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Kit Brandon Revisited: Social Comment and Literary Experimentation in the Final Novel of Sherwood Anderson

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In 1936, Sherwood Anderson published what, unbeknownst to him, would become his final novel. Kit Brandon, A Portrait, the story of a Blue Ridge mountain moonshine girl, actually dealt with the weightier topic of emancipation of women long before the term "emancipation" became popular. In this book, Anderson continued earlier efforts to explore the new economic impact of women in the Industrial Age. Actually, he began to explore the rising economic power of women as opposed to the declining power of men. He did not do this through statistics or revelations of mighty industrial changes. Instead, he explored the life of one woman who was affected by, and in her way, conquered, the Age of the Machine.

Previously, Anderson had touched upon the plight of the new American factory worker, both male and female, in a variety of books that included at least one explicitly "proletarian" novel. Kit Brandon was widely anticipated to be Anderson's great proletarian effort, especially since leftist alternatives to the society that had produced the Great Depression were in vogue. During this

time, Anderson had lent his name and stature to at least one Communist-oriented organization in the hopes of benefiting the worker. In 1932, Anderson, along with fifty-one other intellectuals, endorsed an open letter announcing support for the Communist candidate for President of the United States. The author of Winesburg, Ohio, from the time of his rejection of the middle-class he wrote about in that book, to the time of his death in 1941, never felt half-way about a cause. Although he later abandoned Communism, he was much enamoured of it from a period beginning roughly with the onset of the Depression to the publication of Kit Brandon. Hence, the final book was expected to be a vindication of the proletarian struggle that had already caught the attention of such writers as Erskine Caldwell, John Dos Passos, Langston Hughes and Lincoln Steffens, all of whom signed the 1932 Open Letter with Anderson.

In spite of such anticipation, Kit Brandon was not a proletarian novel, even though a cursory examination would conclude otherwise. In fact, the novel marked the end of Anderson's fascination with the philosopy. The works that preceded

Kit Brandon do form a kind of prelude to the novel, but to consider them before approaching the novel on its own merits would be to fall into the same trap that ensnared many of Anderson's critics in 1936; hence, we will deal with those works in a later chapter and proceed immediately to analyzing this work on its own merits.

In Kit Brandon, Anderson introduced what was essentially a new concept for him: the idea of a heroine instead of a hero. The book was neither a financial nor a critical success when it first appeared. Misunderstood by the critics and perhaps abandoned by Anderson himself, it went through only one printing and was ignored for over twenty years until retrospectives on Anderson's work produced second looks at the last published novel of one of America's most influential writers.

In this day of increasing awareness of the contributions of women beyond their traditional roles of housewife and mother, it is therefore timely to reassess this novel, not only in the context of its worth as an early feminist tribute to a truly independent woman, but also in the

context of a final work by an author who was thought to be in a decline when the work was published. We will discover that the book has elements that should ensure it a place on any feminist bookshelf, even though Anderson would probably wince at the current connotations of feminism. We will also discover that Anderson's narrative technique in this book, far from being the total failure of those early assessments, had legitimate merit and deserves kinder reviews than were initially generated. This technique actually anticipates many modern writers who may not be aware of their indebtedness to this giant of a generation long dead. In fact, we will find that criticism of the book was colored with false assumptions and consequent misreadings.

Finally, we will discover through this paper, a literary tragedy. We will expose the premature end of the final literary period of an artist who exemplified as much as, if not more than, any of his contemporaries, a commitment to literary search and experimentation.

Kit Brandon the Novel, Kit Brandon the Woman

Imagine, if you will, a lady moon-runner. Do not imagine a moonshiner, for he is in the production aspect of that illegal business. Instead, imagine a moon-runner, someone in the distribution end, charged with the responsibility of delivering illegal whiskey from mountain hollows to cities where it is consumed by drinkers who happily ignore Prohibition. Then imagine that dangerous, illegal job held by a woman.

If that setting and central character cause one to presume much about a book using these materials, then there may be legitimate flaws in this novel, at least superficially. Certainly "Kit Brandon" sounds like an Old West story and the climax of the book is indeed a shoot-out. This novel is far more serious, however, than would be assumed from a casual examination.

Basically, the book is a romance in the more fanciful definition of that genre, since the action takes place in a rustic environment and it depicts a certain revolt against authority. The setting is the Southern Appalachian mountains--the Blue

Ridge--an area made famous during Prohibition as the busiest place of manufacture for the alcohol America tried unsuccessfully to legislate away. A natural barrier to westward expansion, only today are the mountains penetrated by superhighways and still legends of mountain men and bootleggers abound.

For the second half of the definition, the revolt against authority might be interpreted as the making and selling of illegal whiskey during a time in which authority outlawed it, but this is a short view. The authority Kit rejects is more profound; it is psychological rather than physical, and therefore more difficult to escape. The authority is actually the Industrial or Machine Age itself, in which men consign themselves to mind-numbing roles in a system that enslaves or destroys them. Kit revolts through her mastery of the Machine. In this case the automobile is the Machine, and Anderson sees it differently than he did years before in Winesburg. In fact, the automobile has become, in this novel, the most perfect symbol of the Industrial Age and instead of fearing the product of mass production,

Anderson has a sense of respect for the craftsmanship involved:

> The purring thing down in front, under the hood of the car . . . oh, American workmen, American inventors, you have done something here, oh mechanical age, this is your finest accomplishment.[1]

As Kit develops, she establishes herself as the equal to, and in many cases, the superior of men. Kit is a mountain girl who escapes from the poverty and degradation of her mountain life to a more exciting world on the other side of the mountain and ultimately, through her mastery of the automobile, on the other side of the law. The changes wrought in Kit over the course of the story and the changes she observes in others form the statement of the book.

Aside from the shift in focus, there are major differences in this book from other Anderson works. First, practically all his previous works offered various incarnations of himself or some facet of his personality. George Willard in

[1] Sherwood Anderson, Kit Brandon, A Portrait, (New York: Scribners, 1936), pp. 169-170.

Winesburg was the connecting link for the various short stories in the famous 1919 book and he is widely perceived as the young Sherwood Anderson observing life in Clyde, Ohio. Others characters have been less openly autobiographical but they often exhibited Andersonian traits, especially when the topic was marriage. In Kit Brandon there is no real shadow of Anderson to cloud the story. In fact, his literary device is to inject himself directly into the story and then become so absorbed in Kit that he drops the objective language of the writer and slips into an oral syntax. His will is so bent to Kit's that his digressions take on the fragmentary form of conversation. His method is to use the ellipsis rather often to facilitate the rapid shift from image to image just as the mind will expand upon stimulus. This technique was fairly common in other writers of the period, notably James Joyce and (minus the ellipsis) William Faulkner, and is obviously a stream-of-consciousness device. The errors critics made in reviewing the book were two-fold: first, they had categorized Anderson as a "Midwestern" writer confined to the conventions of the so-called

Chicago Renaissance and this new setting was alien to them, and secondly, they failed to heed the very obvious warning in Chapter One.

In previous works, Anderson seemed to be torn between a simple prose as in Winesburg and an experimentation in "jerky" rhythms as in Beyond Desire, which preceded Kit Brandon by four years. Actually, his experiments had begun years earlier, but Beyond Desire was the most infamous example of the technique critics damned in Kit Brandon. Anderson often attempted to explain his efforts toward a more organic style of writing after the fact, but in Kit Brandon he attempted to justify this method of shifting responsibility to his fictional heroine and her effect on his writing. It was as if the author, sensing previous criticism and its potential effect on this work, attempted to justify his actions. If the story is fragmentary and the language is fragmentary also, then it is because he heard it in fragments and is so absorbed that he nearly mimics her vernacular:

> Her story came to me in fragments. We were together for that purpose, that I might get her story as one more of the multitude of curious, terrible, silly,

> absorbing or wonderful stories all people could tell if they knew how.[2]

On a later page, the image appears again:

> They were fragmentary pictures she gave me--a mountain road, going up out of an East Tennessee valley . . . this before East Tennessee became industrialized, factories coming into many of the little towns to pick up and use the cheap mountain labor . . .[3]

And again the image appears, two pages later:

> . . . Kit was always asking, demanding, that I leap across great gaps in her account of how things were with her, what she felt about things . . .[4]

And finally, the image re-appears:

> Kit, when she spoke of her childhood, occasionally fell into the vernacular. I think she always knew when she did it.[5]

Anderson appears to be consciously asking the reader to accept this method because it is another of Kit's terms which he must meet before he is allowed to tell her story. Therefore, the reader does not merely read; he participates in the

[2] Kit Brandon, p. 1.

[3] Kit Brandon, p. 4.

[4] Kit Brandon, p. 7.

[5] Kit Brandon, p. 13.

experience. A question then appears: was the warning sufficient? It probably was not since few critics accepted the style when the book was published. It was not, however, a totally new convention for Anderson. Irving Howe, who, in a seemingly contradictory manner, both admires Sherwood Anderson and still considers him a minor American writer, notes that Anderson used, with great success, the oral narrative technique in such stories as "The Egg." He calls the manner by which the storyteller seemingly cannot explain what he has seen as a "protestation to perplexity."

> But it is the mark of the good storyteller that, even as he confesses to bewilderment about the story's meaning, he is actually presenting the reader with the materials necessary for the total response. Sometimes, as in "The Egg," both Anderson and his narrator seem slightly bewildered by the story's terrible events, but the story is nevertheless there in its entirety and virtual perfection.[6]

It seems likely that Anderson wished his audience in Kit Brandon to share with him that wonder of discovery he obviously felt in reliving

[6] Irving Howe, Sherwood Anderson, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1951), p. 151.

her experiences. Unfortunately, it seems also obvious that they did not, for his efforts to do so were either too feeble or too obscure for an audience grown impatient with what they considered Anderson's ramblings.

Another major difference between this book and prior Anderson works is the new attitude toward women. Kit is more than a near-legendary figure: she is actually a new woman--a synthesis of factors and circumstances that Anderson felt would someday create a new economic impact on America. Kit's intrusion into the male world of moon-runners is triumphant; her actions would do justice to any man's reputation. Other women in the book, although not as futuristic as Kit, exhibit strong traits often reserved for men in popular novels of the day. From the quiet stoicism of a moonshiner's mistress to the fiery exhuberance of a factory girl-cum-union organizer, the women tend to prevail.

The story begins in South Dakota. This is unimportant and probably unnecessary, but Anderson seems to have picked an area as dissimilar to the Blue Ridge as possible. For the effect of verisimilitude, Kit is pictured far removed from

both the Blue Ridge and her past. Here in South Dakota, Anderson is working on a magazine article on the dust storms and hears of a famous lady moon-runner. He meets her and begins to write her story as she wants it told. They drive from town to town, staying in different hotels, as Anderson does his work. During the day he writes about the storms and, at night, he listens to her stories. It should be noted that he rides while she drives--a reversal of roles apparent from the outset. Kit says merely that she thinks better that way:

> "You let me drive.
> "I think better when I'm driving a car. I've driven so much."[7]

Immediately, Anderson has us confront the strength of Kit Brandon. She is in control and likes it that way. Extrapolating here, we can assume Kit is much the master of her own life and functions best in that role. Also, the automobile is more home to her than any static location. Cars have been such a large part of life that she appears almost fused with the

[7] Kit Brandon, p. 2.

machine. As the book progresses and the automobile becomes more a symbol for the Machine, Kit is contrasted with the men who are destroyed or rendered impotent by the New Mechanical Age. This is an age in which mechanization has permeated American life and traditional male strengths have been subjugated to the whims of managers and bosses. Kit's success in this story is not only accommodating a machine, traditionally the tool of men, but mastering it as well, reinforces the symbolic image and feminist bent of this work. The contrast is especially vivid when Anderson describes the plight of the "mill daddy," the nominal head of a large household where he is no longer the breadwinner:

> A family moved down out of the hills to such a town and, when there were several children, particularly girl children, the father became what is known in Southern mill towns as a "mill daddy." He put his wife and all his daughters to work in the mill. You will see such men in any mill town. They are lost there. Such a man in the hills at least kept on the move.[8]

Anderson was an excellent observer of Southern customs and manners, and, in spite of repeated

[8] Kit Brandon, p. 21.

attempts to categorize him as something else, he managed to record faithfully these attacks on the Southern psyche. The denigration of a Southerner, regardless of whether he was a blueblood or hillbilly, was an awesome occurrence. Perhaps only Faulkner, with his Snopes and Compsons, appreciated this phenomenon any better. Also, Anderson knew much better than any pure Midwesterner, how powerful was the hold of the land on the Southerner.

Kit's life begins in a small, grubby shack somewhere in the Blue Ridge. Essentially no better or no worse than any of his neighbors, John Brandon leads a savage, ugly existence on a small scale. As a child, Kit notices the residual magnetism of such farms for mountain men who went to high-paying jobs in factories up north only to return out of homesickness. Anderson points out that Kit was aware of this phenomenon but was not affected by it:

> I used the expression, "The hills had them," and she nodded her head. She meant to say that the land of the skies--always the far-reaching skies--the beautiful hill land of Southwest Virginia, West Virginia, Tennessee,

> Kentucky, North Carolina, called the men back as it hadn't called her.[9]

Anderson, in cataloguing all these states, shows the effect to be regional and suggests that it is universal: men, unable to face modern life, return to a simple, yet overwhelmingly poor existence. The land is an enveloping sanctuary, maternal and broad-reaching for men and women. Kit reacts differently, more strongly than the men who return defeated to the mountains or who become dejected "mill daddies." She is different and her experiences strengthen that difference.

At fourteen, Kit has been, in effect prostituted by her father to a hoodlum who buys his moonshine. That brutal experience is her first contact with sex. Ugly and mean, the experience does not cause her to retreat into a shell, or conversely as a usual motif in fiction, change her into a nymphomaniac. In fact, Kit develops a certain detached air to her liaisons. There is an early indication of strength in the young girl in sexual matters to be found in the imagery employed by

[9] Kit Brandon, p. 5.

Anderson. The nearly violent act of cattle mating appears early in the book and reappears later. Not yet past puberty, Kit has the responsibility of breeding the family cow while her father is off somewhere selling whiskey. Her attendance to this job hints of the attitude toward sex she later develops:

> "And that's one hell of a job for a child," she said, "a cow when that time comes for her.
> "She just goes plum crazy.
> "She'll go slam bang, right through a fence.
> "You cry. You get so mad at her you want to kill her, but it's a thing that's got to be done."[10]

From this point on, after the incident with her father's friend, all Kit's sexual experiences are controlled by her. Again, this is a new woman Anderson is introducing. The popular perception of the reticence of women in sexual matters is rejected by Anderson's new woman: not only can she vocalize her feelings toward sex, but she can use sex to her advantage with little second thought. Not long after her experience with the man, Kit shows another indication of strength

[10] Kit Brandon, p. 12.

in her rejection of her father. When he attempts to take advantage of her as they bathe together in a small mountain stream, she manages to overcome an initial paralysis and makes an important decision:

> They were there, father and daughter at the creek's edge, in the failing light and her father took off his clothes and bathed. He did not look at her but presently spoke. "Take off your things," he said gruffly and she undressed, "now come here." There was this strange terrible moment for the child about to become a woman. She went trembling toward him. There is a look that comes into men's eyes. . . . She grew suddenly alarmed and ran from him. There was a sudden snapping of the cord that had bound her to him and she ran, snatching up her clothes.[11]

At this point, the tie irretrievably broken, Kit runs away. She knows only one escape: a world seen only through occasional glimpses down a mountain road of people driving off into something unknown. It was a different world, embellished by her imagination. She goes down into the valley and becomes a millworker.

Kit comes to the mills like many other young men and women in this age who had left their homes

[11] Kit Brandon, p. 42.

searching for something better:

> They were wanting what they could not get at home and "Why not?" I thought as Kit talked. Even into the most isolated of the mountain homes the catalogues of the big mail order houses had begun to come. They were wanting what all modern girls and women are wanting. They were wanting new hats, silk stockings. They were wanting new dresses.[12]

For the first time, these mountain girls had an opportunity to acquire goods of their own with their own money. At this point, Anderson digresses on young mountain men and women as the cheap source of labor for the new mills. This ellipsis-filled passage and those that follow it are intended to be less Anderson than Kit's possession of Anderson. If the reader properly absorbed the warning in chapter one, then he would understand that Anderson's direct intrusion into the story is the most legitimate way to remove himself from criticism of his style: Kit is a dynamo, full of stimulus for his own creative processes and he is drawn into the experience. He is not merely recording her story as they drive

[12] Kit Brandon, p. 42.

through the night; he is reliving it and his meanderings are wrought by the sheer excess of the inspiration her stories afford. Later on, Anderson will digress further in a somewhat antagonistic bent to the factory owners and managers who use the labor of Kit and her class. Such digressions caused many critics to label this book the long awaited "great proletarian novel" by Sherwood Anderson. Such categorization is correct only to a point. As we shall see, Anderson's proletarian ramblings diminish with the distance Kit places between her and her factory life. Actually, Anderson is merely giving vent to various thought expansions as he relives Kit's story and some of her early experiences detail a certain fascination with the communist activities that rippled through the crowds of workers in the era. Here in the factories, Kit begins a psychic road to financial independence just as she embarked on a road to freedom by running down the mountain path away from her father. As we will see later in the book, Kit also abandons mill life for a more exciting existence on her own without interference from "bosses." Unlike many of her

co-workers, both men and women who are trapped, she can move and does. Unlike many others who felt something they could not articulate and stopped searching because of that inabiilty, Kit is fluid and begins a new life with ease. No "bosses" threaten her to stay on the line. In fact, the treatment of "bosses" in this book denies its proletarian categorization. They are less malignant than petty and certainly not central to the issue.

Curiously, little time is spent on Kit's mother in the novel. Obviously, the woman, with her slovenly nature and inability to save Kit from her father's advances, provides Kit with no role model. In fact, Kit breaks with two father figures in this work and has no great attachment to any woman who could become a maternal force. Her break with John Brandon as a child preshadows her later break with Tom Halsey as an adult. Anderson implies that Kit is so far removed from the life her mother led and that she herself would have led if she stayed in the hills, that her mother exists in no tangible sense. Later on, her friendship with Agnes is charged with little emotion and she merely drifts away without trauma. The parental break that Kit has made is magnified

into a break with an entire lifestyle--the squalid existence of the mountaineer. While no one could expect Kit to want to return to such a life, it is important to note that she made the break at all. Anderson implies that other young girls share Kit's desires, with the proviso that if we were to examine their lives, they could offer stories similar to Kit's. Again, the effect is made universal. Although Kit rises above her limitations and the other girls do not, Anderson leaves the door open for future rebellions and casts Kit in the role of pioneer.

As Kit assumes her duties in the mill, there is at first an eager childishness to her life. The machines enchant her and she perceives a certain beauty in these contrivances of man. There is a strange beauty akin to music and dance in the millrooms, but soon Kit matures and begins to question this early fascination:

> The thread came dancing, dancing. "It made you want to dance," Kit said. She began to like her life in the factory. That impulse didn't last. She thought the loss of the feeling of being a part of something big and significant came from a certain

> attitude toward workers by those up above. It came from society.[13]

The machines themselves are not debasing to Kit. She is fascinated with their symmetry and function. Instead, she is troubled by an attitude, a materialistic bent to all of society and not just of the upper class. Although there is a debasement of humanity by the managers and factory owners, Kit later finds that the workers might not be much different if the situation were reversed. Anderson's treatment of the factory vs. workers issue in the early part of this novel does not make it easy to "proletarize" the work if one declines to read the remainder carefully. Anderson tried writing a proletarian novel in Beyond Desire and that was unsuccessful. When Kit Brandon appeared, some critics assumed that this book would be the true "proletarian" novel of which Beyond Desire was merely a forerunner. The fact is that the effect does not sustain itself throughout the book and indeed, Anderson had no such intentions anyway. Although he does devote

[13] Kit Brandon, p. 62.

many digressions to workers in Kit Brandon, the bulk of Kit's experience comes after she leaves the factory. Anderson uses mill life as just another stage in the development of Kit's character and he may be poking some unwitting fun at himself for worrying about the issue. In one scene, Kit describes her friend Agnes' reaction to a famous strike at Marion, Virginia. The idealistic millworkers lost the battle and an idealistic writer had come down from New York to record the events. At least Agnes assumes he is idealistic since he is famous:

> A big city newspaper had hired the big writer to come down. Agnes had heard, later, that he got $10,000 for ten articles written about that particular strike. He came and went. "Of course, afterwards, after the strike was broken, the mill started up again with other workers inside . . . people just like us . . . we on charity. The famous writer sent us down a barrel of apples."[14]

During the time Agnes related this to Kit, she said nothing, continuing an air of detachment that was not confined just to sexual matters. Kit, wary of writers because of this, but wanting

[14] Kit Brandon, p. 99-100.

her story told, implies a question to Anderson: Are you in this for the money too?

Aside from Agnes, Kit is affected by another person during her time at the mill: a young consumptive named Frank. Last names are not used in reference to Agnes or Frank. In deference to another Southern tradition perceived by Anderson, he uses two names, first and last, only when referring to someone special. Anderson seems to suggest a certain namelessness on the part of the millworkers and the only man Kit really admires is introduced with both names. He is Tom Halsey, the head of the bootlegging empire she eventually joins. Anderson suggests here that Halsey deserves more recognition for rising above everyone else in his industry. Other men are introduced and both names are ultimately known, but Anderson attaches a certain magnificence to Halsey early on by this device. It should be noted that John Brandon, Kit's father, is introduced with both names. This magnificence may also be applied to characters of more malevolent import then, as long as a lasting effect is emphasized. The workers remain just Frank and Agnes.

Frank is less a lover to Kit than a child, although they do make love one night in the fields

outside of town. Always detached in her sexual relationships, in this case it is somewhat maternal. Frank's sickness is a constant reminder of his defeat at the wheels of the machines:

> It might have been the lint in the air in the mill. He had been told that. If it were true, he wanted God's curse on those that let it happen.
>
> He had an idea. He had been lying on his back, his face to the night sky, but sat up. Perhaps it was money. People were always wanting more money--like his father and mother. But they had been fools to come out of the hills for it.[15]

Frank struggles to make some sense out of his misery but cannot. Kit is more astute, more rational and can think more clearly. She knows there was nothing back in the hills and she is developing a new awareness and interest in the world around her. Anderson draws another of many fine comparisons here, for Frank is the weak, uncertain creature and Kit is strong. Frank is lost, dying and without hope, clutching a romantic notion of an Arcadia that Kit knows never existed. She says no comforting words to Frank, just as she said no comforting words to Agnes when she related the story about the strike.

[15] Kit Brandon, p. 67.

Kit knows she cannot afford anyone real comfort by mere words, but she is aware that her presence in both incidents is enough to ease her friends' pain. Tragically, in Frank's instance especially, she cannot become involved.

Kit cannot become involved because something inside her is held in reserve. It is tragic for Frank for he has no one to really love him, and to a lesser degree, tragic for Kit because she denies herself the full potential of experience. But for now, Kit is satisfied with her lot and long after Frank is gone, she reflects on this while riding through the night with Anderson:

> "Not one of them has ever touched me yet."
> "You mean you kept something?"
> "Yes."
> "You think you've still got it to give?"
> She turned and stared at me a peculiar long stare she had--like the stare of a gipsy (sic) woman, or of many mountain women of the American Southern Highlands. Then she smiled.
> "I reckon you ain't trying to start nothing?" she asked, and "No," I said. I perhaps knew it would do me no good.
> "Yes, I think I've got it." she said.[16]

[16] Kit Brandon, p. 24.

Kit's true admiration first develops for those who were strong. Agnes is the initial focus for this admiration. She is not defeated by the machines, and indeed her mind races along with the thread:

> She was always burning with ideas, her mind always busy. She saw constantly a vision of a new world, emerging or about to emerge as she might have said, out of an old agricultural South. She had been born Southern, who never thought anything, said anything, about being the best blood of the South.[17]

Kit is fascinated with Agnes, not because she is a symbol of a new worker's world to come, but rather because backgrounds are unimportant to Kit in the dispensation of natural abilities. Kit starts with nothing but manages to gain something--Agnes also starts with nothing but is derailed in her efforts to achieve an improvement. In fact, Kit tends to become disenchanted with Agnes when the latter becomes too communist-oriented for her liking. This development is another example of the thesis that the book is wrongly categorized as a proletarian novel. In spite of Anderson's

[17] Kit Brandon, p. 97.

rather naive ramblings on the proletarian struggle as he becomes more immersed in Kit, she quite definitely rejects such thinking for a more individualistic lifestyle. Initially, though, Agnes does have a profound effect on Kit:

> She awoke, made a real hunger that was in Kit. It was a hunger that influenced all her later life . . .
>
> The big factories, so huge, so magnificent, the thousands of fast beautiful machines.
>
> "They have a way of making us feel too much, just a part of the machines. Why do they want to do it? It hurts. It eats in."[18]

As Agnes describes this hurt, Kit feels it as well, and through Agnes, Kit begins to crystallize the vague ideas that swirl in her head. Agnes gains a certain amount of respect from her co-workers because of her union work, and Kit is even more impressed. She feels privileged that Agnes is her friend and returns her friendship:

> Kit Brandon, was sometimes a good deal moved, something restless within her was stirred, by the speeches of her friend Agnes. The two young women had become close friends.[19]

[18] Kit Brandon, pp. 84-85.

[19] Kit Brandon, p. 95.

But even as their friendship deepens, Kit realizes that Agnes is not the means to an end for her, and that end is still obscure. Kit is a student, observing life, and the following passage illustrates her conflict:

> Unconsciously perhaps, in those first months away from home, she was already reaching out for something, feeling for it constantly, trying for it. She herself did not know what it was. It was a thing--call it a kind of style in life. She was wanting unconsciously to become a stylist in living.
>
> To get it into her body. Already she was noting things, checking on things that would have meant little or nothing to Agnes. "All right, sister. You've got your dream. I've got another."[20]

There are two points to consider in that final passage: first, although Kit uses the word "dream," she uses it in the most psychological sense of the word. She does not have a goal; she has a murky outline of something better and she tends toward it rather than following specific plans. She is more certain of what she rejects than the options she chooses, and the worker's struggle is firmly rejected. After news arrives of failed strikes and the workers' lot at the mill seems unlikely

[20] Kit Brandon, p. 95.

to change, Kit grows restless. She notices something sapping the vitality in the faces of her friends. They are becoming more base, more dehumanized by the machines, or more specifically, in their use of the machines. Kit also realizes that she has the ability to control her own life while all around her, her friends relinquish that power. As Agnes begins to drink and make less sense, Kit becomes more pragmatic. She realizes her assets and becomes determined to use them.

> Kit Brandon, as she walked in the snow along the road with Agnes, hadn't, as yet any definite ideas about clothes, getting a man or not getting one. She was beginning to get faintly, ideas of what might be done. There was her straight, slender young body, white flesh, straight legs, slender ankles. She did not spend much time dreaming of strong male arms about her, the brave male protecting the shrinking female. She was getting along a little in a matter of growing importance to herself, beginning to want something that some man might . . . help her to get.[21]

At this point, Kit realizes she has the attributes for more than a boring life in a cotton mill--her body is attractive to men and can be used to gain what she wants. More importantly, she rejects the

[21] Kit Brandon, p. 103.

old concept of a strong man protecting a weak female. Kit is still a student here, but with her philosophy taking shape, she is ready to graduate. She leaves the mill and takes a job in a department store--not as much money to be made but a greater potential for future rewards. Among the men she meets is Tom Halsey, the bootlegger, head of an empire of moon-runners.

The reader is introduced to Halsey through a series of flashbacks that, although well-written, tend to detract from the overall thrust of the novel on first reading. Initially, this digression seems to be overblown even though Tom is the only important character to Kit in the story. There is a need, therefore, to introduce him properly, to set the stage for his appearance in terms of ruthlessness as befits the role of robber baron. A case could be made that Anderson is a bit afraid of his creation here, and is including quite a lot of material in compensation for writing a book that deals with a woman almost to the exclusion of men. Actually, although some shortening might have smoothed the critical reaction, the passage developing Tom is important for the critical role Tom plays in Kit's eyes. He is the second father figure for her

break from, and unlike John Brandon, her biological father, Tom was selected by Kit for the role he played, making the separation more meaningful. In the final chapter of this section, Anderson is at his descriptive best, confining his reliance on the ellipsis to a minimum and supplying the reader with a fitting climax to the story.

Tom Halsey is indeed a robber baron, the shadowy figure who generates such attraction for Kit. He has been this way for many years, long before Kit heard of him. In the digression, Tom visits a church for the most selfish of purposes: he had decided to take a young wife away from her minister husband. She has lost her child and Halsey has lost his wife, the mother of his infant son Gordon. There is no love by Halsey for Kate here; it is simply his calculation that she yearns for her lost child and he wishes to take advantage of that desire to save his own. He could have been discreet and allowed the minister some measure of dignity but instead, in the middle of church, he unbuttons the simple dress Kate is wearing and presses his child to her breast. The minister is horrified but can do nothing to stop him:

> . . . "Come on," Tom said, and led the way out of the tent, the preacher following. Men and women of the audience arose from their seats and followed. Tom led the way to where the horse was tethered and helping her on again put the babe into her arms. He sprang into the saddle before her. "Put your arms about me;" he said, "you won't fall." The preacher had fallen to his knees in the dust of the road and was crying out to his God. "Don't let her go away with him. God, don't let her go," he cried.
>
> The astonished people stood in silence as Tom and the woman, Kate rode away into the darkness.[22]

Outwardly, Gordon Halsey in his maturity is an imposing figure like his father. Feared like him, he is handsome and drives a flashy car. Obviously rich, with the taint of illegal gains to make him more enticing, Gordon could have his pick of any girl in town. Kit's detachment has undone him, however, and much like the cow in heat that Kit remembers from her days on the farm, he is mad for her. Kit knows this and refuses to yield, putting him off as his madness increases until she is asked to marry. Even then, Kit is still detached, apparently more interested in his roadster than in Gordon:

[22] Kit Brandon, p. 154.

"Do you not love me Kit?"
"Well, I don't know. I can't tell yet."
There was one thing certain. She loved his car.[23]

Gordon is an obvious contrast to his father in the sense that he lacks the sheer ruthlessness of the elder Halsey. Gordon, despite his good health, is actually close to the consumptive Frank in Kit's judgement. Both are sterile victims of the system, although Gordon gives the illusion of control. In truth, he controls no more than Frank, his father replacing Frank's bosses in terms of authority. When Kit decides to marry Gordon she is taking on the care of a weaker person no less than if she had married Frank. This is made obvious to her the first time she meets Tom.

Tom Halsey is a Blue Ridge gangster with only a questionable heir in Gordon. Kit decided much earlier in her life to marry for money or not at all. When Tom and Kit meet, it is with the frank appraisal of two businessmen examining each other's offer. Kit's attitude comes not from a sense of failure as Tom feels in his son, but instead from

[23] Kit Brandon, p. 197.

a sense of the importance of self. It is best understood in the context of a conversation Kit had with another clerk at the five-and-dime while waiting for adventure:

> "It plays hell with your figure if nothing worse.
> "There isn't any goddamn grubby millhand going to get me and don't let it happen to you either, Kit.
> "I'm not going to have a lot of kids just to make more slaves for the kind of big-bugs we work for."
> Kit listened, absorbed in what Sarah was saying. The little blonde was saying things that had already come somewhat vaguely into her own mind. She had never put her own thoughts into words.[24]

Again, Kit is pragmatic, but even with the benefits of a fast car and wealth, she still feels something akin to pity for Gordon, something similar to what she felt for Frank. When Kit is first taken to Tom, she realizes that Gordon does not have the strength to marry without his father's permission:

> It was an uncomfortable moment. Kit was uncomfortable and so, also, very evidently was Gordon. "So this had been his home, where he had spent his boyhood, this place?"
> She at once felt a certain sympathy for Gordon.[25]

[24] Kit Brandon, p. 214.

[25] Kit Brandon, p. 218.

It is obvious, however, that Kit is more interested in Tom than Gordon. She is not interested in the sexual sense, but then, she is not that interested in Gordon in a sexual sense. Like a Mafioso, Tom has henchmen inside the house and he wishes to talk to Kit privately; even Gordon is excluded when they walk outside. Kit suggests a mystical bond between herself and this famous figure:

> He must have accepted her from the start. They stood together by the fence on that night for a long time, darkness coming . . . the time may not have been as long as it seemed later to Kit . . . there might have been a kind of bond growing between the two.[26]

This bond continues after Kit and Gordon separate. Although Tom had evaluated Kit as one would evaluate a brood mare and had indicated his desire for a grandson, he still visits Kit, indicating his awareness of the bond:

> In the presence of her husband's father Kit never did talk much. She sensed his desire to talk . . . to a woman . . . knew, in a way in which women do know such things, that he had chosen her to play a certain role in his own life.[27]

[26] Kit Brandon, p. 214.

[27] Kit Brandon, p. 218.

Kit is grateful to Tom but she is still frightened of him. When she begins to fear the possibilities of his wrath, she attempts to compensate for the separation and lack of grandchildren by offering to drive for him on the moonshine runs. Not even Gordon had offered to do that. Tom is a bit nonplussed and Kit wonders what power within her could have caused her to make the offer, but a deal is struck:

> "You know what risks you will run?"
>
> "Yes," she said again and, "I'll see." he said. She thought he would let her do it. He had agreed to the marriage between herself and Gordon wanting to use her. This was his way of life, to use others. When he had gone she got to her feet and half danced around in her room. "I'm going to get a real chance now," she thought. She looked forward with joy to the possibilities of a life of danger to be taken on in exchange for the queer half-dead false life she had been living with her marriage with Gordon.[28]

Events pass rapidly to the climax of the book and during this time, perhaps because of the time she spends alone in hotel rooms, waiting for the run and reading, Kit again becomes introspective. She reads Dreiser and begins to brood. Only when she drives is she truly alive. Along with the

[28] Kit Brandon, p. 234.

brooding, however, she is developing a new self-respect. She is engaged in an occupation normally reserved for men and she is good at it. In fact, she excels. She begins to realize that she does not need Gordon and probably never did. He had only eased her entrance into a profession she would have assumed anyway. She has no desire to return to anything in her past and she becomes imbued with a new sense of independence and self-worth. She welcomes this even if it frightens her.

> There was always, in Kit, as perhaps also in Tom Halsey, consciousness of some kind of power in self. In some vague way she knew that, even when she had been half illiterate, there had been a kind of consciousness in her.[29]

Also, Kit realizes she is becoming stronger than Tom. Although outside the law, he has established a monopoly in his chosen field much like a Rockefeller or a Carnegie. Even worse in terms of degradation, Tom cannot leave his business as Kit can. Kit observes that even at the top, the system still takes its toll. An example of this effect on both Tom and those around him appears when a young man, in order to prove his loyalty to the gang, must assassinate

[29] Kit Brandon, p. 254.

someone in Tom's presence. In this way, Anderson touches again on the corruption fostered by a mechanized age. Tom is merely in degree more ruthless than the factory owner who subjugates the individual for the sake of the enterprise. As Kit further forms her ideas of self, she begins to lose her admiration for Tom Halsey, whom she sees as only a part of the system, even if the head. Far from being the man who could avoid convention and control his environment, he is actually the most trapped. In a final shoot-out on the Halsey farm, Tom is accidently killed by his son. The Halsey line is done forever; it is an ironical end to the career of the man Kit so admired. More importantly, Kit's last illusions are swept away with the destruction of the Halsey empire.

Only two characters are still of consequence in the book. The first is Halsey's mistress, Kate, whom Halsey had taken from her husband. It would be easy to attribute some symbolism to this act, in that Halsey could be construed as an evil force luring away a mother figure, a symbol of good. Actually, it is not so simple; Tom has lost his wife and Kate has lost her son; it was a meeting of supply and demand, different only in scope from

Tom's moonshine supply business. In fact, Kate never becomes Tom's bride. Kit finds her worthy of admiration in that she has elected to live her life the way she does and she answers to no one.

The second character to consider here is the last character in the book who is involved with Kit, and he appears only after the climactic shoot-out that forces her to become a fugitive. Like Kate's second chance at motherhood, Joel Hanaford seems to have been introduced to give Kit a second chance at love. An argument could be made that Anderson introduced Hanaford at this late point out of a realization that he had no admirable male figures in the novel. Some critics have accused Anderson of this, but others, notably Welford Taylor, take the point of view that it was Anderson's intention all along to bring in the character at this late date:

> . . . Anderson felt that retaining a sense of selfhood was not enough, one must also exercise concern for one's fellow man. Kit does this to a greater degree than any other character in Anderson's fiction . . . The outcome of the relationship with Joel Hanaford is never told, but his plight causes her to realize the

> importance of placing the well-being of others before her own.[30]

There are problems with the second-chance and altruistic theory, although it is apparent that Hanaford has a role not usually attached to characters in a denouement who do not appear before the climax. When Hanaford appears he is as weak as Frank, Gordon, or the fledgling assassin, but he still manages to save Kit from the police. In a nonsexual evening together they become intimate and reveal themselves to each other. Hanaford may have benefited from his exposure to such a strong personality as Kit in sorting out his own self-image, and Kit may have benefited from the realization that she is not alone in the world:

> There was in her mind an almost definite notion of a new kind of adventure she might begin. She felt warm and alive. Young Hanaford had done that for her. She had been carried out of herself and into the life of another puzzled human. There might be some one other puzzled and baffled young man with whom she could make a real partnership in living.[31]

[30] Welford D. Taylor, Sherwood Anderson, (New York: Frederick Ungar, 1977), p. 93.

[31] Kit Brandon, p. 373.

A question arises here as to whom the reference "puzzled and baffled" refers. Indeed, it appears that Kit is looking for another confused young man like Hanaford, but Anderson may be saying something else. Kit could be looking for someone as puzzled and baffled as herself with this new sense of self and with only an incomplete plan for its use. The key word in the last paragraph is partnership. Throughout the book, Kit has been developing into a strong character much in opposition to popular concepts of women in Depression America. We have witnessed her development from hill urchin to millworker to a courtesan to a moon-runner and in the final passage of the book, we witness her transformation into a full woman. Kit now has her choices and what she wants is not a relationship dominated by herself or her lover. She wants a partnership: a relationship based on reality and equality. In contemporary America, this is a mature theme in literature; the excesses of the Sixties and Seventies have mellowed into a less rigid feminist stance. Anderson is to be commended for making it the central issue of his book, but for whatever reasons, his critics may not have seen it in 1936.

The Sword Falls

There were misreadings. There were probably as many among the Anderson supporters as among his detractors. When the criticism came in as winter approached in 1936 it was fairly predictable: his traditional supporters welcomed it and his enemies castigated it. Of the sixty-eight reviews listed in Ray White's excellent Sherwood Anderson: A Reference Guide, forty-three may be considered positive, nine were apparently ambivalent or lukewarm and sixteen were highly negative. Those sixteen were the most devastating, for they were influential and tended to be prophetic in terms of sales. Some representative samples are listed below; White's blurbs make the inaccessible reviews still useful in determining the tone of the book's reception:

> Chicago Daily News, October 14:
> In Kit Brandon, Anderson has written his most readable and important novel--and the first readable proletarian novel in America.

> Newsweek, October 17:
> In Kit Brandon, "the teller of the Winesburg tales stages an abortive comeback with a rankly sentimental novel . . . "

> New York News, November 22: Anderson should avoid writing adventures such as Kit Brandon and return to writing "Americana" such as Winesburg, Ohio.
>
> Raleigh Observer, October 25: New in subject, more confused than even Anderson's other novels, Kit Brandon wastes good literary materials.
>
> Cleveland Plain Dealer, October 11: "an exercise in prose in which the writer continually parodies and burlesques his own style."
>
> Charlotte News, October 11: Kit Brandon is the "worst book of the year" in terms of style, plot and excessive sex.[32]

All the above reviews miss the point: Kit Brandon was not a proletarian novel, neither was it "rankly" sentimental and its style, so remarkably different from Winesburg, should have been criticized on its own terms. The problem was that the critics did not know those terms. William Faulkner, however, felt that he did.

"Sherwood Anderson: An Appreciaton," was one of the most perceptive essays written on Anderson's artistic struggle. It is difficult to select parts of Faulkner's tribute to prove a thesis point since the whole, in this case, is indeed greater than

[32] Ray Lewis White, Sherwood Anderson: A Reference Guide, (Boston: G. K. Hall, 1977), pp. 147-154.

the sum of its parts. But this stands out: in analyzing his mentor, Faulkner knew that Anderson's ego was not really ego at all, in spite of biographical contentions to the contrary. Faulkner saw Anderson as a true, if flawed, artist and he knew Anderson was a target for criticism:

> . . . He expected people to make fun of, ridicule him. He expected people nowhere near his stature or accomplishment or wit or anything else, to be capable of making him appear ridiculous. That was why he worked so laboriously and tediously and indefatigably at everything he wrote . . . (he wrote) for what to him was more important and urgent: not even for mere truth, but for purity, the exactitude of purity . . . His was that fumbling for exactitude, the exact word and phrase within the limited scope of a vocabulary controlled and even repressed by what was in him almost a fetish of simplicity . . . He worked so hard at this that it finally became just style: an end instead of a means . . .
>
> . . . That was the reason for his hurt and anger at Hemingway . . . and at me in a lesser degree . . . Neither of us--Hemingway or I--could have touched, ridiculed, his work itself. But we had made his style look ridiculous; and by that time, after Dark Laughter, when he reached the point where he should have stopped writing, he had to defend that style at all cost because he too must have known by then in his heart that there was nothing else left.[33]

[33] William Faulkner, "Sherwood Anderson: An Appreciation," in The Achievement of Sherwood Anderson, ed. Ray Lewis White, (Chapel Hill: Univ. Of North Carolina Press, 1966), p. 196.

It was as if a Sword of Damocles had finally dropped on Anderson. It seemed to confirm his worst suspicions, that the critics were right when they said he was washed-up. Kit Brandon did not sell well, even in terms of reduced Depression expectations, and Anderson did not write to completion another novel. The reviews were in, his style was the principal focus of attack, and he was devastated.

What was that style so resoundingly rejected by the critics? Irving Howe says that Kit Brandon is a better book than Beyond Desire, but only in terms of materials. He implies that the stylistic forms of the two are similar, and while he does not specifically deal with Kit Brandon in his biography of Anderson, the implication of guilt by association is enough to allow the reader to assume much about it. If we take what he said about Beyond Desire and soften it a little, these are still harsh words of condemnation:

> Beyond Desire--there is no point in being euphemistic--is a work of incoherence. Its structure is a chaos: time sequences jumbled, minor characters granted distracting flachbacks, an entire section quite unrelated to the central plot thread. Its prose is in an advance state of decomposition: phrases dangling without support, a desperate reliance

> on ellipsis, sentences that jar and grate in their false naivete.[34]

Interestingly enough, Howe finds a difference between the two books to be initially refreshing--Anderson's technique of injecting himself directly into the story--but soon grows tired of the intrusions. Is it possible that Howe also ignored warnings of chapter one, or would he not accept Anderson's protestations of innocence? Should Anderson have made a stronger warning or should he have experimented at all? In a letter to Mary Pratt Emmet, two years after Kit Brandon was published, he continued to agonize:

> Mary:
>
> I know now that I shall probably never make much money. I missed my chance. I had the one successful book, Dark Laughter, that built my house and, had I been wise, should have pushed for success. It is the way it is done. I should have played literary politics, having written a book that sold. I should have written another in the same tone and quit experimenting.
>
> . . . It is too late now. I have gone too far on another road, can only try to find something better, more honest, more real.[35]

[34] Howe, p. 231.

[35] "To Mary Pratt Emmet," 3 November 1938, Sherwood Anderson: Selected Letters, ed. Charles E. Modlin, (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1984), p. 224.

It is ironic that Dark Laughter was his most commercially successful book, since most critics agree that this book started the stage of "decline" that culminated in Kit Brandon. It is also indeed possible that Faulkner was correct to a large degree in his assessment of Anderson's defense of style. More tragically, it is possible that the battle over style obscured, even for Anderson, the merit of the new social attitude toward women that he proposed in Kit Brandon.

That Anderson had high hopes for Kit Brandon is not an issue; after Dark Laughter and the four books that immediatley preceded Kit Brandon, he needed some vindication of his experiments. What is in question is why it failed. That it failed commercially is also no issue; Anderson's letter to Mary Emmet is especially poignant in light of the fact that he dedicated the work to her. She and her husband were friends and financial supporters of Anderson, and this book was to have helped him repay his many debts to them. What then are the reasons for the failure of the book that Anderson had such high hopes for?

Some of the criticism was probably justified in the sense that Kit Brandon was a hurried book

and needed editing. This was a correctible problem and it was the fault of both Anderson and Scribner's, his new publisher. Where Anderson erred was in selecting the wrong publisher after the collapse of Liveright, his former publisher. James Schevill notes that Anderson had two offers after Liveright failed: one from the Viking Press and one from Scribner's. Viking would have been the better choice for it would have brought all his published work under one roof, but Scribner's obviously had more prestige. There was another, more powerful reason for Anderson to sign with Scribner's and that was the quality of editorship he hoped to receive:

> . . . after a long period of hesitation he finally decided to accept a contract from Scribner's largely because of the presence at that house of the editor, Maxwell Perkins. Perkins had brought Hemingway and Fitzgerald into prominence and undoubtedly Anderson hoped that here was a publisher with a magician's touch.[36]

Unfortunately, the relationship Anderson appears to have sought between himself and Perkins did not materialize. At the time of this book, Anderson

[36] James Schevill, Sherwood Anderson: His Life and Work, (Denver: University of Denver Press, 1951), p. 306.

was nearing sixty years old and Perkins assumed, perhaps, that this internationally famous writer did not need a forceful editor as he had been to the young Thomas Wolfe. Also, could it be that Anderson's pride would not permit him to ask Perkins for such help? In addition, Scribner's demanded a novel from Anderson instead of the short stories he had been so successful with. Was this too much effort for a writer who had just signed on and evidently hoped for some time to become accustomed to his new publisher?

Most critics agree that it took a great effort for Anderson to finish Kit Brandon. David Anderson (no relation) notes that Anderson may have been through with the book even before he finished it. Something distracted and troubled him, perhaps a concern over the nation's problems and a foreboding about his luck, and he largely ignored the proofs. David Anderson sees this as one of the great tragedies of Anderson's career:

> The novel might have been one of the best of its time had it not been marred by mechanical and structural difficulties; grammatical lapses and transitional disruptions are annoying, especially when they could have been easily eliminated. Unfortunately, when the proofs arrived at Ripshin Farm,

> Anderson disregarded them as though he were through with the novel forever; the proofs were returned uncorrected, and the flaws remain to detract from the effectiveness of what might have been his best novel.[37]

Irving Howe notes something readily apparent to anyone reading Kit Brandon with its disjointed structure, sometimes loose, sometimes tight:

> In a letter to Maxwell Perkins, who was now his editor, Anderson wrote that he was trying to be "more objective, trying, you see, to use mind as well as feeling"; and the signs of that effort are visible throughout the book, particularly in an occasional tightening of the prose. Had Kit Brandon been written by a young man at the beginning of his career, its faults might have seemed minor blemishes easily removed by rigorous editing. But, as Perkins must have realized, it was now too late for rigorous editing: what he had done for Wolfe it would have been impossible to do for Anderson.[38]

Welford Taylor is more generous with Anderson. He dismisses the sloppy mechanics and focuses on the real issue of the book--the character of Kit:

> One of the strengths of Anderson's narrative experiment lies in the

[37] David D. Anderson, Sherwood Anderson: An Introduction and Interpretation, (New York: Holt, Rinehart, 1967), p. 149.

[38] Howe, p. 235.

> attractiveness of Kit herself. Her flamboyant lifestyle, her innate sensitivity and honesty, her growth from a deprived urchin into a woman who finds through experience a meaningful set of values upon which to base her life--all these attributes make her interesting to the reader.[39]

Indeed, Kit is interesting in spite of the struggles of the average reader in maintaining a proper frame of reference while reading the novel. But she was not all that appreciated in 1936, especially by critics who wanted no experimentation. Mark Van Doren bordered on viciousness, imitating the Hemingway who imitated Anderson in the parody that began Anderson's fall into disfavor. Exaggeratedly disjointed and relying almost absurdly on the ellipsis, Van Doren's review ridiculed the author rather than merely identifying the faults of his book:

> How he tells it is his own business . . . he has written twenty-one books before this one about Kit Brandon . . . so there is no doubt he could explain his greater and greater liking year in and year out for a way of writing that is more like the way a baby reaches for something than the way a man writes when he has something to say or maybe a story to tell . . . or then again maybe a person to really

[39] Taylor, p. 92.

> and honestly create . . . none of which things has been done in this book of Kit Brandon.[40]

The Van Doren review was especially painful since it echoed the Hemingway parody mentioned by Faulkner. In that parody, Hemingway attacked Dark Laughter, which, as Anderson had pointed out to Mary Emmet, had "built my house." It is possible that Dark Laughter's sales were somewhat of an aberration: this was before the Depression and Anderson's popularity was near its height. Could the readers of this book have bought it because of Anderson's personal popularity and were they bewildered enough by the change in style to refrain from buying another? Also, is it possible that Anderson may not have understood that and blamed his declining fortunes on critics who jumped on Hemingway's bandwagon? Since two of Anderson's former pupils wrote parodies at the same time, this possibility may have merit. Certainly Hemingway's parody, The Torrents of Spring, was an act of rejection by Hemingway of his mentor. William Phillips writes:

[40] Mark Van Doren, rev. of Kit Brandon by Sherwood Anderson, The Nation, 17 October 1936, p. 110.

> If we see (the parody) as an inflated My Old Man in which the young man retraces his disillusionment with the integrity of his literary father, Anderson's last function for Hemingway becomes clear; Anderson was erected as a symbol of failure, failure to accept the obligations of his chosen craft and to undergo the aesthetic discipline which alone brings order into the world.[41]

Hemingway's parody was joined at the time of publication by another parody by William Faulkner in a small, private-circulation volume called Sherwood Anderson and Other Famous Creoles. Although the latter was in no way as bilious as Torrents and was not intended to be, Anderson was deeply hurt. It seemed that from that point onward, nothing he could do would satisfy the critics. Kit Brandon was the final novel and the final straw. No longer lionized, he settled into retirement as much as he could. After his death five years later, nothing was said about the ill-fated novel for twenty years.

In the spring of 1962, Cratis Williams, in an issue of Shenandoah magazine devoted to Anderson, attempted a reappraisal of Kit Brandon. Proposing

[41] William L. Phillips, "Sherwood Anderson's Two Prize Pupils, in The Achievement of Sherwood Anderson, ed. Ray L. White, (Chapel Hill: Univ. of North Carolina Press, 1966), p. 207.

a new outlook on the novel, Williams faulted the critics as much as the novelist:

> It is unfortunate that critics and writers on American fiction have apparently not been prepared to perceive the significance of Anderson's fusion of techniques in his handling of what were for him new materials in Kit Brandon, which, when studied from the vantage point of one acquainted with the history and the usually shoddy and superficial interpretations of the literature of eight million Southern mountaineers, turns out to be not only one of the few genuinely significant interpretations in fiction of the Southern mountaineers and in general a carefully written and well plotted novel, but also Anderson's final triumph in the proletarian novel.[42]

Professor Williams is to be commended for his effort to resurrect the novel even if the attempt failed. The book is still out of print and will probably remain so. Also, Williams sounds a bit territorial, like a somewhat miffed Southern mountaineer. And, as has been pointed out, this may not have been the proletarian novel envisioned by Williams and many other critics. The emphasis throughout the book is too much on the emerging concept of self and the possibility of partnership.

[42] Cratis D. Williams, "Kit Brandon: A Reappraisal," Shenandoah, 13, Spring, 1962, p. 58.

Nevertheless, one finds it difficult to disagree with Williams' next statement:

> Kit Brandon has suffered undeserved neglect. The unity achieved in the fusion of materials, style and technique, the careful researching which had preceded the writing of the novel, and the reality of Kit herself make the book a fitting conclusion to Anderson's career as a novelist.[43]

Some of that neglect may be attributed to factors which had manifested themselves before Kit Brandon. Some of the neglect may be attributed to Anderson himself. In the following chapter, we will examine the era that served as a prelude to the book and review the reasons why the book became a postlude to the era instead.

[43] Williams, p. 61.

Prelude and Postlude

There are four books that serve as a kind of prelude to Kit Brandon. Only one was a novel, yet in all of them there are questions raised that are similar yet different from those Winesburg raised a decade earlier. That in itself was troubling for Anderson critics as we have seen; they were far too accustomed to the Midwest, and these books dealt predominantly with the South. None were successful. David Anderson makes an interesting point about this period in Anderson's career:

> . . . Anderson was ready to work again. His writing was slower than it had been in the past as he felt his way into what he saw as a new, true novel, and his optimism was tempered by the grimness of the world he was reentering, and the subject matter of (Kit Brandon). He had few illusions about his chances for success either in his work or in solving the country's problems, but he was ready to try.[44]

Instead of writing about the threat of dispossession caused by the coming mechanical age

[44] David Anderson, p. 118.

as in Winesburg, Anderson dealt with the existence of this new society and the issue of accommodating it. Also, the mountains had become representative for the nation at large, and automobiles were common across the country. Just as the backwoods South was losing its reliance on horses and was linking up to the rest of the South by car, the country was linking its various parts by modern highways. Instead of being destroyed by an oppressive Machine Age, Anderson saw a glimmer of hope that the machine could be useful if an accommodation could be struck.

The five books, Perhaps Women (1931), Beyond Desire (1932), Death in the Woods (1933), Puzzled America (1935), and Kit Brandon form a collection of the so-called proletarian period of his life for their subject matter and the private concerns of the author during the era. James Schevill suggests that the emphasis was less proletarian than that of simple necessity. Anderson had suffered from a declining reputation, was struggling with financial and personal problems and was nearly desperate for some new source of inspiration:

> To struggle back to the edge of creation required a change in the pattern of his activities, some new concern. Fortunately, the interest

> was at hand. In the national economic collapse he began to sense anew his old allegiance to what he called . . . "the defeated people." . . . For "middle class people in love" had been the theme of several of his stories and novels, including the best seller Dark Laughter . . . . He had to find a more objective problem. In the machine and in the workers bound to the machine, he had discovered a fresh perspective.[45]

During this time, Anderson also found his fourth and last wife, Eleanor. Her role in sharpening the perceptions Anderson was acquiring as a result of this new interest has not been fully appreciated. Not only did she supply Anderson the sanctuary of a stable marriage: she also allowed him egress to the industrial conditions of the South in a way that he would not have had otherwise. She was a well-educated woman who, rejecting the traditional role of a Southern belle even though she came from a mainline Virginia family, rose to the post of Industrial Secretary of the YWCA. Across the South and indeed, across the country, she opened new doors for him. It would not be presumptuous to conclude that the independent spirit and development of potential that he noted in Eleanor was transferred

[45] Schevill, pp. 268-269.

in his writings to Kit Brandon, far more than the real lady moon-runner from Southwest Virginia that ostensibly served as the role-model for the book. That lady, Mrs. Willie Carter Sharpe, indeed participated in many of the events Anderson fictionalized in his book, but with her famous trial and jail sentence, not to mention her infamous diamond-studded teeth, she does not seem the sensitive, thoughtful creature that is Kit. Mrs. Anderson, by contrast, seems more and more deserving of some memorial for her fidelity to the memory of her famous husband. If for no other than sentimental reasons, this book should be considered in terms of her as well.

Indeed, Eleanor led Sherwood through a tour of the South and other Depression areas that he may have missed in his artist's environment. As a result of this new life, Anderson began to write about the millworker and the problems of the reality of a mechanized age. James Schevill writes:

> At first this transfer of interest to the labor movement was more personal than political. He was fascinated by the effect of the machine upon man. It was a new concern only in the sense that he now respected and accepted the machine. In his previous books, Winesburg, Ohio

> and Poor White, he had been concerned with the industrial energy that had destroyed an agricultural way of life. With the acceptance of the machine, he began to think of it as having its own beauty and function.[46]

The failures of these five books form a comment on Anderson's artistic failure. Their reasons for failure will help explain the overall failure of the last literary era in Anderson's life.

The earliest book has the enticing title of Perhaps Women. It is a tentative book, as the title suggests, in which Anderson begins to express a growing fear that modern man is losing his manhood to the machines and only woman can adapt properly to this new reality. The theme was developed, as we say in Kit Brandon, in the image of the frail, dying Frank. Unfortunately, the book was not consistent and contained more than one form. Free verse, essays, sketches, and random thoughts were the forms it contained and together they formed a somewhat incoherent mass for Depression readers. David Anderson manages to arrive at this statement of the book's thrust:

> As the title implies, Anderson feels that whatever hope remains for

[46] Schevill, p. 276.

> man in the factories lies in women, who are the real sources of strength in the industrial society.[47]

Again, the gropings and problems with style did nothing to help the book's reception. Although it failed, Anderson realized Perhaps Women for what it was: a tentative effort which often precedes a more substantial work. It was a feint against the forces of social convention; the real blow would fall later. Perhaps Women was not a major effort, but instead the product of a "writing drunk" about which Anderson wrote Burton and Mary Emmet. The natural exuberance of an artist who came alive with stimulation, Anderson's effort was not a total loss as James Schevill notes:

> If the main thesis of the book, the idea that women might provide a solution to the evils of the industrail age, was neither clearly nor convincingly stated, the essays were nevertheless a step forward after the long period of frustration. Under the stimulus of the machine his sense of language had revived, even though he was still groping in the short, curt, impressionistic style that he had experimented with since Dark Laughter.[48]

[47] David Anderson, p. 119.

[48] Schevill, p. 277.

His next book, Beyond Desire, was gladly received by the leftist papers but poorly received by the critics and general public. As Irving Howe described it, it is "incoherent" to many readers. If we accept Anderson's ideas that a book's structure should reflect the inner mind of the main character we are still faced with a difficult book. Howe said it was the "nadir" of Anderson's career as a novelist. The setting and action are perfectly matched to the proletarian theory of the day, however, and the leftist magazines embraced it. But even as it was published, Anderson felt the "glitter of communism" fade, as James Schevill noted. Much like Kit's relationship with Agnes, and perhaps reflected in that episode, Anderson's fascination wore thin as he felt too strongly the pull of the individual and veered away from the Party.

Beyond Desire concerns one Red Oliver (one cannot help but note the symbolism of the name), an idealistic youth who dies trying to escape a life over which he has no control. He hopes, madly it seems, that in his death a certain baseness might be lifted from the workers' community. The night before his death he struggles with the decision to stay or leave, knowing that to stay would be

his death. He finally comes to the conclusion that every worker's struggle is his, even if that struggle is not clearly formed.

It is unfair to draw a straight line from Beyond Desire to Kit Brandon as the leftists hoped one could, for the main characters are so remarkably dissimilar. The settings are much the same but the net result of the respective plots finds Red's death even more futile when contrasted with Kit's success.

James Schevill says that Beyond Desire might have been the result of work on two novels that were never quite satisfactory to Anderson in any of the various incarnations or stages in which they appeared. The book actually began, according to Schevill, during the period preceding his new concern with the problems of the workers. At first one novel was titled No Love and then was changed to Sacred Service. Finally, it became Beyond Desire with the intent of the author to show the state of a man when he finally rids himself of baseness. He began another work called No God, indicating his continuing state of mind, but gave it up and returned to short stories. Evidently, all the parts were strung together and given a new hero in Red

Oliver. This variation of sources may have contributed to the confusion of style and theme that prevented any significant sales.

In Death in the Woods, Anderson returned to the genre of which he was an acknowledged master--the short story. Many critics consider this collection to be his best work of the decade, even if it was not a financial success. In fact, the poor showing of Death in the Woods was one reason why Scribner's wanted a novel. Liveright, certainly through no fault of Sherwood Anderson, had collapsed shortly after bringing out the book and this insured its failure, whatever its merits. Many of the stories were written before this new period but they were all tightly written and distinctly Sherwood Anderson. James Schevill explains the public reception of Death in the Woods as opposed to the reception of the novels in a passage reminiscent of Faulkner's "Appreciation":

> What the critics failed to see was his continuous struggle with two different styles. Complaints were voiced about his "mindlessness," the frequent wandering and sag in the texture of his fiction . . . When his work collapsed, as it frequently did, it was not because of a failure of mind but because of a failure of style. In his short stories he tended

> to return to the natural technique that characterized Winesburg, Ohio. In the novels, however, he was still fascinated by the jerky rhythms with which he had begun to experiment in Dark Laugher.[49]

If Anderson had problems with his novels, it did not affect his reporting abilities. Aside from running two country newspapers in Marion, Virginia, Anderson had begun to collect a following on the basis of his work for a government magazine called Today. Successful in reporting and critically successful in Death in the Woods, he was still unsatisfied as a novelist. Since his style was being attacked, Anderson fought back in the way Faulkner remembered it: he defended and continued to write novels in that same style. If Anderson had been writing in a later era, he might have been hailed as a forerunner in both style and theme of modern impressionistic writers. In fact, it might not be mere generosity to suggest that Anderson saw that the stilted, precise, and naive style of Hemingway would ultimately be rejected, even as that style was making the latter a wealthy man. Also, there is the possibility that Anderson may

[49] Schevill, p. 301.

have seen that the giant, all-encompassing Great American Novel of Wolfe would never be matched by later writers who would opt for more intimate, psychological works. Even the harshest critics will agree that, in many cases, Anderson's thought often outweighed his actual production. If this is the case, then Anderson is not to be condemned as a foolish old man clinging to a hazy dream. Instead, he takes on the appearance of a martyr, holding on to a dream that is not yet appreciated or understood. Whatever the case, even his supporters point out the lucidity of the Today articles as proof of Anderson's retention of ability. At the same time, they will often shrug puzzledly at the mention of the novels.

Those essays for Today form the bulk of the last book that preceded Kit Brandon. In fact, for verisimilitude, Anderson suggests that he finds Kit's story while on assignment. Accounts from all over the country, from the Dust Bowl to the West Virginia coal mines, are included in this volume in a way that lets the subject tell his own story. It seems logical to assume that the critics would have a field day with a title like Puzzled America

but since the style was reportorial and not impressionistic, they generally let it alone. Unfortunately, so did the readers. Only 1411 copies were sold. Still, this is an important book to consider when reviewing Anderson's "proletarian" period for two reasons, both of which indicate the maturity and cosmopolitanism of the author.

First, the book soundly rejects communism, or at least the type practiced by Russia as well as the fascism spreading through Europe. According to Richard H. Pells, author of Radical Visions and American Dreams, which is a fine, scholarly work on the American Depression-era radicalism that grew and withered, Anderson was not puzzled about America in his book:

> Indeed, Anderson concluded his book on a note of supreme optimism. America might be "puzzled," but in contrast to the tyranny and fear that was spreading through Europe, she remained the hope of the world. This (these radicals' journeys) were a form of homecoming; they resulted not in a reinforcement of their radical convictions but in a commitment to the land, to the people, to democracy, and to the entire national experience.[50]

[50] Richard H. Pells, Radical Visions and American Dreams, (New York: Harper and Row, 1973), p. 201.

By this time, communism and the struggle of the proletariat were not anywhere near as important to Anderson as the critics still seem to believe.

Secondly, the articles and the book pointed out, through the style of letting the subject tell his own story, Anderson's awareness of a new cosmopolitanism that was spreading throughout America. Readers of essays are relatively few and indeed, few of the general public read Puzzled America, but some of the architects of the New Deal did. David Anderson notes that Anderson finds a new awareness out in the country, of the relationship between individual lives and the world itself. The writing is good and,

> . . . it does clearly reflect Anderson's insight into the relationship between the people of rural and small town America and the world in which they live as they start the long struggle out of the ruin brought on by rampant materialism.[51]

Failure, however, is still failure, and after a string of four, Anderson needed a blockbuster in Kit Brandon like he had never needed success before. According to James Schevill,

[51] David Anderson, p. 139.

> Deep in his mind (Anderson) was faced with the collapse of his reputation as a creative writer. "Anderson is done," he heard sneered around him every day. His ability to sell articles, short or long, literary or political, did nothing to assuage his artistic conscience which demanded a different kind of expression.[52]

He put body and soul into Kit Brandon but it did not work. In chapter one of the novel, he warned the reader that Kit's story had come to him in fragments and even though he repeats the warning, very few people seemed to have heeded it. Although it may not have given him the license to write in the style to which the public did not want to become accustomed, it was an honest warning. In truth, Anderson did exactly what he said he was going to do: write a story as it was told to him. Just as Faulkner demands suspension of convention inside the retarded character in The Sound and the Fury, Anderson is hoping for that same courtesy in Kit Brandon. He did not, essentially, receive it.

There could be another reason why the critics savaged Anderson: they simply may not have liked him. Walter Rideout notes a phenomenon associated with Anderson that is not generally ascribed to other writers:

[52] Schevill, p. 316.

> I suspect that those who dislike Anderson tend to judge him by the weak tales, those who like him by the strong. . . . during his literary career (his) writings were at times overvalued, at times undervalued on grounds having as much to do with current general attitudes as with the work itself. The effects of such tendentious or distorted readings, by which one saw what one wanted to see in an Anderson book rather than what was actually there, are still with us, furthermore, and distort our own readings in ways we may not recognize.[53]

If this were to be the case, then not only Kit Brandon, but every other Anderson book deserves to be reappraised. Then, perhaps, the postlude to a confusing era, as Kit Brandon seems to be evaluated, might become the opening bars to an opera of imagination that Sherwood Anderson initiated, if not orchestrated. Anderson's melodies are hummed unwittingly by today's imaginative writers, but he remains to most a Midwestern figure who merely deserves a place among Edgar Lee Masters' Spoon River tombstones.

[53] Walter B. Rideout, Introduction to Sherwood Anderson: A Collection of Critical Essays, (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1974), p. 2.

Conclusion

It took a long time for Anderson to realize that both he and his public had changed. The pendulum had swung the other way and his experiments were no longer well-received by an audience that had preferred the old Midwestern Anderson. He spent far too much time waiting for artistic inspiration instead of buckling down at his craft with the skills he possessed. Eleanor Anderson remembers her mother, Laura Copenhaver, good-naturedly getting after Anderson for not polishing his work. Anderson kept a room in the Copenhaver home and did some work there. Laura would look over what he had written and make suggestions; Anderson would pay strict attention, and then forget to implement them.

Because of this waiting for inspiration, he probably wasted several years trying to be the old, youthful Anderson instead of capitalizing on what he had. He spent too little time on revisions and corrective work on Kit Brandon. If he had been less careless and simply revised the drafts, the work might have been part of a sustained body of literature. Instead, Anderson's legacy is erratic. Kit Brandon suffers the most while at the same time

it is able to rise above the rest of Anderson's muddled final works. Welford Taylor seems to explain this phenomenon best:

> Kit is able to retain a sense of inner wholeness while being threatened by the same external forces that weaken her counterparts in Anderson's fiction. She is exposed to selfishness, yet she remains generous. She is exposed to the machine, yet she holds on to human values. She encounters lonely, confused people, yet she is able to realize a sense of purpose and meaning in her life.[54]

Kit is unique in another respect: she is Anderson's only central character who has real hope. Her self-realization is unmatched in any other Anderson work. Strangely, she appears during the Depression, the darkest night in the nation's economic history, and she comes when Anderson's reputation was at its lowest.

It is not enough to say that, in compensation, Anderson at least had a happy marriage with Eleanor and spent the remaining five years of his life after Kit Brandon in relative comfort. Physical comfort could never compensate for the lack of artistic satisfaction for Sherwood Anderson. If anyone lived the life of the artist and promoted the life of

[54] Taylor, p. 93.

the artist, it was he. If anyone recognized the role of the artist in society and had no misgivings about the scarifices required, it was he. The tragedy here is that an unfortunate set of circumstances conspired to stunt and finally destroy a literary period of an American writer who deserved and deserves far better. Kit Brandon's failure was Kit Brandon's loss and the loss of every American woman for another generation. The current concern with women's rights and dignity could have manifested itself earlier if this book had been better understood. This concern was delayed, for even as mighty a figure as Sherwood Anderson could not share center stage with the Depression and the Second World War. Only now are his contributions being fully appreciated and in ways even the beneficiaries are unaware.

It would be pleasant to think that sometime in the sixth decade of his life, in the cool mornings at Ripshin Farm when Anderson rose early and left Eleanor to work alone, waiting for inspiration to flow, that he somehow summoned the ability to write a final masterpiece. Alas, he did not. What he wrote in Kit Brandon was the first notable study by an American writer of the dramatic change occurring in American society in terms of the emerging equality of women.

As America matured, Anderson's cognizance of her new attitudes toward women developed. Kit Brandon is a good, not a great, work and its flaws are obvious. In spite of its problems it is an important work and it remains no less than his classic Winesburg, Ohio a memorial to Sherwood Anderson's tenacity as a student of life and even more than Winesburg a memorial to his courage as an artist.

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