

**Autobiographical Moorings in Thomas Wolfe's
*Look Homeward, Angel***

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Abstract

This paper tries to illustrate the fictional alterations that Thomas Wolfe the novelist makes for achieving an artistic end and juxtaposes the facts of Wolfe's life with the events of his novel *Look Homeward, Angel*. As it is examined that the fiction of Wolfe is autobiographical, and he cannot handle experience that are not directly his own. Either through memory, or love, or sex or through some mystical experiences, the protagonists of Wolfe's fiction, perpetually strives after escape from the past and victory over the present and future. *Look Homeward, Angel* is transparently autobiographical.

Keywords: Thomas Wolfe, *Look Homeward, Angel*, Autobiography, Experience, Reality, Self-Expression, Memory

The significance of Thomas Wolfe the novelist emerges as soon as we discover in him the link that joins him at once with the writers of the nineteenth century and twentieth century. His greatness lies in his titanic endeavour to pin down the whole of reality. Wolfe's novels are essentially disseminated with the inclusive concept of individual sensibility and the characters therein are defined by their confrontation with their psyche rather than by their social relationship. Moreover, the pattern of experiences in which they are involved consists of their initiation into reality, their search for truth, their identity and recognition. In consequence their themes and structures tend toward myth, ritual and folklore. The mythic overtone though rich and varied, has a predominant pattern in the solitary myth of the fall of man and his regeneration exploited time and again by Wolfe.

Wolfe, quite consistent with the tradition of Walt Whitman who sang of himself, wrote to his mother about his intended end as a writer: "I mean to express myself to the last ounce" (57) quoted by Elizabeth Nowell in *Thomas Wolfe - A Biography*. It is truism to say that pure objectivity is a myth in creative writing. Objectivity in its utmost purity lies in externalisation of personal emotion through some objective correlative; and in this sense, "every creative act is in one way or another autobiographical" (*Something of Myself in the Enigma of Thomas Wolfe* 6). But it is more so in the case of Wolfe who is avowedly concerned with self-expression. This preoccupation with self-expression makes his novels all the more autobiographical.

Of all his novels *Look Homeward, Angel* is the most autobiographical, so literally autobiographical that its publication caused more excitement, gossip, and talk and distress in Asheville and the Wolfe was accused of painting himself and his home circle, as well as neighbour, friends, and acquaintances with bold- Charing lines, sparing nothing and shielding nothing. The town seethed with the fury of - resentment and resentment and that Wolfe received anonymous letters full of vilification and abuse. Eugene Gant, the protagonist of *Look Homeward, Angel*, is easily identified with Wolfe. His birth in the year 1900 which marked the beginning of the twentieth century synchronizes with the year of the birth of Wolfe himself. While describing the ancestry of Eugene in the novel, Wolfe writes of his own ancestry. Eugene's father Oliver Gant is a stonecutter and so was Wolfe's father William Oliver Wolfe, "a Stone-Cutter's apprentice." Surprisingly, the name Oliver remains unchanged in the novel. Gant's wife, Cynthia, figures in the fiction in her original name and Wolfe's mother Julia Elizabeth figures as Eliza Pentland and the word 'Pentland' replaces the names of Julia's descendants, the Pentland and the Paton. Similarly, the place Baltimore remains intact, but Asheville becomes Altamont and the old Kentucky Home, the Dixieland in the story.

Wolfe was a periodic drinker who indulged in epic sprees which both terrified and outraged his teetotaler wife and caused a lot of headshaking in the still small town of Asheville - thus writes Nowell describing the drinking habit of Wolfe's father. Eugene's father is given to the same inordinate drunkenness terrifying the prostitutes at the Eagle Crescent and making Elisa wait till the terrible quiet the return of the fear at night. However, Tom's relation with his father was 'happier one' and so is Eugene's relation with his father as compared to that with his mother. The children were fascinated with Gant's character. Tom spoke of the enormous beating colour of Gant's life. Tom's sister Mable Wheaton feels the same richness in William Oliver Wolf, "It was papa who made the grass green for us" (19). Wolfe, while presenting the epic richness of Eugene's father, draws upon the richness of his own father's character:

"The family was at the very core of ripeness of its life together. Gant lavished upon his abuses, his affections and his prodigal provisioning. They came to look forward eagerly to his entrance, for he brought with him, gusto of living, of ritual"... (64)

The falling tides of Gant's rhetoric, his repeated citations from the classics, his entire 'Grandiose Speech' and 'Love of Poetry' tally with those of Wolfe's own father. Elizabeth Nowell writes of Wolfe as inheriting from his father, "the richness, (18) the Rhetoric and the Seniority of his prose," (25) and also his "great gusto of living" (19). She illustrates the parallel by quoting from "The Story of a Novel" and reproducing Wolfe's own words about his father:

My father, stonecutter, was a man with great respect and veneration for literature; he had a tremendous memory, and he loved poetry and the poetry that he loved best was naturally of the 'Rhetorical kind.' (2)

From his father he got his garrulity, his mysticism, his enormous retentive memory, and his dogged will for long sustained, exhaustive work. The dogged will of his mother manifests itself in Eliza's strength and endurance.

Wolfe himself had studied for four years in the loving kindness of Mrs. Roberts. It follows then, that Margaret Leonard of *Look Homeward, Angel*, is modelled after Mrs. Roberts and that the love, between Eugene and Margaret has a striking semblance with the love between Mrs. Roberts and Wolfe himself. The scene which depicts the tender youth straining against the galling weight of newspapers is so moving that it seems to touch upon some secret world of the writer's own life. At first the canvas strap of paper bag bit cruelly across his tender shoulders. He strained against the galling weight that pulled him earthward. The first weeks were like the warring nightmares. Eugene the newspaper boy, rises with the lark, completes the work of delivering the papers in the Nigger-town before dawn and attends his classes without telling the Leonards that "he was working in the early morning" (*Look Homeward Angel* 322). In this scene of a child's suffering and humiliation, Wolfe seeks the catharsis of the bitter experience of his own childhood when his escape into reading and fantasy was broken and he was sent out on the streets to sell the copies of the Magazine in accordance with his mother's admonition.

Wolfe has developed a sense of hatred against his mother and her Kentucky Home which she had established for the visitors. The shattering influence that the old Kentucky Home wrought upon his psyche is revealed in one of his letters to Mrs. Roberts: "I was without a home... I moved in ward on that house of death and tumult from room to room, as the boarders came with their dollars a day and their constant rocking on the porch. My over-loaded heart was strangling with speech, without articulation, in my own secretion" (*Look Homeward Angel* 27).

This deep-rooted hatred against the Old Kentucky Home is attributed to Eugene who hates his mother's career as a boarding house-keeper and the same hatred is turned into tempestuous madness when Eugene, being betrayed by Laura James, runs amuck and begins to break, like Samson, the Dixieland boarding house with the frantic gasps. But, then, this is an example of pent-up emotion, surging and seeking its vent through an 'objective correlative' in the guise of a wild, demonic and frustrated lover; and this also given a glimpse into the author's heart nursing a wound of an unrequited love. Eugene's elemental love with Laura James and his Heathcliffian desperation wells up from Wolfe's own experience of love with Claura Paul. Eugene, too, does not quite get over his love with Laura James; rather love gets over him and makes him mad. Evidently, then, Tom's Claura Paul is Eugene's Laura James and the Old Kentucky Home is the Dixieland boarding House. "I was without a home, a vagabond, since I was seven" (*Look Homeward Angel* 44). This feeling of homelessness finds expression in Wolfe's letter to Mrs. Roberts.

It points out, on the one hand, the autobiographical source of the theme of isolation, while on the other, it speaks of the painful loss of ideal motherhood in Wolfe's life; besides, it culminates into a quest for a mother and thus clarifies the reasons for Eugene's love of and infatuation with the women of older age and for Ben's love of Mrs. Perkins who is old enough to be his mother.

The most moving scene in the fiction is the presentation of the death of Ben, a twin brother and guardian angel to Eugene. He lives even after his death in the memory of Eugene who is presented in the concluding chapter of the novel as holding a colloquy with Ben's ghost. Though dead, Ben keeps impinging continually on the consciousness of Eliza and Eugene; Eliza is frequently reminded of his death; the very sight of the watch presented by Ben to Eugene transports Eugene to

his twelfth birthday as described in *Of Time and the River*. This Ben, then, is the fictional projection of the original Ben, a twin brother to Thomas Wolfe himself. It is clear that the scene of Ben's death surges up from the deeply felt experiences of the author who had always referred to Ben's death as the most tragic experience of his life. In like manner, the long-drawn-out scene of Oliver Gant's slow death with his cancerous body and heart-rending groans grows from the terrible experiences of Wolfe who had watched his father dying of cancer. Wolfe as a child had seen and suffered his father's suffering and had heard him crying of pain and agony. Obviously, the sense of awe felt at the sight of the terrible disease torturing his father finds its intensification in his fiction.

Wolfe in fact draws quite liberally upon the actual incidents of his life. The death of Eugene's roommate parallels the death of Tom's room-mate named Bob Sterling, and hence Bob Sterling of the novel is Edmund Burdick in actual life. Eugene's experience as a checker of the flying field parallels Tom's experience. Tom's brother Fred had joined the navy and Ben had been rejected. In like manner, Luke (Eugene's brother) as depicted in the novel, joins the navy and Ben is rejected. Even the scene of Warfare for the share of Gant's property, presented with a satiric overtone in the novel, is based on an actual incident in Wolfe's life. The incident of Luke tricking Eugene into signing a release and thus depriving him of his legitimate share in the father's property is reflected in the of Wolfe's letters.

The scene of commotion at Eugene's proposal for advanced study and at his choice of Virginia University, as presented in the novel, bears resemblance to similar facts in Wolfe's own life. "When Tom broached the subject to him (Tom's father), was told for once and for all that he much go back to the University of North Carolina or give up College altogether" (*Look Homeward Angel* 413). Eugene receives a similar rebuff from his father, and he is going to the State University, and nowhere else. Eugene's experience at Pulpit Hall, too, resembles Wolfe's at Chapel Hill; and thus, Pulpit Hill is the fictional version of Chapel Hill.

We are further told of Eugene as a victim to buffooneries and cruelty of vacant laughter that had opened deep wounds in him. His "wild child face," "his great raw length of body" and his "bounding scissor legs" were laughed at by his fellow-students. With all her whining and pining for her father's recovery with all her frantic and feverish questionings to Dr. McGuire, Helen does not become a melodramatic figure -she does not break away from life but sticks to it. What redeems her is her adherence to life and her selfless devotion to and sacrifices for the life of her dying father. This extreme devotion to old Gant links her up with the Mabel of Wolfe's life. Helen blurts out in her frantic desperation. The only link connecting her with life is thus her father. Her never-failing love for him wins her a kinship with Wolfe's sister Mabel who had stayed at Woodfin Street, "with his devoted daughter keeping house for him"? (*Look Homeward Angel* 58) while Gant's devoted daughter is Helen who adored him, nursed him and made him docile during his drunken spree. But, then, this is an oblique resemblance to the facts of Wolfe's life, and Wolfe's demonic imagination seems to have transformed, Mabel through a poetic metabolism into nightmarish Helen who looms so unmistakably throughout the pages of *Look Homeward, Angel*. The scenes of individual isolation and loneliness which punctuate the novels of Wolfe stem, to a considerable extent, from his own feeling of estrangement suffered partly on account of his grotesque figure and partly due to the absence of loving parents in his childhood.

Wolfe's bitterness towards his mother, having sought its purgation in the presentation of Eugene's hatred towards Eliza in *Look-Homeward, Angel*, does not get spent, but appears in *The Web and the Rock*. It follows that the chief preoccupations of Thomas Wolfe the novelist have been to recreate in his fiction the acts and events of his own past. But the physical deed and its repercussions gradually subside and become part of the lost past in accordance with the laws of change and succession which operate in the world of space of time. Yet the reverberations of the act continue and become a part of the human consciousness; thus, the act itself persists in the mental world whose co-ordinates are memory and imagination. Language, when used creatively, is a pictorial representation of the mental world - just as graphs and diagrams are of the physical world. It is quite in the fitness of things, then, that Wolfe's preoccupation with the excavation of the past that is said to persist in the mental world, leads him subsequently to the exploration of the potentialities of language through which alone the pastor the mental world can be truly represented.

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