

## **Quest for Self and Identity: A Study of Sherwood Anderson's Windy Mcpherson's Son**

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### **Abstract**

All of Sherwood Anderson's literary creations evoked many facets of human existence. Sam McPherson, the hero, is the subject of the 1916 book *Windy McPherson's Son*. The main focus of the narrative is his search for meaning in life. Industrial and business ethics are portrayed by Anderson as being inhumane. He demonstrates how in a superficially minded culture; man has lost any sense of significance and human values. One no longer recognizes oneself as a genuine human being. These are the issues that Anderson appears to identify in the novel. He makes the implication that people should endeavor to comprehend life and love for others instead of accepting the world of consumerism. To overcome the boundaries of human loneliness, love is discussed in this novel. This paper throws light on the issues of human loneliness, human love, and individual identity.

**Key words:** *Estrangement, distortion, frustration, dehumanizing, identity, loneliness, domination*

A promising writer has emerged in Sherwood Anderson. Numerous authors read his works on literacy. He enjoys a solid reputation for his literary output. The first author to capture the essence of the human experience is him. His two books, *Windy McPherson's Son* (1916) and *Marching Men* (1917), draw on his own experiences. In all his literary works, he invoked many facets of human existence. It is very clear that very few writers focus on, “web of human connections that binds as much as it divides. The search for one’s destiny is the key theme of the novels” (Manimozhi, 2020) Anderson’s works picturize the web of human loneliness, alienation, disfigurement, frustration, and the silent love that underlies robotic American culture.

The book *Windy McPherson's Son* was released in 1916. The book's focus on the hero Sam McPherson gives it both strengths and weaknesses. The main theme of the narrative is the search for purpose in life. Due to the repercussions of materialism, the protagonist and other characters in the book feel alienated. Sam leaves his own self behind in his quest for this hedonistic prosperity. When a man struggles or is hesitant to fully identify with the social substance—which is the objectification of the human spirit—he feels estranged. Later on in the book, when Sam is feeling lonely in the lost world, he recognises this human spirit. The events leading up to Anderson's rejection of materialistic values in Elyria are his own life narrative. Anderson is attempting to comprehend his own life through personal experience.

In this novel, Anderson explores the themes of human loneliness, human love, and individual identity. He views the corporate and industrial ethics as being inhumane. He demonstrates how in a superficially minded culture; man has lost any sense of significance and human values. He is no longer aware of who he is as a genuine human being. These are the issues that Anderson seems to acknowledge in the book. He implies that a person is no longer aware of whom he is as a genuine human being. These are the issues Anderson seems to acknowledge in the book. He implies that a person should reject the materialism in the world and seek to comprehend life and love for others. To overcome the boundaries of human loneliness, love is almost enough.

A semi-autobiographical novel called *Windy McPherson's Son* explores a man's journey, a mission that is never successfully achieved. It addresses the issue of alienation as well as the plight of the lonely man who is lost in the world and unable to communicate with others. It tells the heroic tale of Sam McPherson. He is rootless, a lone and homeless. Not only is loneliness a distinct problem for Sam, but also has a big impact on the lives of those around him.

Sam McPherson, the protagonist, moves through three successive stages toward maturity and moral awareness. The first stage is about his youth who spends in a small town. The second stage revolves around his escape to the city and the pursuit of success and the third stage his abrupt abandonment of the ethics of success.

The novel deals with the hero of Sam McPherson, the protagonist, as he grows up, starting in his early boyhood and continuing into poverty. The mechanized culture and social life of America are the subjects of the story. Without realizing the manner of life, American men and women are dull as a country. Sam is comparable to Huck Finn from *Huckleberry Finn* by Mark Twain. More than just a passing similarity connects Sam McPherson's wandering with Huck Finn's journey down the Mississippi.

*Windy McPherson's Son* is a classic American tale of a troubled, frustrated guy and how he begins, rises, and falls apart. It depicts a typical American character who struggles with a perplexed culture and feels cut off from his own kind. Sam McPherson is an unorganized young man who lives in poverty. He lives in the Iowan town of Caxton with a modest family. The protagonist, Sam McPherson, is just thirteen years old. In his town, he has a pretty wretched life. Because he comes from a low-income home, he receives no formal schooling. Sam makes a pitiful living as a newspaper boy in his hometown.

Sam's rustic upbringing is depicted in the opening chapters of the book before his pursuit of wealth and power. He feels the pull of the metropolis at the age of fifteen. Sam's talent is evident when he engages others in conversation about themselves and their relationships. His life is strongly motivated by the stories he hears about the fortunes made in the metropolis. Sam McPherson starts to fantasize about the day when he'll rise to the top of the community. He understands that Chicago is the best spot for him to accomplish his goals and fulfill his dreams. Sam sees life as a game and declares thus:

“He conceived of life in the city as a great game in which he believed he could play a sterling part. Had he not in Caxton brought something out of nothing, had he not systematized and monopolized the selling of papers, had he not introduced the rending of popcorn and peanuts from baskets to the Saturday night crowds? Already boys were in his employ, already the totals in the bank book had crept to more than seven hundred dollars. He felt within him a glow of pride at the thought of what he had done and would do” [67].

“From his childhood Sam is tortured by the social humiliation of his family's poverty, and so he uses everyone to make all the money he can. The thought of money makes Sam to get the heroic feeling to be “Strangely alive and awake like a young man in love”[Scafidel 97].

Sam McPherson's relationship with his father is wholly estranged. His father Windy McPherson is an ineffective storyteller, an alcoholic, and a braggart. He doesn't love or care about his kids. Anderson's novel paints a harsh picture of his father. In his imagined society, dads constantly treat their wives cruelly and carelessly.

Sam's family faces several hardships and makes pitiful wages. Sam's mother puts in excessive hours to support her family. From his pal John Telfer, the archetype of the materialistic future, he picks up the love of money. John Telfer is feared and revered in the community due to his education, but he is not loved. Sam admires John Telfer for being the local representative of the new materialism; Sam is blind to Telfer's lack of empathy and emotional complexity. John Telfer puts forth his philosophical notion about money:

“No matter what comes in the future, in our day money-making precedes many virtues that are forever on men's lips”, It is one of the virtues that proves man not a savage. It has lifted him up not money-making, but the power to make money. Money makes life lovable. It gives freedom and destroys fear. Having it means sanitary houses and well-made clothes. It brings into men's lives beauty and the love of beauty” (60).

Three other important characters that are estranged from one another are a concern throughout the book. Sam McPherson's mother Jane McPherson, father Windy McPherson, and Sam's friend and affluent and well-educated neighbour John Telfer.

In *Windy McPherson's Son*, the father-son relationship is portrayed in detail. Sam's father is a failure, a jerk, and a representation of one's own incompetence, yet this portrayal is absurd rather than malicious. Windy McPherson, Sam's father, struggles to distinguish between fact and fantasy. He can never forget that he once led a battle while serving as a sergeant in an infantry battalion. In an effort to forget his humiliation, he repeatedly becomes drunk. He inhabits a universe. He doesn't give a damn about his wife or his kids. He entirely distances

himself from his local town family. Sam despises his father because he is negligent and uncaring toward his family.

The mother-son relationship, which has an autobiographical undertone, is the novel's focal point. The most egotistical and selfless act of compassion is shown to be his tremendous love for his mother Emma Anderson. In this book, Jane McPherson, Sam's mother, represents subdued love. She adores her kids without conditions. He doesn't give a damn about his wife or his kids. He entirely distances himself from his local town family. Sam despises his father because he is negligent and shows little affection towards Sam. Mother of Sam is ill, overworked, and verbally impaired. Jane McPherson demonstrates her love for her children by sacrificing herself in a number of instances. Sam has been oblivious to her patients suffering and fortitude.

This is the love that Sam later in the novel tries to recapture and understands, but he fails in his efforts to put this into practice. Jane McPherson's deep affection towards Sam is pictured in an effective way:

“In church on Sunday morning, Sam went regularly to sleep, putting his head on his mother's arm and sleeping throughout the service. Jane McPherson loved to have the boy there beside her. It was the one thing in life they did together and she did not mind his sleeping the time away. Knowing how late he had been upon the streets at the paper selling on Saturday evenings. She looked at him with eyes filled with tenderness and sympathy.” (27)

Characters who do not want to enter reality effectively depict the conflict between a dream and reality. Sam used to have daydreams as a child about being a wealthy businessman. Sam would rather be in the dark than in the light.

“John Telfer's friendship is a formative influence upon Sam. His father's worthlessness and the growing realization of the hardship of his mother's position have given life a bitter taste in his mouth. John Telfer becomes Sam's spiritual father and does a great deal towards his early education. Sam accepts John Telfer's words completely ignoring the man's true position in the town. He guides Sam and tells him about money making in the world. Sam learns John Telfer's attitude towards money making:”Makemoney! Cheat! Lie is one of the men of the big world! Get your name up for a modern high class American”! (66)

John Telfer teaches Sam values and morals. His failure as a painter has led him to a richer role as a living artist. He is an articulate and vivid man. He thus declares:

“I do not paint pictures; I do not write books, yet am I an artist, declared Telfer, proudly.”I am an artist practicing the most difficult of all arts – the art of living. Here in this western village I stand and fling my challenge to the world.”On the lip of not the greatest of you”, I cry ‘has life been more sweet’” (8)

The novel also heavily relies on Freedom Smith. He aids Sam in his money-seeking endeavors. Sam works hard and receives a lot from Freedom Smith. Sam McPherson gains a lot of trade knowledge while working for Freedom Smith for three years. Sam longs to rule

the world on his own terms. Sam lives as a travelling buyer for the next two years, visiting villages in Illinois and Iowa and negotiating lucrative deals with men like Freedom Smith. The town that had previously seemed so kindly to him now seems awful. He has lost any connection to his home town. Sam almost abandons his loyalty to money as a result of John Telfer's discussion of Whitman, love, and values. The distinction between corn as a symbol of materialism and corn as a sign of vitality is highlighted by John Telfer. He declares:

“I see the long corn rows with men and the horses half hidden, hot and breathless and I think of a vast river of life. I catch a breath of the flame that was in the mind of the man, who said, ‘the land is flowing with milk and honey.’” (Leonard 103)

The second part of the novel describes Sam's life in the metropolis of Chicago. He escapes to Chicago using his hard work and cunning dealing skills, which he acquired in his little town. The only things that excite him about his materialistic world are money and power. In order to make money, he distances himself from his family and moves to the city

“The city which is portrayed in this novel is neither particularly beautiful nor ugly, but it is large. The Chicago city is not only a well designed city but also a powerful place designed for the strong people. The people go to the city to find their own destiny: Life is a battle in which few men win and many are defeated and in which hate and fear play there with love and generosity”(227)

Sam starts his first career in business by working for a commission company in the city's South Water Street neighbourhood. Later, Sam is given the chance by Rainey Arms, one of the top businesses in the globe. He gains the respect of the company's employees and stockholders as its realistic leader. Sam develops into a business mogul and assumes a significant role as the motivated millionaire. Sam McPherson battles his way to prosperity and power in a culture that has forgotten about the good and harmonious essence of people. Sam leaves his little community in search of material success, travels to Chicago, where he encounters opposition. He fights a lot just to survive in the city. He is a victim of the morally and materialistically corrupting effects of civilization. Sam denies having the desire to become wealthy and powerful, which would force him to return to his small-town life and his family.

In the City, Sam meets Janet Eberly and develops friendship with her. She is an intellect and disregards all the usual womanly points of view. She has her own attitude towards life and people. Janet's talk of books and life is not understood by Sam, Janet chides Sam and asserts:

“Books are not full of pretense and lies; you businessman are-you and jack prince. What do you know of books? They are the most wonderful things in the world. Men sit writing them and forget to lie, but you businessmen never forget. You and books! You haven't read books, not real once.” (148)

Sam loves Janet dearly and admires her. He spends the evening with Janet and hears her explain life. Janet Eberly dies unexpectedly. Sam considers her to be his wife. Sam is lost and suicidal, drinking excessively every night while aimlessly traversing the barren streets. He feels isolated in society now that she has passed away. Sam McPherson serves as the

company's chief lieutenant, treasurer, and chairman of the board of directors. The protagonist, Sue Rainey, is first shown as a determined individual. She is the Rainey Arms Company Colonel's daughter. After Janet Eberly's passing, Sam meets Sue Rainey and becomes friends with her.

“Sam is diverted from his unsatisfying material quest after meeting Sue Rainey, who convinces him that he will achieve fulfillment by creating perfect children. So Sam decides to marry Sue Rainey as she considers bearing children to be service to mankind.”She wanted a man who would be the father of children who do things” (David 172).

The idea seems wonderfully simple and beautiful to Sam and he appreciates her idea and asserts:

“Marriage is a port, a beginning, a point of departure, from which men and women go forth upon the real voyage of life [...] All that goes before is but a preparation, a building. The pains and the triumphs of all unmarried people are but the good oak planks being driven into place to make the vessels fit for the real voyage.” (183)

In the narrative, strong love does not highlight the relationship between men and women. Men and women do not have a common language of love and understanding. Men are forced by women to accept the constraints of their lives. Women feel lonely in the world as a result of their love having been replaced with frustration. Although Anderson views possessing a woman as a good deal, he views sexual love as the surface expression of a profound spiritual love. In this book, love transcends bodily limitations. Sam's affection for Janet Eberly is not intense love. But Janet alters Sam McPherson sexually and intellectually:

“She was the first woman who ever got hold of and stirred his manhood, and she awoke something in him that made it possible for him later to see life with a broadness and scope of vision that was no part of the pushing energetic young man of dollars and of industry who sat beside her wheeled chair during the evenings on Wabash Avenue.”(150)

Sam McPherson and Sue Rainey have a physical relationship without passion. Sam McPherson replaces sex with money and marries Sue Rainey, but their union quickly breaks down. They frequently believe that they will find salvation via sex, but Sam runs from lust and fear: “He remembered how he, as a boy in the city had run through the crowded streets fleeing from the terror of lust. He began to understand how distorted, how strangely perverted, his whole attitude towards women and sex had been.” (180)Sam McPherson and Sue Rainey don't truly love and understand one another. Only out of convenience are they married to one another. It is not possible to witness love, which is the union of two souls or a mental understanding. John Telfer taught Sam McPherson as a young lad that sex and women are incompatible with a man's potential. “In one of his formative discussions with Telfer, he cries, “To hell with women and girls”, as though throwing something distasteful out of his throat,” (63) His position in society is assured by his marriage to Sue Rainey, and he engages in obsessive money-making. They devote a lot of time to admiring nature now that they are married. Sam Rainey resumes business after Sue Rainey is unable to give birth, hoping for a

better life. He ends his relationship with Sue because it is not a particularly solid one. He tells her straight out that he can't have a happy life with her. He desires to live his life on his terms.

This book demonstrates how maternal love and affection go beyond familial bonds. The connection between Sam McPherson and Mary Underwood is a clear indicator. After the passing of Sam's mother and Jane McPherson, his schoolteacher Mary Underwood becomes the recipient of all of Sam's happiness and sadness. She was referred to as "little mommy" by Sam. Sam's quest for money prevents him from realizing the genuine value of people; Mary Underwood is the one who shows him the true love and ill effects of materialism. Later on in the book, he realizes the importance of love.

The characters are alienated from one another, because they have lost their identity in life. They are isolated and are unable to comprehend or interact with one another. Sam has a strong connection to his mother, yet he cannot comprehend her. He isolates himself from the love of others. The distance between him and his family widens as a result of his escalating ambition for wealth and power. He is totally cut off from both his family and the outside world. When Sam McPherson and Sue Rainey learn they are unable to have children; their sense of estrangement grows even further. Sue accuses him of demeaning her husband, and as a result of their lack of communication, their relationship deteriorates. Due to her husband's inability to love and care for her, Sue Rainey finds herself entirely alone in society. Additionally, Windy McPherson is a solitary being who is cut off from both his family and his fellow humans. Sam has little love for and no comprehension of his father has no love for his father and never understands him

Human loneliness is a confused search for one's identity and ultimate purpose in life. Due to Sue leaving him and moving home with her father, Sam feels alone in the world. He has no love for people and lives a pointless life in the city. Later, he comes to see that material values have no true purpose in life and just serve to isolate one from the rest of the world. So he starts what he hopes will be a fruitful search for a meaningful way of life to replace consumerism.

Sam McPherson, the money maker has more love for his own self than he has for others. Throughout his life he uses them but he does not care for any of them. Sam's frustration begins to grow and he feels lonely in the country. He begins his search for what he has missed in life. So he sets out his strange quest, "to seek truth and to seek god" (244). Among the common people. Sam loses the sense of fulfillment and quest for ultimate meaning "The best men spend their lives seeking truth".(240)Sam McPherson is a very important character because he goes through so much throughout the book. He works very hard to maintain his tranquilly. The protagonist seeks out truth because he is unhappy with worldly pleasures. He realizes that if man is a barometer of truth, he must stifle competition and subjugate money. Sam decides to set aside his gains and go in pursuit of the truth.

Sam's search for self-discovery is the subject of the third part of the novel. Sam's rebellion against making money comes to an end in life. Sam's decision to leave the city in pursuit of the meaning of life not only signals the start of his big escape, but also another significant divergence from his normal course of events. Sam is attempting to identify with the labourers

and common folk, but they are no better than his urban siblings. He learns that people are looking for the truth in America's rural towns and villages. Sam's enthusiasm in interacting with others drives his search. He makes an effort to fit in with the common folk. Sam tries to impart his expertise to others while he is on the move.

“In his wanderings, he knows working girls and a prostitute tries to help them and seeks truth. In Pennsylvania, the manufacturing town, Sam sees that people are suffering for their own rights. When Sam sees depression on their faces, he says;”Fools and slaves”, he said earnestly, pointing to the men and women passing on the side walk.”See them going like beasts to their bondage? What do they get for it? What kind of lives do they lead? The lives of dogs” (276).

Sam discovers that labour unions are more worried about the use of scab-machinery than they are about the possibility of losing a just strike. Both assisting them and joining the strike, he. Due to the numerous street-walkers, he feels really miserable.

“In his quest for truth, he finds that love is missing in the society. Dissipation and vice have destroyed the moral character of the people. He finally discovers that “Christ simple message of love and community” has been rejected by the Iowa villagers. In the words:”The land that McPherson enters is still a land marred by men and women who have not learned to be clean and noble like their forests and their plains” (311).

Sam is sick with fatigue. After many years of wandering in search of the elusive truth, Sam understands “that he was not by nature a vagabond, and the call of the wind and sun and brown road was not insistent in his blood”(306). He wants to return to Sue, as he wants peace and happiness. Sam realizes that money does not make man's life happy, and he is not satisfied with it. Sam needs only love that can bring human beings together. He struggles hard to find truth within himself. After rejecting his material wants in his life, he convinces himself that, “still looking towards the city”, that love is a matter of truth, not lies and pretences” (245-46)The desire for success leads Sam to need to understand himself, and to recognize his own identity. He finds his own identity when Sam returns to his wife, hoping to lead a happy life. Sam brings with him three neglected children from a drunkard woman. He declares that man can attain love through children. Hence he comes to the conclusion that, “We will live our lives for service to mankind, through the children that will presently come into our house” (215).

Sam McPherson returns to his wife, who is lonely. He begins his new life through love and understanding. He decides to lead a meaningful and peaceful life based on love. He himself says: “I cannot run away from life. I must face it. I must begin to try to understand these other lives to love” (330) Sam eventually changes for the better, but his dream is not realized in his life. His life demonstrates that success may be achieved through love and compassion. He now knows that compassion and understanding must come before love. Man can achieve a comparable form of unity with the entire world through this. The writer makes a strong case for the importance of morality when summarizing the causes of his hero's downfall in the words that follow:



“Sam McPherson is a living American. He is a rich, but his money, that he spent so many years and so much of his energy acquiring, does not mean much to him. What is true of more wealthy Americans than is commonly believed? Something has happened to him that has happened to others also, to how many of the others? Men of courage, with strong bodies and quick brains, men who have come of a strong race, have taken up what they had thought to be the banner of life and carried it forward” (324).

Anderson has used elements from his real life to create fiction, like many other American authors. The book paints a pretty accurate picture of Anderson's society. He develops characters that are alone in the world in his writing. In American civilization of the 20th century, morality and love are absent. Sherwood Anderson asserts that the human race will only witness dissolution if it fails to understand the true meaning of existence.

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