

# Dark Laughter: A Study of Sherwood Anderson's Ideas

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## ABSTRACT

**Dark Laughter, a 1925 novel, the bestseller of Sherwood Anderson, presented the neuroticism, hurry, and self-consciousness of life in the America of the decade of 1920, at the back of which there is an easy, strange laughter of blacks. Anderson felt a vacuum in the life of Americans due to the growth of industrialisation and other social factors. Americans were unable to cope with the pressures of modern existence and the result was a complete vacuum and meaninglessness in their lives. Their psyche became shocked and distorted. In Dark Laughter, Anderson tried to suggest some means to Americans that might help them to improve upon their situation. He has tried to provide answers to some of the questions which Americans have been facing. For him, primitivism, mysticism, and sex are some of the means which can help Americans to come out of their troubled existence. But the kind of primitivism and mysticism he is preaching is not real but pseudo one which fails at the very first site. Similarly, he has presented sex as an escape from the pressures of life. But the problem with Anderson is that he has made sex an end in itself not a means to an end. Anderson has romanticised sex and made it the essence of life. He has glorified sex to such an extent that it assumes the place of religion and even philosophy.**

**Key Words: Primitivism, mysticism, romanticisation of love, war and sex, moral and psychological vacuum.**

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## INTRODUCTION

Dark Laughter is a manifesto of Sherwood Anderson's ideas which are of many types. The main ideas which Anderson is dealing with are primitivism, mysticism, romanticisation of love and war, sexual strength of negroes, man-woman relationships, and sex. Dark Laughter is centred around a hero, who has stopped in middle age to re-examine his life in relation to his environment. Bruce Dudley, the protagonist of Dark Laughter, has changed his identity. Earlier he was John Stockton of Chicago but in changing his identity he has rejected conventional standards. He attempts to find fulfilment in his life but he can do nothing except end up in the arms of Aline, his boss's wife. He is like a vessel floating on the ocean of life that has no goal, no aim in life. Bruce Dudley starts on his voyage but he is not sure of his expectations from life. Some strange notions are lurking in his mind and under the impulse of these notions he is measuring his life. But still, he is unable to get meaning in his life.

Anderson has a very vague notion in his mind. According to him Americans have "...got out of touch with things -stones lying in fields, the fields themselves, houses, trees, rivers, factory walls, tools, women's bodies, sidewalks, people on sidewalks, men in overalls, men and women in automobiles."<sup>1</sup> It is implied from the above quotation that according to Anderson, Americans had gotten out of touch with nature.

Anderson associates nature with primitivism and vice-versa. That is why he has associated negroes with nature. According to him, North America, which has become more industrialised, is devoid of nature. On the other hand, South America is still full of natural beauty and niggers. According to him, the South is the land with a "brown blood flowing, white blood flowing, deep river flowing" (p.79). It is a land of "a slow dance, music, ships, cotton, corn, coffee" (p.79). It is a land of "slow lazy laughter of niggers" (p.79).

Anderson associates negroes with the gods; and with primitivism, but it is a fake concern of primitivism as he glorifies fake aspects of primitivism. Anderson sentimentalises and romanticises the negroes. It seems that Anderson has been fascinated by the sexual primitivism of negroes. To quote David Garnett, "Just as it is the happy fortune of the present to be always able to invest the past with whatever romantic glamour it sees fit, so it is privilege of civilised town-

dwellers to sentimentalise 'primitive' people."<sup>2</sup> There is nothing bad in primitivism as such but Anderson has given it a false approach. Negroes fascinate Anderson only because of their free play of sex. They are ignorant about feelings of shame and furtiveness associated with sexual behaviour. They are not at all bothered if anyone watches them having sexual intercourse. When Bruce watches a young negro woman making love with a brown man, she is not at all ashamed of it, though she also knows that someone is looking at her: "She knows Bruce is looking. What does it matter? He is looking as one might look at trees, at young colts playing in a pasture" (p.79). Anderson seems to approve of the extra-marital sexual relationships of the negro women with as many men as they like: "A brown woman having thirteen children- a different man for every child" (p. 75).

Anderson thinks negroes as children of nature. He associates them with gods. According to him, negroes have an "instinctive understanding" (p.23) and "a way of getting at the ultimate truth of things" (p.248). There is a haunting laughter of negro women throughout the novel. It seems that these negro women are making fun of Bruce and Aline. When Aline elopes with Bruce, the younger negress bursts into a "high shrill laughter" and declares, "I knowed it, I knowed it, all the time I knowed it" (p.319). According to Anderson, negroes are the people who know everything. They are like gods and angels. But Anderson seems to have exaggerated his notion about negroes. In fact, the primitivism which he is stressing is not a real one, it is pseudo-primitivism. For Anderson primitivism is nothing more than sexual licentiousness and libertinism. He allows all the sexual freedom to negroes. They do not have any spiritual, emotional, or even physical sanctity of love and sex. Anderson seems to have missed his target here. His aim was to affirm the old spiritual, moral, and human values through primitivism. But paradoxically, he has affirmed the diseased and decadent moral values. For him, primitivism is merely a display of animal sexuality. In the present times when there seems to be nothing to fall back upon, this sort of primitivism is not at all going to help. This type of primitivism does not load on humanity to achieve some dignity, honor, and courage.

Bruce Dudley and Aline, both are leading a sexually starved life. They get attracted to each other and ultimately Aline elopes with Bruce. Their relationship with each other is based merely on sex. Bruce does not believe in the institution of marriage. For him, it is an abominable institution, a "relic of barbarism" where people "see too much of each other" (p. 235). Anderson seems to deny the institution of marriage and believes in a free relationship between man and woman. So he has shown the relationship between Aline and Bruce based on the free play of sex. But in fact "the elopement is a gesture of rebellion rather than the achievement of freedom."<sup>3</sup> Bruce and Aline don't get any freedom or satisfaction out of this.

The second main idea of Anderson in *Dark Laughter* is his mysticism. He mystifies even the most apparent and simple things. He shrouds everything in the veil of irrationality and mysticism to the extent that it confuses the readers. Continuous use of "something" which is never told what exactly it is, confuses the readers. Bruce Dudley feels his name "has a kind of something in it. It suggested solidity and respectability" (p.14). Though Bruce started his voyage to find some meaning in his life still he didn't know what he was after. He only knew "he was after something" (p.19). Anderson shows totally strange people drawn to each other "as by instinct" (p.94). He shows their thoughts and feelings mixed up to the extent that their lives become inseparable: "There came times when human beings ceased being isolated. What one felt others felt. One might say that at certain times, one left one's body and went, quite completely into the body of another. Love might be something like that" (p. 174). In the very first meeting, Bruce and Aline feel a "flashing kind of thing" between their bodies (p.110). There comes a recollection in Bruce's mind, of his boat journey in his childhood with his mother. There he felt a strange "shy boyish desire" to call to the slender, young man who seemed to have "some sort of connection with his mother" (p.104). All this is mysterious as we never know who that young man was and what sort of connection he had with Bruce's mother.

One parallel incident occurs at Rose Frank's apartment where a silent man is shown to have "some indefinable connection" with her (p. 173). There was "something about to happen in the room" (p.173). What this something was we never know. Bruce recalls another incident of his childhood when traveling men used to visit a place on the hillside. He recalls that the daughter of the house used to sit in the laps of those men: "One evening she had been sitting on the knees of a young man and suddenly she had a feeling. She didn't know what it was" (p.89). Everything happens suddenly. How that happened, and why that had happened is never made clear. He mystifies the image of Aline as well who was standing against the tree as a "white, dainty figure" (p. 207). She had become "a part of the sky, of the ground, of passing winds. When it rained, she was the rain. When thunder rolled down the Ohio River Valley, her body trembled slightly. As a small lovely stone figure, she had achieved Nirvana" (pp. 207-8). For a common reader with a rational mind, all this is beyond comprehension. The reader gets simply confused at the sight of Anderson's characters who suddenly get a streak of realisation when they feel that all the mysteries of life have been exposed before them. This is best illustrated when Fred suddenly clings to Aline and says, "You are someone I can understand. I am out of my depths here" (p. 175).

This type of mysticism which is in fact, pseudo-mysticism, cannot be digested by a logical and rational mind. Anderson's mysticism defies all logic and understanding. Anderson mystifies and romanticises sex as well. For him, sex is the religion and essence of life with hidden powers in it. He glorifies sex to such an extent that it becomes the ultimate end of life. He seeks in sex the answer to all the problems and complexities of existence. Anderson seems to be obsessed with sex. No doubt, sex is an important aspect of life but Anderson's characters equate sex with life. Even the imagery is full of sex. In *Dark Laughter*, Spring is associated with sex desires and vague sexual longings. Anderson believes that it is only sex that leads to a meaningful relationship between a man and a woman. Sponge Martin and his wife are happy as they find sex an anchor of life. But even they need external stimulants like alcohol to rouse their sexual instincts. On the contrary, Bruce is dissatisfied with life simply because he has been unable to have a satisfying sexual relationship with his wife. It is only with Aline that he gets a spiritual and physical union. Almost up to the end of the novel, Bruce remains impotent. He is able to regain his sexual strength only in the arms of Aline but even this relationship doesn't give him complete freedom and satisfaction.

Anderson associates very vague and strange notions with love and sex. When Aline had a sexual fling with Bruce, she compared her satisfaction to a soldier who had escaped unhurt in a battle. But sex does not help Bruce to have profound and meaningful relations with women. Even Aline is not satisfied in her relationship with Bruce because their relationship is based merely on sex: "Perhaps she had only wanted Bruce for the moment, a matter of the flesh only, a woman bored with life reaching out for a little momentary excitement, and then, perhaps, it might be that she felt as he did" (p.289). Similar is the case with Bruce. Even before starting his new life with Aline, Bruce thinks: "Odd that he, wanting her so much and now that he got her, began almost at once thinking of something else" (p. 310). In fact, this all happens because of a relationship based on flesh only. Any relationship based on flesh alone never leads to any real fulfilment and satisfaction in life. On the contrary, it usually leads to frustration. It never helps in making a genuine human relationship between the opposite sexes. Any relationship between a man and woman based on sex alone is temporary and never lasts long. Sponge and his wife seem to be satisfied but even they require external aids like liquor to make love to each other: "When she and Sponge were out that way, after catfish, and they had both taken five or six good stiff drinks of 'moon,' she was like a kid. She made Sponge feel-Lordy" (p.12). All the other characters in *Dark Laughter* have to wait for Spring to make love. The very fact that these characters need external aids to make love shows they are not genuine lovers.

Anderson's ideas about the war are very stupid. According to Fred, "You don't kill men in war much. They just die" (p.198). Similarly, "kill any one who says anything against our women" is a vague idea (p.200). Just like love, Anderson romanticises war as well. When Fred kills a man while on patrol duty in No Man's land, he is haunted by it. Anderson romanticises war because he himself has not experienced its harsh realities.

One more aspect of *Dark Laughter* is the sentimentalisation of its characters. Anderson's characters give a flowing expression to their sentiments almost to the point of absurdity. Aline is sentimental about trees and feels them filled with life. When she hears from his father the technical description of extracting turpentine from trees, she is restless and cries out at night. She feels sympathy for the wounded trees: "Trees crying out-bleeding. Men going about, hurting them, cutting them with axes. Some of the trees fell down groaning while others stood up, the blood running from them, crying out to the child in the bed. The trees had eyes, they had arms, legs and bodies. A forest of injured trees, staggering about, bleeding. The ground under the trees was red with blood" (p.140). This is all naive romanticisation. When the world war came, Aline compared injured and bleeding men with those trees. When Ted Copeland, Aline's fiancé, asked her to marry him she refused to say 'no' to him because "it would have seemed like saying 'no' to one of the trees" (p.141).

Just like Aline, Bruce is also very sentimental. Whenever he touches plants and trees with his fingers, he feels as if he were touching Aline's flesh: "Flesh is flesh, a tree is a tree, grass is grass. The flesh of women is the flesh of trees, of flowers, of grasses. Bruce in the garden, his fingers touching the young trees, the young plants, was touching with his fingers also Aline's flesh. Her flesh grew warm. There was a whirling, singing thing within" (p. 252). He is so much obsessed with Aline that he literally "went softly through the rain and touched with his fingers the wall of the house in which Aline slept" (p. 230). For him touching the wall of the house was like touching Aline's flesh. This is a stupid kind of sentimentality. It is really funny that Anderson's characters feel a strong emotional attachment to some persons and even to some objects. Aline is strongly attached to trees, Bruce to his mother, and Fred to Aline, whom he thinks is a small and old-fashioned statue of marble.

Anderson's characters have very stupid notions about themselves. They think themselves to be intelligent and knowledgeable people, but in reality, they are nothing more than ludicrous characters. They pose stupid questions even

about the most obvious matters. They are naive, sentimental, and simple-minded characters. They get bewildered even by the clearest matters. They wonder about simple things and ask stupid questions. Aline thinks about the laborers: "Well, what did a laborer look like? What differentiated a laborer from another man, from the kind of men who were Fred's friends, from the kind of men she had known at her father's house in Chicago when she was a young girl?" (p.137). Her musings about trees and turpentine are also stupid and ridiculous: "There is a tree growing in a field. Is it really a tree? What is the tree?... What was turpentine? Was it some strange golden elixir of the life?" (pp. 139-40).

Just like Aline, Bruce also puts naive and stupid questions. His thoughts about Sponge are quite funny: "Was the man entirely satisfied with life? Did his job satisfy him, his wife, the house in which he lived, the bed in which he slept? Did he have no dreams, seek nothing he could not find?" (p. 116). This naive habit of questioning makes Bruce ludicrous. Anderson's characters wonder and question the most common experiences. They try to show themselves as seekers of knowledge. But they are pseudo-seekers, not real ones. This false knowledge makes them confirmed fools. They become their own mockers when they talk about the philosophic questions of life such as love, art, and its relation to life and problems of human existence. But in fact, their too much concern with the complexities of life makes them fools. Bruce tries to find the real meaning of art in a very stupid manner: "What was art anyway? Did such men as himself and Tom Wills want to laugh at it? Did they incline to think of art as a silly mawkish sort of exhibitionism on the part of silly people because to do so made them seem to themselves rather grand and noble- above all such nonsense- something of that sort?" (p.52). All these are meaningless questions that do nothing except make the characters ludicrous. Their concern for higher aspects of life is merely superficial. The higher-sounding words used by characters are in fact meaningless.

Anderson's characters do not understand the wide gap between reality and illusion. They are common people but compare themselves with great historical personalities. Aline thinks Sponge is a Napoleon Bonaparte: "Smiling she thought that Sponge might very well have been a Napoleon Bonaparte walking along like that, stroking a black mustache with stubby fingers" (p.138). Similarly, Sponge's wife thinks Bruce is "the hero of a French novel" (p.222). She further imagines Bruce as the Prince of Wales or the President of the U.S.A. All such attempts are ludicrous.

Anderson's characters are shallow in their concern with life. Their knowledge of history, literature, and art is shallow. But they think themselves to be experts in these. They quote inapt quotations from famous writers, and books in order to show off their knowledge about various aspects of life. But all this makes them butts of ridicule. Aline thinks Fred is a king in the small town of Old Harbor. She compares her husband's position to the position of Julius Caesar. So she quotes from Julius Caesar, but this quotation is not accurate: "Caesar riding through a miserable little town going to join his army, Caesar addressing a comrade, 'Better be king on a dung-heap than a beggar in Rome.' Some thing of that sort. Aline wasn't very accurate about quotations and it is sure she did not think the world'dung-heap" (p. 136). Just like Aline, Bruce is also inaccurate about quotations. While talking about a man who "got things organised a little" (p.119) he muses whether he (man) would become a Napoleon or a Caesar. He takes a quotation from Julius Caesar and mixes it up with another quotation: "If he became a Napoleon or a Caesar he would have to be thinking all the time of the others, trying to use the others, trying to wake them up. Well, no, he wouldn't try to wake them up. If they woke up they would be just like him. 'I like not his lean and hungry look. He thinks too much.' This sort of thing eh?" (p.119). His ending up with this sort of thing exhibits his shallow knowledge. Fred is also unsure about quotations. Once while quoting from the Bible, he also ends up with "some-thing of that sort" (p.278). This indicates his uncertainty and shallow knowledge: "Doesn't the Bible say the Jew is to be the man without a country, something of that sort?" (p.278). In fact, there is an incompatibility between the high-sounding knowledge of the characters and the commonplace situations to which they apply it.

Anderson's characters are simply bewildered and confused. They don't have any proper direction in life. They are just lost in the maze of life. They don't know what is the meaning of life. They are unsure of their expectations from life. They don't know what life has for them. They are just like rudderless boats floating on the ocean of life. It is up to life where it leads them. They don't know what is the ultimate aim and destination of their lives. In *Dark Laughter*, Bruce Dudley starts his journey without knowing what he is after. There was a complete moral and psychological vacuum in Bruce's life which forced him to start his voyage. Once while talking to his friend, Tom Wills, he mentioned "some fellow, an imaginary figure, who cut out, left his job, went on the grand sneak" (p. 68). This discussion hints at the vacuum in Bruce's life. But this discussion does not lead any of them to any destination. It rather confuses them: "Where to? What for? When they got to that part of their talk both men always felt a little lost" (p.68). We know Bruce is after something in life, but what it is neither we know nor Bruce himself knows. Bruce leaves his wife but he is never able to understand why he has left his wife: "I didn't leave Bernice, looking for some other woman. I've got another bee in my bonnet although I don't just know what it is, he thought as he climbed the hill toward the hotel" (p.129). In order to understand the real purpose of his voyage he changes his name and appearance. This all does not help him to find out

the purpose of his voyage, on the contrary, it makes him ludicrous. In fact, it is not that only Bruce Dudley is a confused character, Anderson's other characters are also like him. They are "going thus, unknown, mysteriously through life" (p.19). On the surface, they are engaged with lofty missions but in reality, it is not so.

Anderson's ideas are presented in a free associational pattern. He totally baffles and confuses the readers with his "queer jumble of words-ideas" (p.96). One such instance of a free associational pattern is as follows:

That young Jew in the Chicago news paper office slinging words brilliantly-slinging the bunk. Bernice writing that story about the poet and the woman of wax, Tom Wills swearing at the young Jew. 'He's afraid of his woman.'  
Bruce cutting out from Chicago-spending weeks on a river-on the docks in New Orleans.  
Thoughts of his mother-thoughts of a boy's thoughts of his mother. A man like Bruce could think a hundred diverse thoughts walking ten steps beside a workman named Sponge Martin.

(p.98)

This type of pattern confuses the readers. Readers are often unsure of the time relationships involved. They never come to know whose thoughts the narrator is reporting or whether the thoughts are really his own thoughts or merely the narrator's interpretation of thoughts. This sort of confusion arises because the narrator does not separate him from his characters. He is emotionally involved with them. He doesn't objectify his emotions and the result is that a sort of cobweb is spun in the form of narration. No sane writer would sympathise with characters like Bruce and Aline, but Anderson does it as he is emotionally attached to them. Anderson's use of stream of consciousness technique is also imperfect. If we compare Anderson's technique in *Dark Laughter* with that of Virginia Woolf's in *To the Light House*, the difference is evident. In Virginia Woolf's novels, there is a definite structure of ideas but in Anderson, there is no fixed structure and narration is simply a jumbling of confused ideas and monologues. There is pseudo-simplicity and a non-functional use of repetition.

In fact, all ideas of Anderson are pseudo, not real ones. His over-sentimentalism, pseudo-romanticism, pseudo-primitivism, and pseudo-mysticism are all butts of ridicule. In fact, Hemingway has parodied all these ideas in his *The Torrents of Spring*. Anderson's ideas lack any force of conviction and don't help the bewildered Americans to come out of the complexities of life. There is a pseudo-mystical glorification of man, life, and nature in *Dark Laughter* which is not in a good taste. Hemingway attacks Anderson's excessive sentimentality, pseudo-mysticism, a romanticisation of love, sex, and war, and pseudo-primitivism. The literary fashion which Anderson had started in *Dark Laughter* is bitterly ridiculed by Hemingway. It was not that Hemingway had any professional jealousy with Anderson, but in fact, the sentimental falsification of life at the hands of Anderson could not be tolerated by a rationalist like Hemingway. To a rational mind, his ideas are simply escapist in nature. They can't cope with the harsh realities of existence.

#### REFERENCES

- [1]. Sherwood Anderson, *Dark Laughter* (1942; rpt. Cleveland: The World Publishing Company, 1943), p. 62. All subsequent references to the text of this novel are from the same edition and page numbers in all such cases have been given within parentheses immediately after the quotation.
- [2]. David Garnett, "Introduction," *The Torrents of Spring* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1966), p. 10.
- [3]. David D. Anderson, *Sherwood Anderson: An Introduction and Interpretation* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, Inc., 1967), p. 89.