



Where Is Here?

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Similar to the grotesques found in Sherwood Anderson's *WINESBURG, OHIO* (1919), the misfits peopling the sometimes very brief stories of *WHERE IS HERE?* must grapple with the pain of being human, not just the physical pain caused by sickness and dying but, more profoundly, the suffering caused by loneliness and isolation. These stories are marked by a failure to communicate with others either through words or gestures.

Love seems problematic, even that between mother and child. In "Love, Forever" the mother, when confronted with her lover's dislike of children, systematically murders her own three, including her four-year-old daughter, whom she "had always loved best." Love between lovers is just as elusive. The erotic moves easily into the pornographic, and sexual pleasure is equated with violence. In "Lethal," the opening story, what seems to be a mutually satisfying moment turns suddenly into rape. Even the innocence of youth is no antidote to the darkness. A youth's sexual awakening becomes perversion, as in "Sweet!," or promiscuity, as in "Turquoise."

The failure to connect with another creates the pain found in the majority of the stories. Artists, who traditionally provide a voice for those who are silenced, as George Willard does in *WINESBURG, OHIO*, are here mute. The actress ("Actress") and the Great Man ("From *THE LIFE OF . . .*") have lived their lives for effect, never scratching more than the surface. The painter ("The Artist") literally sucks the life out of his models, whether his subject is an eggplant or his father, and transfers it to his canvas. The writer called only H. ("The Wig") does nothing but revise endlessly his early stories as he lives in a mental institution. Answers are not forthcoming from these artists. But perhaps, as Oates suggests in these stories, the questions are unanswerable.

The world depicted is bleak and devoid of comfort. While the misfits effectively symbolize the desperation of daily life, no one escapes. These well-crafted stories present a very dark picture of contemporary life.

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