

# The Fictional Forte of Thomas Wolfe with special reference to *Look Homeward, Angel: A Brief Analysis.*

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## ABSTRACT

This paper attempts to show to the reading public that Thomas Wolfe is a novelist of considerable repute and recognition representing some healthy dramatic and narrative writing rich in subject matter, firm in control, often objective in point of view. It vividly projects his first and best novel *Look Homeward, Angel* as a masterpiece novel of Wolfe laying focus on the drab circumstance of provincial American Life, especially acuteness of 'loneliness' through the portrayal of Eugene Gant, the hero of the novel who is portrayed as one grappling with the problems of his life with an attempts to escape from a feeling of loneliness and also attempts to show how *Look Homeward, Angel* exhibits the Wolfe's rhetorical devices employed to describe the emotions and the imagination of a sensitive youth.

**Key words:** Fictional Forte.

Thomas Wolfe, a novelist of some repute and recognition, is said to have produced some short novels which represent strong dramatic and narrative writing rich in subject matter, firm in control, often objective in point of view. In the middle length of the short novel, he worked with perhaps his greatest effectiveness. He is said to have produced seven pieces in this middle length, all of them original published in magazines as independent entities. Five were later fragmented and distributed through the full length novels which include, *The Web of Earth, A Portrait of Bascan Hawke, Of Time and the River, No Door and You can't Go Home Again* "Most of Wolfe's achievements will come under view if one pauses over the three

notions: realism, symbolism, roomy autobiography" (Brown 154-55). The novels are essentially autobiographical.

Thomas Wolfe was born on 3rd October 1900 in Asherville, a city located in the mountains of North Caroline. He is an American novelist, short story writer, essayist, dramatist and poet. His parents, who separated when Wolfe was a young boy, served as the models for some of his most intriguing characters and are considered to have been powerful influence on Wolfe's psychologically troubled adult life. Thomas Wolf entered the University of North Carolina at the age of sixteen. He developed an interest in drama and prepared for a carrier as a playwright. He wrote and produced plays as a member of

George Pierce Baker's famous 47 workshop. He studied English under John Livingston Lowes. Wolfe spent many hours at the Harvard library attempting to read every important work of World literature. After receiving a Master's degree in 1922, he accepted teaching assignment at New York University. As he was wearied by teaching, Wolfe resigned his position in 1925 and determined to live entirely by his writing.

Then, Wolfe had an occasion to get in touch with Aline Bernstein, New York stage designer. She was the woman who became central to his personal life and career. She provided him with the emotional and financial support that enabled him to write his first and best novel, *Look Homeward, Angel*. Which was praised by Margerat wallace as a masterpiece novel of Thomas Wolfe. *Look Homeward, Angel* is an interesting and powerful book as has ever been made out of the drab circumstances of provincial American life. It is at once enormously sensuous, full of joy and gusto of life, and shrinking sensitive, torn with revulsion and disgust. Mr.Wolfe's style is sprawling, fecund, subtly rhythmic and amazingly vital. He twists language masterfully to his own uses, heeding neither the decency of a word nor its licensed existence, so long as he secures his sought - for and instantaneous effect. Assuredly, "this is a book to be savored slowly and reread and the final decision upon it, in all probability, rests with another generation than ours"

(Wallace 7)

After several years, Wolfe conceived of a multi-volume series titled 'The October Fair'. His theme of loneliness of the individual was expanded to include what he considered a universal quest; the search for a spiritual father, or someone who can help you, save you ease the burden for you. This is the theme of his second novel *Of Time and the River*. Cowley reviews *Of Time and the River* as an ambitious novel with tremendous strength as well as tremendous weakness by holding as:

"This book of Thomas Wolfe's is better and worse than I have dared to say- richer, shriller, more exasperating. Cut down by half, it would be twice as good. Strangely, in the midst of its gigantic faults, it gives you the ideas that Wolfe might and could write a novel that was great beyond question" (P 164)

After the publication of his second novel in 1935, Wolfe fell out of favour with many critics. They objected to the autobiographical aspect of his novel. In 1937, Wolfe set to work on an objective novel. While *The Web and the Rock* and *You Can't Go Home Again* exhibited little evidence of progression to objectivity, they did contain a powerful, more mature retelling of Wolfe's story, with Eugene Gant now in the guise of George Webber and Aline Bernstein appealing as Esther Jack. Wolfe's vision had expanded to include social concern as well as the individual's quest for fulfilment.

Wolfe, through Webber , explained his outlook on life to editor Foxhall Edwards in *You can't Go Home Again*. "Man was born to live, to suffer and to die and what befalls him is a tragic lot. there is no denying this in the final end. But we must, dear Fox, deny it all along the way" (YCGH 737). According to Louis Untermeyer, "Always he is something more than himself. He is not only an ambivalent American artist but the symbol of America itself, intransigent and contradictory, looking to Europe for escape and inspiration and at the same time, repudiating the past, denying any heritage but out own" (Untermeyer 731)

*The Hills Beyond* is without a doubt his most objective work. In some parts of it, the style is lean and bare beyond anything one could have expected to find in Thomas Wolfe. There is both a gain and a loss of the lyrical and poetic intensity of his earlier writing... Moreover, *The Hills Beyond* is a work of most pure imagination, with only a few traces here and there of factual intensity with the history of his own family. Most of it represents the very last work he did" (Asuell 383). C. Hugh Holman edited five of 'The Short Novels of Thomas Wolfe', which reminded readers that this was the form in which Wolf worked best. He called the short novel "Proustian" . 'The Party of Jacks' is starkly direct in its telling, fixed almost entirely in the forward moving events of a single night. This work is "Proustian" not in its use of memory or

sensory detail but in its attempt structurally to join representation from a great range of society. In fact , however, it is in his presentation of the precise content of specific scene with a convincing richness of detail and a sense of great vitality that Wolfe appears best, and here is methods are essentially those of the traditional rather than the experimental novelists.

In his four larges and two collections of short stories, Wolfe was concerned with a few central themes. His various concepts of time, faith, loneliness and death, his search for a spiritual father, and his romantic guest were not longer crucial. He was the sensitive artist divorced from his environment. Late in his life, he looked outside himself. He looked and assimilated the political, social and economic world and attempted to bring it in his last novel, *You Can't Go Home Again*. Wolfe's writing is formless autobiography and his style is often pure, simple and quite interesting and it can elucidate the writers' work.

Thomas Wolfe's novels are the record of the revolt of a young spirit. All through life we are searching for some sign - "a Stone, a leaf, a door" - which will open up to us the universe of perfection and enchantment, Wolfe believes in original sin. We are born into the damnation of spiritual isolation and must achieve grace by ending that isolation. This is the main theme of Thomas Wolfe's novels. The two principal symbols are 'love' and

'death'. They are the only things that will end the spiritual isolation of the soul. In the great poem which prefaces of *Time and the River*, these symbols are presented and they are expanded throughout the novel.

Eugene's brother Ben is a symbol for all men who cannot speak or give a sign of brotherhood. The Simpsons are the millions of lonely families. Eugene's desire to read all the books ever written is due to his hunger to see over the walls of his soul into the outside world. The trains rushing through America are the symbols of America itself, violent, splendid, powerful, and blindly rushing to the right. In his novels, he caught that strange and unique combination of brilliant hope and black despair. This is the essence of American spirit.

Thomas Wolfe was lyrical. For him, there was only one world and he was at the center of it. On one level, Wolfe illustrates with great effectiveness the concrete, the immediate and the sensuous. But he is also guilty of excesses in both quantity and quantity of rhetoric. However, Thomas Wolfe's novels are the successful effort to write his autobiography. He is a representative American of his time with a vision of the nature and hope of his democratic land.

One major theme in his fiction is that of 'loneliness'. Just one month after publication of his novel of *Look Homeward Angel*, Wolfe made clear to his mother that its theme was

clearly stated in the opening pages: "that we are born alone - all of us who ever lived or will live - that we love alone, and die alone and that we strangers to one another, and never come to know one another " Eugene Gant, the hero of the novel, grapples with the problems of his life. He tries to escape from a feeling of loneliness - a state of mind which seems to be the very conditions of human existence:

"He understood that man were forever strangers to one another , that no one ever come really to know everyone, that imprisoned in the dark womb of our mother we come to life without having seen her face, that we are given to her arms a stranger, and the, caught in that insoluble prison of being , we escape it never , no matter what arms may clasp us, what mouth may kiss us, what heart may warm us." (LHA 31)

Eugene set out on his quest for certainty and security symbolized by his search for a father. But the quest is not completely useless. The very failure of the hero is the means to his discovery of the self. This experience of failure reveals to his the tangled web of good and evil, of success and failure that life is. He succeeds

in achieving a symbolic release from his hostile domesticity. His search is a continuation of humanity's search for the unattainable. Eugene Gant accepts the past which is a constant source of consolation and

even inspiration. He identifies himself with the millions of men of the past who had gone on similar futile quests. His voyage is the voyage of humanity. In a dream, his dead brother, Ben, tells him, "there is only one voyage and one failure" (Look Homeward 447). The total nature of his quest, as in the case of Whitman, the full hunger and the full thirst for experience results in the urges and energies of the American personality. The central and simplest theme of this novel is the revolt of the individual from the small town.

Throughout the novel, the theme of a symphony reins the note of loneliness and of a groping, defeated search for an answer to the riddle of eternal solitude Eugene set out in search of an impossible ideal-to communicate that which is incommunicable. What he did achieve was a finished portrait of the artist as a young man, and within this man the portrait of a continent. The theme of isolation is also introduced in the prose-poem and the final sentence, "O lost, and by the wind grieved ghost, come back again" (P 64). is repeated at several points in the narrative. The novel is rich in sensual detail and passionate intensity and is increasingly recognized as one of the most important novels in twentieth century American literature .

Characterization in this novel is something appreciable and superb. Besides Eugene, there are several characters monumental in their graphic individuality and personality.

The most unforgettable are William Oliver Gant, Eliza, Ben and Helen. W.Oliver Gant was a man of tremendous energy, potency and magnetism, but ruined by illness, drunkenness, irresponsibility, gigantic defects of various kinds. The children loved him for being a good provider. He had a love for abundance and lusty in his speech, railing aloud some Shakespearean lines in inebriated glory. The character of Eliza is more complex. She was egocentric. She was dependent on the love of her family without surrendering her native freedom. She is represented as a woman so engrossed in her speculations with real estate and money making. Her family became a nuisance and a hindrance rather a vital concern. Only Ben, the beloved brother had any knowledge of the boy's problem. This was true because he, like Eugene, was always tying "to find some entrance into life, some secret undiscovered door-a stone, a leaf-that might admit him into light and fellowship" (Walser 65). The great death scene of Ben is the most profound experience of a young man ever had. For Eugene, it was the death of recognition. Helen, Eugene's sister is a warm portrayal.

His effective use of language is in his accurate and vivid dialogue. Wolfe had a remarkable ear for folk speech and his people speak personal dialects set down with great verisimilitude. His characters sometimes seem to talk for ever but their speech is always marked by distinctness in diction,

syntax and cadence. Style is one of the means by which he creates a sense of variety and abundance in the book for Wolfe employs a variety of styles. Here in this novel, style is used for depth as well as for breadth. Wolfe uses the stream of consciousness style quite frequently in the book-usually a series of phrases and images that are supposed to represent the thought-stream of the characters. To conclude, Thomas Wolfe's work constitutes a major and remarkably successful effort to write his autobiography as a representative American:

*"Look Home and, Angel* remains the most unified of his novels, lyrically and dramatically, because it naturally falls into a simple pattern. It covers a natural stage in a man's life; it tells with whole-hearted intensity the story of growing pains, which to the youth are very complicated but to the grown man an old story" (Muller 55).

Thus, *Look Home Ward, Angel* exhibits the major tendencies in Wolfe's rhetoric. It is his best book because his rhetorical flourishes are most happily employed to describe the

emotions and the imagination of a sensitive child or youth.

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**Happiness is not something ready-made. It comes from your own actions.**

~ **Dalai Lama**