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# Crying in Class, Once Again—Literature, Loneliness, and Our Human Need for Connection

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# The Weekly Reader

Teaching and Learning Center, Winthrop University, Rock Hill, SC

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Winthrop University

## Crying in Class, Once Again—Literature, Loneliness, and Our Human Need for Connection

It happened once again, when I did not expect it. I cried in class.

In ENGL 529—20<sup>th</sup>-Century American Fiction and Drama, we are reading Sherwood Anderson's *Winesburg, Ohio*, a collection of short stories that focuses on life in a small town in the first part of the century. One of the first stories is "Hands," about a man with the improbable name of Wing Biddlebaum.

Wing Biddlebaum is a curiosity to the people of Winesburg because of his hands. Unlike the rest of him, his hands are beautiful and expressive, but he hides them, for a reason nobody knows. The narrator reveals why, a secret from Wing Biddlebaum's past, whose real name is Adolph Myers. I will not reveal what that secret is—I highly recommend this strange, beautiful book!

The part that got me is at the end of the story. Wing Biddlebaum is alone, and very lonely, but wishing for a human connection. I

began to tear up as I read this passage:

"Lighting a lamp, Wing Biddlebaum washed the few dishes soiled by his simple meal and, setting up a folding cot by the screen door that led to the porch, prepared to undress for the night." I choked up as I read, and my students could hear the emotion in my voice. At least this time, they could not see tears falling—just that my eyes had welled up.

Sherwood Anderson hit me (and many of my students) with what T.S. Eliot called an "objective correlative":

*"The only way of expressing emotion in the form of art is by finding an 'objective correlative'; in other words, a set of objects, a situation, a chain of events which shall be the formula of that particular emotion; such that when the external facts, which must terminate in sensory experience, are given, the emotion is immediately*

*evoked."*

The act of washing his "few dishes" and setting up his folding cot were the set of objects and situation that immediately evoked a profound sense of loneliness, sadness, and empathy in me. So, I cried.

I have to admit this happens to me a lot—but even so, I am never prepared for it. Literature is powerful, dangerous stuff, especially when you take it so seriously, when it means so much to you. Reading literature and talking about it with my students is my life, is the center of my life.

This early in the semester, I know I made a connection with my students when they saw me overcome with emotion, and then when I talked about why that had happened. I realized I had suddenly been hit with a powerful memory of the time in my life when I felt most alone.

That time in my life was when I was in college and

*“But I am trying to remind myself how hard it is to be young, alone for the first time in your life, unsure of your future, unsure if you have chosen the right major, looking for love but not finding it, feeling the pressure of assignments and grades, living near or past the limit of your expenses.”*



### Continued from page 1

the two years immediately after, when I had my first teaching job and lived alone in, horror of horrors, a single-wide trailer. As I talked, briefly, about my extreme loneliness during those years, I saw heads nodding all over class.

As we get older, we are apt to color our memories. Part of me remembers my college years as the best years of my life. And that is somewhat true. But my brain submerges the memories of nights alone, of anxiety about my future, of the feeling that everybody else has love, everybody else has a sense of belonging, everybody else has a plan.

It hit me hard in class that day how many of our students are drowning in loneliness, sadness, anxiety. I could sense it in the eyes of so many of those 20 students, most of them 20 or so.

Many of us, myself included, are guilty of laughing at this generation of students, calling them “snowflakes,” ridiculing their neediness, their insecurity, their need for safe spaces and emotional support animals.

I am not trying to excuse any unnecessary demands or any

overreach on the part of students. I am sure there are many cases of people abusing a system that gives them support.

But I am trying to remind myself how hard it is to be young, alone for the first time in your life, unsure of your future, unsure if you have chosen the right major, looking for love but not finding it, feeling the pressure of assignments and grades, living near or past the limit of your expenses.

Sherwood Anderson wrote his book in 1919, almost one hundred years ago, but the emotions he captured then are emotions that I still feel today, that our students feel.

In my favorite of these stories, “Adventure,” a woman named Alice Hindman realizes that she has wasted her youth waiting on a lover who will never return. The ending of the story almost always makes me cry:

“Turning her face to the wall, [she] began trying to force herself to face bravely the fact that many people must live and die alone, even in Winesburg.” Even in Winthrop...

The good news is that we are not really alone. We

have each other, if we will reach out and show empathy, express our own loneliness and our need for human connection. Even in that somewhat sterile space, the classroom.



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See the box below on the third page for the call for proposals for the 4<sup>th</sup> Annual Winthrop Conference on Teaching and Learning. The deadline for proposals is just over two weeks away!

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## Thanks For Helping Make the Teaching and Learning Center Work!

Winthrop's Teaching and Learning Center offers a wide variety of sessions each year for faculty and staff, on teaching, technology, professional development, and personal development. From leading class discussion to mastering the Smart podium to tenure and promotion to cooking soufflés, the TLC tries to make sure that all faculty and staff receive

the kinds of professional and personal development that will make them better teachers, administrators, and employees.

To offer this programming, the TLC depends on the talent, expertise, and generosity of our faculty and staff. We do not have a big budget to bring in outside speakers and experts. Even so, we are able to offer engaging,

timely, and valuable sessions every year on a variety of topics. We thank those who have offered their time and talent in past years.

If you have a request for a session you would like to see, please email me and I will try to arrange it. And if you have a session you would like to present, please email me. We will set something up as soon as we can!

## A Service From the TLC: Teaching Consultation

The TLC for several years has been offering a service: teaching consultation. At the instructor's request, I (or another agreed-upon person) will visit your class to observe and consult with you afterwards about your successes and challenges. This consultation has nothing to do with the tenure and

promotion process, and no reports will be made to department chairs or deans (unless you so request). The invitation to the consultant can only come from the instructor, not from a dean or chair or any other person. All conversations will be private and confidential. If you don't want me to visit your class and observe your teaching, we could

just meet and talk about your teaching. If I am not available to visit your class because of my schedule, I will find a qualified person to do the consulting. So please let me know if you would like to invite me into your class or for a consultation. Call or email me (803) 323-3679 or [birdj@winthrop.edu](mailto:birdj@winthrop.edu).

## Go2Knowledge—Learning On Demand!

Go2Knowledge is a website that offers a variety of video presentations on faculty and staff professional development. You will find presentations by nationally-known experts in seven categories: At-Risk Populations, Campus Safety, Organizational Development, Student Success, Teaching and Learning, Technology,

and Open Educational Resources. Within each category, you will find a number of excellent and informative videos. The Office of Academic Affairs has provided us a subscription to this service.

People often tell the TLC that they would like to go to sessions, but they don't have the time or they can't

at the times sessions are offered. With Go2Knowledge, you can attend sessions on demand, anywhere, 24/7. The TLC will also have frequent Go2Knowledge Groups, where we meet to discuss a presentation. Log in here: <http://www.go2knowledge.org/winthrop> See you there!

Register for a TLC Session  
At

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## The 4th Annual Winthrop Conference on Teaching and Learning 3/24/17

The 4<sup>th</sup> Annual Winthrop Conference on Teaching and Learning will be held Friday, March 24, 2017. Registration is only \$15.00. Proposals are due February 15. You can find the call for proposals and the submission form here: <http://digitalcommons.winthrop.edu/tlcconference/>

## Thought For the Week

"I feel for Adam and Eve now, for I know how it was with them....The Garden of Eden I now know was an unendurable solitude. I know that the advent of the serpent was a welcome change-- anything for society."

--Mark Twain