Chapter Four, “Speaking of Manhood in Winesburg, Ohio,” takes as its premise “manhood,” the concluding word of Sherwood Anderson’s Winesburg, Ohio. The essay reviews how the term has long been recognized as a central concern of the text and explains how criticism on this subject often concludes that Anderson develops a sensitive, artistic version of “manhood” to serve as an alternative to traditional understandings of gender roles in his time. This chapter, however, draws on the writings of Michel Foucault, Hayden M. White and others to consider Anderson’s constructions of “manhood” in Winesburg, Ohio not as alternatives to dominant visions of men prevalent in his time but as fully within and reinforcing a patriarchal social order.

“Don’t stop now. Tell me the rest of it.”—George Willard in “Loneliness”
“hidden” lives and “unacknowledged impulses and the ‘hidden truth’ of repressed sentiments” (311). Certainly, early reviews of the text as well as Anderson’s own statements on it reflect this view. A reviewer for the Chicago Tribune in 1919 understood the stories as imagining a town “where emotion was all the more intense for being defeated and repressed at every turn” (Rascoe 161). In 1923, Anderson himself wrote to a Russian translator of his work: “With the publication of Winesburg I felt I had really begun to write out of the repressed, muddled life about me” (Anderson, Letters 93). For Anderson as well as for many of his critics, this repression is a quality of the modern world Anderson inhabited, a world where—in Thomas Yingling’s view—“sexual repression” threatens “the mature life of men”; as a result, Winesburg, Ohio “presents frustrated desire as ubiquitous, the product of an inevitable and universal repression” (100). In response, Anderson’s project is imagined, quite logically, as one of exposure, combatting repression in the modern age by narrating the hidden desires of his characters, or, as Aaron Ritzenberg has recently put it, “The text adheres to the modernist belief that the mind must look beyond surfaces to find the truth...a buried revelation” (501).

Critics of Winesburg, Ohio disagree, however, on the purposes and results of Anderson’s “revelation” of the “repressed” desires of the “male mind.” Some critics have understood Anderson’s treatment of masculinity and male desires in the text as a conservative reinforcement of gender roles. Clare Colquitt sees the text moving towards a conclusion in which George Willard is merely part of “the community of men who in Winesburg define, exploit, and understand women’s desire for expression only in sexual terms (94). Mark Whalan’s Race, Manhood, and Modernism in America: the Short Story Cycles of Sherwood Anderson and Jean Toomer, the most recent as well as the most comprehensive treatment of masculinity in Anderson’s work, concludes that while Anderson may have wrestled with the significant challenges to gender roles brought on by World War One, Winesburg, Ohio ultimately “buttress[es] patriarchal masculinity” while working to reinforce traditional, normative, heterosexual ideologies (71).

To others, Anderson’s project seems liberatory, as he develops a more sensitive, evolved vision of “manhood” to oppose the traditional gender roles of his time. Indeed, when writing about the “cultural radicals” who advocated “erotic experimentation” and revision of traditional gender