers he founded the African Blood Brotherhood, an American black liberation organization. The characters have their ideas sorted and do not change their opinions. These conflicts on the race issue happen many times in different chapters throughout the book, always leading Banjo to be accused of siding with white people. As a Picaro, he will not change his mind and the serial format highlights his convictions: from the beginning to the end of the novel, he stays true to his principles. He is in a state of liminality, he refuses to join his Afro-American friends or to despise them, he lives in an in-between racial space.

Banjo is not however a carbon copy of his author, as he is described as being rather bored by literature. When presented with Ray's literary work, 'he quickly los[es] interest' (McKay, 72). He is also characterised by a short memory or a lack of interest for financial matters. In a chapter Latnah specifically asks him not to forget the change when he pays for wine, leading to an argument between the two and Banjo promising not to forget. Just a few lines after we learn that he actually forgot the change. These anti-hero traits reinforce his position as an outsider. His character is flawed and hence even more realistic and relatable.

### **III-II George Willard, hero of a bildungsroman?**

Unlike Banjo, The character of George Willard is less of an outsider. He fits better in his environment, suffering at first from the same issues as the other inhabitants: the difficulty to express one's voice. This could be explained because George evolves in his hometown, he is not part of a diaspora. His outsider status is created by his aptitude to evolve; unlike the 'grotesques' of the book, George eventually uses his experiences and decides to leave Winesburg. Love affairs, fights, and most importantly tragic observations constitute his thought-process and progression which leads to this departure. To that extent he could be considered the hero of a bildungsroman, a novel of education.

The term was coined in 1819 by Karl Morgenstern, a Livonian philologist. It described novels relating the life of a young individual and his evolution in a society where he has to learn from his experiences. In *Winesburg, Ohio*, George Willard encounters many different characters thanks to his job as a journalist. The grotesques each teach him a lesson; they represent an experience George has to understand and acquire in order to evolve.

This process of development is symbolised by the chapters' titles: the third story that takes place in Winesburg is entitled 'Mother'. We discover in it the mother of George, Elizabeth Willard. The main character does not clearly age throughout the book. Even if we are not given any indication as to the passing of time, we can assume a maximum of a couple of years pass from the beginning to the end of the book. We are therefore never introduced with George as a child, and this short story evoking his relation with his mother is what could represent his boyhood the best. We can argue that we are very early on presented with George's family life.

The eighth chapter out of twenty-one is then entitled 'Adventure'. This title represents the evolution of George Willard. Indeed, throughout the book he undergoes classic changes for characters of novel of education. The discovery of love is a cornerstone of most bildungsroman. George's affair with Helen White is evoked in 'Drink', 'the Thinker', and represents the main subject of 'Sophistication'. In the latter we learn that 'He

had tried to make her think of him as a man when he knew nothing of manhood and now he wanted to be with her and to try to make her feel the change he believed had taken place in his nature.’ (Anderson, 235). The notion of manhood is typical of bildungsromans, representing the final stage of the character’s evolution. ‘Sophistication’ is the last but one chapter and we find before it a story entitled ‘an Awakening’. We can therefore argue that after frequenting the inhabitants, George learnt from them and had an awakening, allowing him to leave boyhood.

It is important to acknowledge that novels of education is often considered as an ultimate aim the complete integration of the character within a society. Here, if George tries to evolve, it is towards leaving his town, separating himself from the grotesques. In that sense, even if his main character fits the description of an apprentice in a novel of education, Sherwood Anderson appropriates the concept in order to modify it. All George experiences, presented in short stories as many puzzle pieces he has to put together in order to finally see the truth, lead to his departure. The ultimate aim is not to fit in the society of Winesburg but rather to escape from it. Again, this echoes the choice of a serial format since as we have proven before the short stories following each other appear like a maze. George is trapped in a perimeter; his final objective is therefore logically a flight.

George Willard’s evolution is symbolised by his love affair but also by the development of his writing. At the beginning of the novel George is presented as a marginal figure. He is present as the journalist who reports the stories but does not actively takes part in them. He gradually appears, until becoming a central character, as his occurrences towards the end show; the last two chapters are exclusively dedicated to him, while he was just a marginal character in the first two chapters of the book. He was a listener, and gradually becomes an actor. His writing follows the same path: in ‘the Teacher’, he is told that he must “stop fooling with words”, that he must learn “what people think about, not what they say”. (Anderson, 163). He is told by Kate Swift –the teacher- that he cannot be satisfied by just listening to the inhabitants’ anymore; he has to get involved, investigate, and become more active.

### **III-III George Willard and Banjo as unifiers**

George Willard and Banjo are different characters that can be attached to different literary standards. However, they both have the same function in the novels: To unify the characters and the stories. Being a journalist, George listens to the inhabitants' stories and writes articles about them, gathering them. His articles picture characters that are the main figures in some chapters but also appear in the background in other stories. They are connected together by Georges' writing. The same process applies to the setting, as depicted by the map of Winesburg we find page twenty-five. Possibly drawn by George, this map allows the reader to have a clear mental image of the place but also link the different buildings together. It is for example clear that Hern's Grocery faces Sinnings' Hardware store on the Main Street. In a series of chapters loosely connected, George Willard is the link in the chain of events.

In order to do so, he is present throughout most of the novel, a listener. It is shown by the speech given to him: Indeed, he almost only says 'Tell me more' in the stories he is not the main figure of. (Mahoney, 249). Banjo, on the other hand, is more of an actor. He unifies people together with his music: in 'the Breakwater', he and his band 'went playing from little bistro to bistro [...] they were joined by others- a couple of Senegalese and some British West Africans and soon the company was more than a dozen' (McKay, 25). As we can see here, Jazz literally brings people together. It is important to notice that the bums are always referred to depending on their origins. This reinforces banjo's place as a cornerstone since music is a universal language. Moreover in a context of diaspora: 'McKay' s reach is to the entire African American diaspora, and he has the advantage of seeing jazz as one of many music types that have been developed by Africans around the world.' (De Barros, 8). Being an African-American playing the banjo, he possesses all the assets to be a catalyst. He is often the first one to bring new members to the group, and his music is understood and appreciated by everyone, as a common passion they share.

Banjo's appearance is extensively described as we are given details on his suits or pyjamas. George Willard, on the other hand, remains in the shadows and is never made

physically specific. 'While he serves as the novel's only means of ordering and presenting information, he does not leave the reader with a firm sense of himself.' (Gniadek, 25). It proves that if is the main character of the book, he remains a tool for the author to connect the story together. Like Banjo, he allows the use of seriality but placing the book between the novel and the collection of short stories. *Banjo* and *Winesburg, Ohio* present different chapters relating loosely connected events, but always through the eyes or the presence of our two main figures. They bring a consistency to the books, making up for a certain absence of plot.

Banjo and George Willard are different characters. They could belong to a Picaresque novel or to a Bildungsroman, but instead are used by Anderson and McKay to justify the serial format. Banjo is not completely a Picaro, because of his place in a diaspora. His origins and the richness of his language are key to his gathering of black immigrants from different parts of the world. His music is the material means through which he physically brings the bums together. An art form is also used by George Willard, but a literary one. By writing about the inhabitants, he connects them and assures continuity between the chapters. His role as a hero of Bildungsroman encourages him to use these interviews to gather experience and to evolve towards manhood. Both Banjo and George, at the end of the books, decide to leave. Without them, the characters are disconnected. When Banjo leaves for the first time, he 'did not know how great his influence was over the beach boys. His going away with his instrument left them leaderless and they fell apart' (McKay, 230). The end of George's education consisting in escaping the town of Winesburg, both characters embark, on a ship and on a train. Without a catalyst, the stories are condemned to be disconnected and therefore both novels end.

## **Part IV**

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### **The failure of the American dream**

When we refer to the grotesque in *Winesburg, Ohio*, most characters concerned are men. Women are present but mostly in the background, as secondary protagonists. This is even truer in *Banjo*, where all the beach boys are men and we can only count two noticeable women characters, Chère Blanche and Latnah. It would therefore be easy to qualify the feminine as being ignored by the authors and focus on the men.

However, the treatment of women is very specific in both books and reflects what we have decided to call 'the failure of the American Dream'. Just like every character they suffer from loneliness and the impossibility to express themselves, as highlighted by the serial format. Nevertheless, their condition as women also grants them a special potential; this quality is easily categorised: either they are seen as mothers or mother-like figures, or as representations of a sexual force.

The first image of maternal powers is seen as reassuring for the men, even more so when they suffer from an inescapable loneliness and grotesque conditions. The second image, more sexual, is rather described as a hint of their madness, or of their darker side; they appear dangerous for men, reminding us of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. Just like Eve eating the forbidden fruit from the tree of knowledge of good and evil, they dangerously tempt men to leap into madness.

In that extent, they are rejected and their potential is wasted. It is symptomatic of the failure of the American Dream, an unreachable utopia. The last hope for the characters to achieve their dreams is to leave, since neither the French city of Marseilles nor the all-American town of Winesburg appear satisfactory for the protagonists to express themselves. In *Banjo*, Goosey nicknames his homeland 'The United Snakes. The simile struck ray's imagination, giving him a terrible vision of the stripes of Old Glory transformed into wriggling snakes and the stars poisonous heads lifted to strike at an agonized black man writhing in the midst of them' (McKay, 123) The United States appear spoilt, far from the idea of a land of plenty or a land of freedom. The environment is an enclosing force, it plays against the characters; hence the need to escape as the only possibility for salvation.

The artists represent the second wasted potential of the books. They appear to be the key to reveal the inner self of their companions, but because they cannot express themselves they do not succeed in setting their friends free. Through a use of metafictional elements, music, writing and painting are represented as ways of escaping, mentally if not

physically. Art is the saviour but the grotesque and the serial format turn the artists into the loneliest figures.

The American Dream consists in the liberation of the characters, a sense of freedom of expression normally represented by the United States. In our books, the environment prevents the characters from being free, forcing most characters in *Banjo* to leave America. The women and the artists are the most badly affected, even though they appear to have the keys to salvation, they are vanquished by their environment and the hopelessness of their situation.

## IV-I The feminine as a lost potential, unable to live the dream

In *Winesburg, Ohio* and *Banjo*, the women are double-sided figures. They either embody the idea of the mother, or the temptress. They possess a social role that prevails over their own existence as human beings. This is reinforced by the notion of seriality since each short story is dedicated to a character or an event, and women are often in the background. Only eight of the twenty-six chapters including *the Book of the Grotesque* – considering godliness as four chapters – are centred on different women. Feminine figures are outnumbered, the way Latnah and Chère Blanche are outnumbered by the beach boys, being the only women mentioned more than once in *Banjo*.

Latnah is indeed a good instance of the treatment of women in both books. Her first encounter with Banjo happens very early in the novel, during the first chapter. Banjo has just been attacked in a bar and is injured. When she sees him, she invites him to come with her and take care of him. She ‘washed Banjo’s wound [...] then anointed and bandaged it’ (McKay, 18). She was only known before for helping the beach boys by giving them money, while always rejecting their advances. She is therefore presented as a non-sexual figure taking care of men, like a mother. She remains in the background until the beginning of her affair with Banjo. Her maternal instinct is however only one face of the coin; during a meeting with Maltby she is pictured as ‘gliding like a serpent. She stirred up a powerfully sweet and strange desire in him’ (McKay, 32). The parallel with the snake in the Garden of Eden and Adam’s temptation is easy to make and places Latnah in the position of temptress.

She cannot be fooled with, as she becomes jealous of Banjo’s other woman, Chère Blanche, this time an only-sexual figure. Rejected and ill treated by Banjo she gradually loses her place in the story. As Banjo’s woman she cannot be a mother for the beach boys anymore, she is part of the group. However when Banjo leaves to live with Chère Blanche, she loses her place as the temptress. Deprived of both faces, she fades away and is the only ‘main’ character completely absent of the last story, narrating Banjo’s decision to leave.

Sherwood Anderson pictures women in the same light: Kate Swift is George’s schoolteacher, a position quite alike to a maternal one. The two characters have a very

special relationship as proven by the tight and intimate hug they exchange years later, at George's workplace. This relationship does not however further develop and George realises that he has 'missed something [...] something Kate Swift was trying to tell [him]' (Anderson, 166). Their mother/child relation is therefore incomplete, because of this lack of communication.

The serial format allows Anderson and McKay to portray their characters in two completely different lights from a story to another. Indeed, thanks to the changes of settings, characters, and time, Kate Swift can be pictured in another way in the story 'The Strength of God'. She is seen 'naked upon the bed' by the Reverend Curtis Hartman. As a man of Church he is shocked by this image and becomes obsessed with it, regularly spying on her. One day, he come rushing to George and declares 'Do you know Kate Swift? Although she may not be aware of it, she is an instrument of God, bearing the message of truth' (Anderson, 155). Women and religion are carefully intertwined; here Kate is presented as a representation of Christ, bringing illumination to the Reverend.

The feminine figures therefore live through or for men. Helping them in a sensual or maternal way, they seldom exist for themselves. Jesse Bentley's wife is pictured as a childbearing woman. Jesse 'values his wife in so far as she is able to bear him children, and when she dies in childbirth he is sorry only because she left him a daughter rather than a son. He neglects his daughter and shows her no love.' (Laughlin, 101). In his desire to 'sire a new nation a great race' (Same as before) Jesse resembles Abraham. It appears that women are seen through the prism of religion, being either the temptress or the devoted mother, sacrificing themselves for men.

A blatant example is the death of Elizabeth Willard. Mother of George, she has always wanted her son to escape and leave the town, hoping he would become someone for himself, but also for her. In the story 'Death', she dies on a Friday at three o'clock. According to the Bible, this is the same date at time as Jesus Christ's death. Women therefore die for others, essentially men. When a bomb explodes in a brothel in *Banjo*, the only victim is the owner of the place, a woman.

The figure of the mother is tightly related to the notion of seriality. If in *Banjo*, Latnah is the only long-lasting feminine presence, in *Winesburg, Ohio*, almost all men are

living with their mothers or with a maternal figure. The occurrences are numerous: Wing Biddlebaum and an old aunt, Tom Foster, Enoch Robinson or Seth Richmond. Seriality allows Anderson to dedicate one chapter to one character. Since every masculine character is related to a mother-like figure, a recurrent pattern is created, reinforcing the bond between the mother and the son. This bond is always strong, even if the family, for instance George and Elizabeth Willard, ‘speak to each other seldom’ (Stouck, 1969, 149)

The reason for this treatment of the women is double: First, they make sacrifices to protect men. This becomes obvious in *Banjo* when Ray spends the night with a coloured woman. His body is pictured as ‘a black root growing down in the soft brown earth’ (McKay, 293). Here the black woman nourishes Ray, who is seen as a tree growing on her land. ‘In McKay's fiction and poetry, the soil is equated to a place of peace and joy for the black man, a homeland, one can here infer that McKay is expanding the soil-home equation: the woman is the soil which is the homeland.’ (Conroy, 18)

The other reason for the women to be condemned is their grotesqueness; In Alice Hindman's description Anderson tells us that ‘her head was large and overshadowed her body’ (Anderson, 112). Later in the same story, she appears running naked in the streets, driven by a ‘mad desire’ (Anderson, 119). The oversize of her head symbolises the disconnection between her mind and her body. Like the other grotesques, she cannot achieve what her intellect desires: escaping to obtain freedom at last. Because of her grotesque condition she is stuck in an in-between space. Deprived of any possibility, she resorts to liberating her primal self, which results in listening to her mad desires and running naked down the streets. Her nudity reflects her return to the origins, when Eve was naked in the Garden of Eden. However, since she is grotesque by her physical appearance and enclosed by the serial format, she embodies a prelapsarian character who cannot achieve the unity of her body and mind.

These two faces of the women are closely related; if they cannot achieve personal liberation, they try to help men, their sons for instance, becoming free themselves. The best representation is George's mother, Elizabeth. Unable to escape the town of Winesburg, she transferred her desires to him, leaving him ‘the eight hundred dollars that meant freedom to travel’. (Mellard, 1310) She wants him to be able to do what she could not achieve, and want him to be able to leave the small Ohio town to finally become someone.

## IV-II The need to leave to become someone

The influence of the authors' life on their books is not negligible; Sherwood Anderson was raised in a small town in Ohio, which he left after his mother's death. Claude McKay was famous to write his works in many different countries, such as Jamaica, the United States, but also the Soviet Union and England. It is therefore not surprising to discover that these two men associate departure with a symbol of accomplishment.

This is reflected in their novels, in which the main characters truly become heroes at the end of their stories. The last stories of both books are entitled 'Departure – concerning George Willard' and 'Banjo's ace of spades'. The two stories are dedicated to the main characters, who finally become the heroes of the novels. Banjo is about to embark on a ship, and George is even described in the train, looking back at Winesburg. The novel finishes on 'his life there had become but a background on which to paint the dreams of his manhood' (Anderson, 247). Banjo on his side assures Ray that they can go a long way together. Both final lines are very positive compared to the rest of the novels. The future appears for once reachable and bearing hope. This is reflected by the very words used: In 'Departure' the language is turned towards the future since George only refers to past events a couple of times.

In order to escape, the main characters simply took their chance. The opportunity was here most of the time, but the moment just was not right. As a reader we feel that both George and Banjo had to relate their companions' stories before being allowed freedom. The latter was always present in the books, but lurking in the background. In *Banjo*, rumours are heard that a friend of a friend obtained official papers to go back to the United States, and ships are seen daily in the French harbour. In Winesburg, the train is heard and acknowledged in several stories as a background noise. The difference between the ones who escape and the ones who remain enclosed by the serial format is therefore a matter of daring. This is proven by David, who escapes the town after hitting his grandfather with a sling.

Leaving remains however inaccessible to most characters, even though they think about it. Elmer Cowley knows which train to get to go to Cleveland where he imagines his

life, but will never leave Winesburg. Seth Richmond tries to convince himself that he will 'get out of here' he wants to be 'going to some city and go to work' (Anderson, 136). Kate Swift 'the schoolteacher, attempts to escape her twin burdens of sex and vocation by an "unpremeditated" walk in a snowstorm'. (Mellard, 1311) These characters never leave their town because they do not find the strength to do it. Using seriality, Anderson shows how many tried, how many share this desire. However almost no one actually succeed until George, who by the same occasion appears to be breaking the serial format; by leaving the town he also leaves the story, and since he became the main character of it, the book ends.

Some of the characters that refuse to leave also do so because they still believe in an inaccessible American Dream. Jesse Bentley for instance, is ready to sacrifice everything for his business to thrive; he is tempted by mechanization for example. His grotesqueness is to believe that God's intervention is responsible for success. This belief in 'material prosperity as the sign of divine favor' is 'one of the informal tenets of Calvinism'. (Laughlin, 99). If it cannot be proven that this belief was inherent to all the puritans who settle in was is now know as the United States, it is recognised that this conception was at least present in their community. Jesse Bentley is therefore a pioneer that still believes in the American Dream, but because he is flawed he does not realise that he needs to leave in order to have a chance to achieve his goals. Because he stays his Winesburg, he ends up psychologically destroyed by his failure of building an empire on his own.

If the characters want to live the American Dream their only way is to escape their environment. It appears that they could be liberated by the hand of the artist, but because of seriality this attempts fails.

## IV-III The aesthetics of creation

Both books present the reader with a great number of artists, and therefore carry metafictional elements. How the musicians, writers and painters are treated reflects the authors' message, that art is liberating but condemns the artist to loneliness.

McKay's novel is dominated by music. It is hardly a surprise when the main character's nickname is one of a music instrument. Banjo even associates himself further with his Banjo when he declares about his banjo 'it is moh than a gal, moh than a pal; it's mahself' (McKay, 6). This could be explained by the fact that the author was a major figure of the Harlem Renaissance. When McKay was writing, Jazz was spreading throughout the national scene and 'Broadway musicals opened up to a black cultural influence' (De Barros, 2). It is therefore not surprising that an author part of the New Negro Movement decides to promote its musical aspect.

Banjo's art allows him to live, as he gains money playing his music. George Willard also makes a living out of his art, writing newspapers articles. Both characters survive thanks to their artistic skills.

Art is on one hand a saviour, as it allows the characters to earn a living, gather, and express themselves. As we have proved before, Banjo unites the characters by playing his music and bars, and George links the characters together with his articles.

Art is also presented as being a means of expression. From the first lines of Banjo, we learn that he will be a colourful main character. McKay makes an extensive use of colour adjective in his first description of Banjo. His slippers 'were an ugly drab-brown color, which, however, was mitigated by the crimson sock and the yellow scarf with its elaborate pattern of black, yellow, and red at both ends.' (McKay, 3). Right away the author gives Banjo a strong connection with art, even in the choice of his clothes, a subject of first importance for Lincoln Agrippa Daily; we realise later that he does not hesitate to spend all the money he has left on items of clothing.

Tom Foster in 'Drink' starts playing with words innocently, 'like a poet' (Mellard, 1306). That encourages him to get drunk. If consuming alcohol is a release of the self, then

words liberated Tom. Through these instances we cannot see art as completely harmful? It often springs from a good intention. However, we are going to see that because of the grotesque and of seriality, the artists are actually the loneliest figures.

The story 'loneliness' pictures the life of Enoch Robinson. The latter is presented as alone because 'he was always a child' (Anderson, 167). However, the 'thoughts hidden away in his brain' could have 'expressed themselves through the brush of a painter'. Even though art is potentially Enoch's salvation. But his lack of communication, which is his main grotesque trait, eventually prevents him from sustaining his relationship with a woman, who leaves him alone and devastated. He cannot find refuge in art, since even in New York and visited by fellow young painters, the artists think that their talk about art 'matters much more than it does' (Anderson, 169). The topic appears therefore trivial and is looked upon. Just like Enoch, the old man in the 'Book of the Grotesque' is presented as a lonely writer, a 'pathetic figure preoccupied' (Stouck, 1985, 311). Completely absorbed by his book and his theory, he cut himself out of any human interaction. The message is that art is a saviour but a dangerous one; if the artist lets him take too much place he would be overcome by his art.

The old writer however reveals us the key to understand human failure: Someone becomes grotesque when he takes one truth for himself, appropriates it and lives by it. Claude McKay treats the subject in a slightly different manner, introducing the notion of interpretation. Typical in a context of diaspora, the term means a transformation of an element by someone, its appropriation. In that sense it is what Anderson's old man despises. However, in a context of diaspora, interpretation allows oneself to find a middle ground between himself and the other. It helps communication. Banjo's most successful song, 'Shake That Thing' is a 'version of the 'Jelly Roll Blues'' (McKay, 41). Interpretation is praised as a proof of identity. Banjo creates songs himself, being inspired by others, this allows him to gather his companions and affirm himself as a creative artist.

Art allows the artist to liberate himself, or to liberate the others. However, in a context of seriality where the same events happen over and over again to different characters and from which it is almost impossible to escape, the artist is condemned. As

describe by Doctor Parcival, life 'is a form of crucifixion, a long torture and dying as it was for Christ on the cross.' (Stouck, 1977, 535). The American dream is a failure because it cannot be lived by the artists or the women, who are both figures that can only try to help the others.

## **Conclusion**

We studied these books in order to understand better the concept of seriality. We wanted to prove that *Banjo* is more than a Racial novel, and that *Winesburg, Ohio* was not a collection of short stories. Published ten years apart, the two books present one evident common point, the serial format, and a great number of differences. The setting, the language used or even the characters differ greatly. And even if we found uncountable resemblances in the treatment of the two novels by the authors, discussing what differs from one to the other is a very important part of our study.

We wanted to go further than simply establishing a list of common points and differences. By digging into the roles of the characters, the presence of two main catalysts in the person of Banjo and George or even the treatment of the setting, we uncovered hidden meanings.

Just like the artists, women possess a certain potential but have to give it up because of their grotesqueness or to serve the others. This is the part of a general momentum that defines the path followed by the two main characters. After defining a perimeter all around themselves, their homes and their companions, they came to the conclusion that leaving was the only answer.

The serial format allows the authors to present the readers with a great sense of repetition, introducing recurrent patterns. It also builds up a wall all around the cities, which we treated as a perimeter. We would like to see it as a cobweb. Indeed, it traps its preys – the characters - preventing them from escaping. It is indeed a perimeter but with many links tying the different branches of the stories together. They all join each other at the centre of the web, where we find our two main characters, George and Banjo, the hearts of *Winesburg, Ohio* and *Banjo: A Story Without a Plot*.

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**MOTS-CLÉS** : Sérialité, Anderson, McKay, Grotesque, Winesburg, Banjo.

### **RÉSUMÉ**

Ce mémoire étudie la place de la sérialité dans les œuvres *Banjo* et *Winesburg, Ohio* de Claude McKay et Sherwood Anderson. Les différents chapitres ne paraissent pas formellement liés, mais aux travers de motifs récurrents et de la place des deux personnages principaux, les auteurs parviennent à créer des connexions entre les chapitres. Les personnages apparaissent grotesque, possédant un défaut inhérent à leur condition qui les empêche de communiquer et de s'intégrer pleinement. Ils ne peuvent également quitter leur environnement, et restent donc seuls. Marseille et Winesburg sont des villes qu'il faut tenter de fuir. Le voyage est synonyme de libération, même si cette dernière n'est acquise que par Banjo et George Willard. Lorsque les personnages principaux quittent les lieux, les deux romans se terminent.

**KEYWORDS**: Seriality, Anderson, McKay, Grotesque, Winesburg, Banjo.

### **ABSTRACT**

This thesis focuses on the role of seriality in *Banjo* by Claude McKay and *Winesburg, Ohio* by Sherwood Anderson. The different chapters of the books seem loosely connected, however, through the use of recurrent motifs or patterns and the role of the main characters, the authors succeed in giving a sense of progression to their stories. The characters appear grotesque, all suffering from a flaw inherent to their conditions. This prevents them from communicating and therefore from finding a place in the society. They also cannot leave their environment, hence staying alone. Marseilles and Winesburg are cities which need to be escaped from. Travel here is synonym with liberation, even though the latter is only reached by Banjo and George Willard. When the main characters leave, both novels end.

