Look Homeward, Angel Study Guide

Look Homeward, Angel by Thomas Wolfe

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Contents

Introduction

A thinly disguised autobiography and a portrait of the early twentieth-century American South, *Look Homeward, Angel* is the most famous book of an author who used to be regarded as an equal of Ernest Hemingway, F. Scott Fitzgerald, and William Faulkner. Published in New York in 1929, Thomas Wolfe's novel was considered striking and important—a work by a genius with a grand, compelling personality. It is a novel in the American romantic tradition, meant to contain Wolfe's own "American experience" as represented by his alter ego, Eugene Gant.

In the seventy-four years since it was published, the novel has received steadily less critical attention. Wolfe's initial editor, Maxwell Perkins, cut sixty thousand words from its original text to make it more readable, but many recent critics and readers continue to find *Look Homeward, Angel* a hugely sprawling text that is sometimes clearly bombastic. Some are also offended by what it says about race and gender. These elements have led to a decline in Wolfe's reputation and a reevaluation of his importance to the literary movement of his time.

Nevertheless, Wolfe's first novel remains very important to the twentieth-century American tradition, and Wolfe generally retains his contemporary reputation as a unique genius. The best critical approach to his work is one that understands it firmly within its time and place. It is a novel with a strong sense of autobiography, a *Bildungsroman* (novel of development), an attempt at a comprehensive display of life in the American South from 1900 to 1920, and a response to the modernist movement of American writers who were living and writing in Europe.

Author Biography

Born October 3, 1900, in Asheville, North Carolina, Thomas Wolfe was the youngest of eight children, two of whom died when they were very young. His father, William Oliver Wolfe, traveled around the northern United States, married twice without having children, and then moved to Asheville, where he married Julia Elizabeth Westall. When her youngest son was seven, Thomas's mother bought and moved into a boarding house called "The Old Kentucky Home." The children shuffled between the two homes, and Thomas became interested in the private school he attended at age eleven.

Wolfe entered the University of North Carolina when he was only fifteen. He eventually excelled there, and after he graduated he moved to Boston to complete a master of arts program at Harvard. By this time, he had begun writing plays and short stories, declaring in letters to his mother that he wanted to put "the American experience" on paper. Wolfe traveled to Europe several times, and on the ship back after one journey, he met Aline Bernstein, with whom he began a long relationship. Bernstein supported Wolfe while he worked on *Look Homeward, Angel*, which Scribner published in 1929 after making some significant cuts to the autobiographical novel.

Wolfe then set out on an ambitious project for a six-part novel series on American themes. Pressure from his publisher contributed to the hurried completion of his second novel, *Of Time and the River*, in 1935. Wolfe then postponed his large project and began work on a novel about another autobiographical hero, the innocent George Webber. In May 1938, Wolfe gave a draft of this novel to his new editor at Harper's and went on vacation. Days later, he was hospitalized in Seattle with a brain infection from pneumonia. He was taken to Baltimore, where he died after an unsuccessful operation on September 15, 1938.

By the time of this death, Wolfe had become a somewhat legendary American figure. Over six and a half feet tall, he was described as passionate and often moody, and he made a lasting impression on those that knew him. His editor published three posthumous novels out of his unfinished manuscript: *The Web and the Rock*, *You Can't Go Home Again*, and *The Hills Beyond*, which describe George Webber's family history and adventures, including his love affair with Esther Jack (Aline Bernstein).

Plot Summary

Part 1

Look Homeward, Angel begins with the journey of Englishman Gilbert Gaunt to Pennsylvania; there he marries a Dutch woman. One of his sons, Oliver Gant (the name was changed upon Gilbert's immigration), becomes a stonecutter and travels through the South until settling with his first wife, Cynthia. After her death, Gant thinks he is dying of tuberculosis and travels west until he reaches the small mountain-valley town of Altamont.

Gant sets up a stonecutting shop and recovers from his restless illness when spring comes. He then meets Eliza Pentland, whom he marries. Then he builds a grand house. Oliver Gant and Eliza have nine children (six of whom survive). Gant begins to go on severe drinking binges, which Eliza vehemently tries to temper.

In 1900, when Gant turns fifty, the conflict between Gant and Eliza comes to a climax. Eliza tries sending him to sanitariums and forbidding saloon owners to serve him drinks, but this only infuriates Gant. One night, he comes home violently drunk. It takes two neighbors, a doctor, and Eliza's brother, Will, to help his daughter, Helen, calm him down. Eliza gives birth that night to her youngest son, Eugene. Gant begs forgiveness from her.

Even as a small child, Eugene thinks deeply about the isolation and loneliness in the world. When he is two, he wanders into his aristocratic neighbors' estate and is almost killed by a horse. His older brother Grover's death from typhoid saddens him deeply. This death causes Eliza to move home from St. Louis, where she was attempting the first of her moneymaking adventures.

Gant continues to grow further from his wife and closer to his daughter Helen. When he is fifty-six, Gant takes a "last great voyage" to California. When he finally returns, he continues his habits of building gigantic fires and making his family eat huge amounts of food.

Eugene discovers his love of books and begins his vibrant inner life at age six. He has several adventures playing with his friends from school (including racist pranks against Jews, African Americans, and poor whites), and once he is almost beaten by the principal for writing insults about him. Eugene's parents make him start a job selling the *Saturday Evening Post*, like his brothers Ben and Luke.

Before Eugene turns eight, Eliza takes him on her next big project—to purchase and run a boarding house called "Dixieland." Eugene still spends much of his time at Gant's house with Helen. But he has his first major crush at Dixieland, on a married woman who has an affair with Eugene's oldest brother, Steve.

Part 2

Eugene grows up rapidly. One day he wins the composition contest the new principal, John Leonard, holds. Margaret Leonard convinces Eliza to send Eugene to their new private school. Mr. Leonard teaches the boys rudimentary Latin and his sister Amy teaches math and history. Mrs. Leonard (whom Eugene idealizes) teaches the boys English, a subject she is passionate about.

Eugene becomes closer with Ben and grows to hate Steve more. Luke and Ben hate Steve too. One night, after Steve has been yelling drunkenly at Eliza and has given Luke a bloody nose, Ben angrily beats him up. Helen tours the South singing but moves back to Altamont after her partner, Pearl, gets married. Luke does a lot of hustling and tries to pay his way through school, but he drops out and gets a factory job.

Gant sells Eliza his precious stone angel for a poor woman's grave. He takes Eugene to early movies and visits Dixieland more often, but he is "dying very slowly" of prostate cancer. Gant has a very brief affair with a Dixieland tenant and sexually harasses an African American cook but is rapidly and visibly decaying of old age.

Eugene gets a paper route through the African American section of town and grows wilder, harrying subscribers for payments. He nearly has sex with a mulatto (mixed race) prostitute, Ella Corpening. Eliza goes on a trip to Florida, while Eugene stays with the Leonards and continues reading a great deal of literature.

With the beginning of World War I, Eugene wants to join the navy and Ben tries to join the army, but neither actually does so. Eugene goes on a trip to Charleston, where he has a fling with an older girl named Louise. When he returns, he wins a medal for an essay on Shakespeare and acts in a pageant as Prince Hal (from Shakespeare's *Henry IV* cycle). After Helen gets married and moves away, Gant decides inflexibly to send Eugene (at only sixteen) to the state university.

Eugene's first year at university is "filled for him with loneliness, pain, and failure." Although he enjoys the education itself, other students mock him frequently. One of them, Jim Trivett, says he will make a man of Eugene and takes him to see a prostitute. When he goes home for Christmas, Eugene only feels better after he has admitted his exploits to Ben and Dr. McGuire.

After a slightly less painful second semester, Eugene goes home again and meets twenty-one-year-old Laura James at Dixieland. One night, after Eugene cuts his hand while trying to subdue his drunken father, she kisses him and he falls rapidly in love with her. They go on a picturesque walk through the mountains and make promises to never leave each other.

At the end of June, however, Laura leaves Altamont, telling Eugene she will be gone for a few days. But she never returns. She writes him a letter informing him that she will be married the next day, and Eugene goes through a savage despair—until Ben once again makes him feel better.

Back at college, Eugene becomes popular and joins a great deal of clubs. When he comes home again for Christmas, his family lets him try a drink for the first time. After he pours more secretly, he becomes extremely drunk. He wanders to town. After his friends bring him back, his family finds him drunk in bed. They all bemoan the curse of drink.

In the spring, Eugene goes on a trip to Virginia in search of Laura. He is still in love with her. When he gets there, he cannot bring himself to seek her out and instead squanders all of his money until he has no choice but to find a job. After working hard all summer, he sends Laura a bitter letter and returns to Altamont.

Eugene returns home from college in October because Ben is deathly ill with pneumonia. The family places the blame on Eliza, whose stinginess may have stopped Ben from getting the proper care, and they bicker with each other while they watch Ben die. When Ben can no longer order her away, Eliza holds his hand and watches Ben's last moments with Eugene.

Luke and Eugene have a burst of energy when Ben is dead, and Eliza tells them to make arrangements in town for an expensive funeral. Eugene breaks into ironic laughter when the undertaker, Horse Hines, is very proud of how he has made up the corpse. Eugene finds the funeral superficial and listens to Helen complain about wasting her life taking care of Gant (who is still alive, if barely). That night, Eugene visits Ben's grave, where he has an eerie discussion with Miss Pert, Ben's companion from Dixieland. Eliza had thrown her angrily from their house during Ben's illness, although Miss Pert was the only person who took care of Ben when he was becoming very sick.

Eugene has a busy and proud final semester at college. After a conversation with his favorite teacher about Harvard, he goes back to Altamont for the last time. Eliza has become completely obsessed with her real estate ventures, but Eugene's anger makes her agree to pay for a year at Harvard. Before Eugene leaves home forever, he visits the town square and sees Ben's ghost. They talk about why Eugene is leaving, and the experience becomes more mystical, with images of the past and of fantastical visions appearing all over the square. Then Ben disappears "without an answer," and Eugene prepares to leave.

Part 1, Chapter 1

Part 1, Chapter 1 Summary

Gilbert Gaunt, who later changed his name to Gant, traveled from England to America (Baltimore) in 1837, settling eventually in Pennsylvania, where he married a Dutch woman. Oliver, his second son, is enchanted by a stone angel he sees in a shop window in Baltimore and becomes an apprentice to a stonecutter for five years. He is a large man, six feet, four inches. After his five-year apprenticeship, he roams the country, at last settling in Sydney. Here he sets up a shop and marries a woman ten years older than himself. Within 18 months, he is drinking, his wife dies, and his business is gone. Only a little past thirty, he looks much older because of his drinking. Gant wanders again, heading toward the mountains and eventually settles in Altamont, a summer resort for the wealthy and a sanitarium for tuberculars.

Using the money left from his wife's estate, he sets up shop. One day Eliza Pentland enters his shop, selling books, which he buys. Eliza has six brothers, but she is the only surviving girl. The family is afflicted with "an insatiate love of property."

Part 1, Chapter 1 Analysis

Maxwell Perkins, said to be the greatest book editor this country has ever seen, was the Scribner's editor for *Look Homeward, Angel*. He was also the editor for many other well-known American authors including F. Scott Fitzgerald and Ernest Hemingway. When he worked with Wolfe on the manuscript that became this book, he was alarmed when he realized that it was not actually fiction - it was Wolfe's real life. It was set in Asheville, North Carolina, where Wolfe grew up and included many people, who were at that time still alive, though Wolfe used other names for them. Wolfe responded to Perkins' concerns in this way: "But Mr. Perkins, you don't understand. I think these people are great people and that they should be told about" (from an article written by Perkins and used as an introduction to the First Scribner Paperback Edition, 1995). So Perkins went along.

Roman a clef is a literary term used to describe fiction that portrays real, identifiable characters and locations thinly disguised as fiction, and *Look Homeward, Angel* certainly fits the definition of that term. It is the early life of Thomas Wolfe and his wildly dysfunctional family, who lived in Asheville, which, at that time, was a developing resort area where those who could afford it would come in the summer to escape the heat. The Western North Carolina Railroad had arrived in 1880, only twenty years before Thomas was born, and by the time of his birth, a market for livestock and tobacco was developing quickly, so the small town of Altamont in this book was already undergoing great change. The feverish desire to own real estate on the part of Eliza in the novel is an indication of what was going on in the town and is a foreshadowing of the last chapters. The book is about the changes that take place in the life of a young man as

he goes out into the world, so the unrest in Thomas Wolfe's emotional life may very well reflect the atmosphere of the town he grew up in.

Asheville has long been the cultural and economic center of the western part of North Carolina and a vacation hub for the Blue Ridge Mountains. The boarding house pictured in this novel provides an early vignette of the resort town that was to come.

Part 1, Chapter 2

Part 1, Chapter 2 Summary

Oliver and Eliza are married, and he builds a large house for her with his own hands. Eliza engineers a partnership with her brother, Will Pentland, which lasts only a year, so Gant goes back to stonecutting and drinking. In the next eleven years, they have nine children. The first, a girl, dies at twenty months of cholera; two more die at birth. Steve, the oldest to survive, is born in 1885. Then there are Daisy, Helen, Grover and Ben (twins). Luke, the last of the nine, is born in 1894. Eliza sends Gant to Richmond for a cure for his alcoholism when the alcoholic bouts stretch into weeks.

Part 1, Chapter 2 Analysis

Much more is known about alcoholism now than when Wolfe was growing up or even when he wrote this book. It's apparent very early in this marriage that Gant is an alcoholic with all the characteristics that many alcoholics display. Living with one is life on a roller-coaster. When he was not drinking, he was garrulous, generous, loving, and vastly entertaining. When he was drinking, he was abusive, grossly immoral, and destructive, even dangerous, to the people he was closest to. There were specialty facilities where alcoholics could be sent for a cure, even in the years before 1900; unfortunately, they were rarely successful over the long run. Because the disease is so much better understood nowadays, the cure rates are higher, although sending the alcoholic away for a "cure" is still commonly practiced.

Part 1, Chapter 3

Part 1, Chapter 3 Summary

In 1900, Eliza is pregnant for the last time, and Gant is not only drinking but visiting prostitutes. Steve, the oldest, now retrieves him and brings him home. When Gant comes home drunk, he rages and threatens to kill Eliza. Helen takes care of him when he finally calms down.

Part 1, Chapter 3 Analysis

Thomas Wolfe grew up to be a very tall man, possibly six-foot-six, and his size came directly from his father, who was said to be six-foot-four. Gant is a dominating presence in many ways in this novel, including his size. He makes loud, long speeches; he provides for his family and consumes large amounts of food and creates huge fires in the fireplaces of the house. The descriptions of his noisy arrival home at the end of the day are some of the most entertaining and heart-warming episodes in the novel.

Part 1, Chapter 4

Part 1, Chapter 4 Summary

Eugene is born after a long, hard labor, with Gant raving drunk downstairs. Gant loves the little boy and one Sunday takes him for a walk near a field where there is a cow. The child imitates the mooing of the cow, which excites the father, and he races home so he can tell Eliza. She says, "I'll vow, Mr. Gant. I never saw such an idiot with a child."

One day Eugene wanders into a wealthy neighbor's grounds and toddles into the path of a horse, which knocks him down and leaves a wound on his head. Dr. McGuire comes and tells them it's not as bad as it looks. Even so, he is unconscious for several hours. He wears the scar on his forehead from that day forward.

Part 1, Chapter 4 Analysis

Bildungsroman is a German term defined in Merriam Webster's Encyclopedia of Literature as "literature that deals with the formative years of the main character," and this is exactly what Wolfe intended to achieve with this autobiographical novel. A later American novel that does much the same thing, though perhaps not so thoroughly, is J.D. Salinger's Catcher in the Rye. As we set out on this journey into the life of Eugene Gant, we see him in this early stage as precocious. We also see the influence of his father in his development here. We can often see that the father does not understand what this extraordinary child needs, but we never doubt that he loves him. We will also see that the mother is so penurious and self-absorbed that she exploits him to satisfy her own needs with little regard for what would be the best for him.

Part 1, Chapter 5

Part 1, Chapter 5 Summary

Steve is wild and rebellious because of his early experiences with his father's most extreme alcoholic escapades. Gant heaps abuse on Steve at home because of his failures; then Steve forges a check on his father. Although Gant pays the check, he is furious, blaming Steve's problems on "Mountain Blood." Eliza tells Steve that he would have turned out better if he hadn't gone to every dive in town to pull his daddy out.

Gant is drinking less except for a spree every six to eight weeks. Eliza's patience with the abuse is wearing thin; they no longer sleep in the same bedroom. Gant brings home enormous amounts of food and builds roaring fires in the mornings and in the evenings, and he reads to Eugene, who memorizes the books and pretends to "read" them by reciting them, which pleases his father.

Eliza decides to go to Chicago to the World's Fair in 1904, to lease a rooming house and rent out rooms. Gant stays at home, as does Daisy, who is in her final year of school. Helen has become Gant's keeper, and it pains him to see her go with her mother. In the summer, Gant comes to St. Louis and brings Daisy with him. Some of the people from Altamont come to the fair and rent rooms from Eliza.

Eliza requires Steve, Grover, and Ben to work at the fairgrounds. Grover comes down with typhoid, and Gant comes back a second time. The child dies of the fever. They travel back home on the train, taking the body with them.

Part 1, Chapter 5 Analysis

Point of view in this story is third person narrator, limited omniscient, which means that we know what the narrator and protagonist are seeing and thinking but no one else. This is an important treatment of point of view in a developmental story like this. By being in Eugene's mind, we can feel with him and see with him the experiences that lead him into adulthood. At the same time, we can also hear Thomas Wolfe's voice in this story because it is his story. Also, he slips from time to time, and we know what some of the other characters are thinking. For example, we are told that Gant's heart shriveled when he saw Gordon so ill of typhoid. And before they go back home, we are told that Gant thought briefly of his four and fifty years, his vanished youth, etc.

Steve didn't have a chance in this family. As the oldest, he was the one who, at an early age, had to be directly involved with his father's drunken rages and disgusting sexual behavior. When he begins to act out his inevitable reaction to these early experiences, the parents blame him and each other. With our objective viewpoint as readers, we are exasperated that someone doesn't do something to help Steve deal with his feelings so he can find wholeness, but it doesn't happen. In the later chapters of the book, Steve

has essentially dropped from sight, but in the chapters where his life is recorded, he is a sad disaster.

Grover, Ben's twin, is a tragedy for the family, and brings them home. Eliza's neglect of the boy and her insistence that he go out and earn a living are largely responsible for his death, but she doesn't acknowledge her guilt. Nor does it change her. Obliviously onward she sails!

Part 1, Chapter 6

Part 1, Chapter 6 Summary

Gant is the home's life-force. He reads from Shakespeare, has Helen recite poems, and moves in great strides around the house, entertaining and energizing the family with his gusto. Always he builds great roaring fires. Food is abundant: apples are stored in the basement, hams and bacons hang in the pantry, and there are preserved fruits on the shelves. Thanksgiving and Christmas feasts are extravagant. "He had a Dutch love of abundance," we are told.

Part 1, Chapter 6 Analysis

It would be easy at this point in the story to come to the conclusion that this is Gant's story - that he is the protagonist, but this is not true. The story is Eugene's. All of this is prelude. Even so, this chapter is one of the best in the book as far as the picture of the family is concerned. Even in the most dysfunctional of families, there are good times. Unfortunately, they don't negate the damage done by the bad times.

Part 1, Chapter 7

Part 1, Chapter 7 Summary

Gant is fifty-six years old; it has been two years since the return from St. Louis, and he makes his last journey - this one to California. He is home now, and Eliza and the children are excited and pleased to have him back.

Part 1, Chapter 7 Analysis

Gant's and Eliza's travels suggest escape. It is a departure from this life in Asheville that brings him so much pain. He could have stayed away, but his demons cannot be escaped by a change in geography. He is a true alcoholic, and there is no escape. The last chapter tells of Eugene's permanent escape from Asheville. This trip of his father's is a foreshadowing of that later leave-taking by his youngest son.

Part 1, Chapter 8

Part 1, Chapter 8 Summary

Eugene is six now and is going to school. He is fond of books, and Eliza and Gant both take credit for his intelligence. He does well at school, learning quickly to read and write. Eliza clings to his babyhood, refusing to cut his hair, even though he is teased about it. He and a friend write obscenities in their notebooks, and one day Eugene is caught. He fears the paddling he is about to get, but the teacher makes an exception and does not administer the punishment after Eugene promises never to do it again.

Eugene and Ben are close, although Ben is growing up, already shaving.

Part 1, Chapter 8 Analysis

Eugene's teachers always recognize his special capabilities, and this teacher who is so feared goes lightly on him.

Ben will be an abiding presence in Eugene's life during his growing-up years. In many ways, he is Eugene's salvation. He gets none of the love and nurturing he so badly needs from his two self-absorbed parents, who seem oblivious to the needs of the children. But Ben is always there defending him, listening to him, sharing with him--all the things a loving parent should do.

Part 1, Chapter 9

Part 1, Chapter 9 Summary

Eugene and his friends spend their days taunting and teasing the Negroes and Jews in their neighborhood. Eugene goes alone to visit his father in his stonecutting shop, and his father takes him across the street for a soda. Eugene then goes on to the library, reading mostly the books written specifically for boys. He also exchanges books with his friends. Altamont is the center of his earth and his ambitions are for love and fame.

Part 1, Chapter 9 Analysis

When *Look Homeward, Angel* first came out in 1929, it was very favorably reviewed and continued to be so for many years. As time went on, however, the critics paid less and less attention to it for two reasons: 1) it is wordy, even though Perkins worked with the author to reduce its size; and 2) it reflects a bigoted, prejudicial view of women and racial minorities that have become unpalatable, not only to critics, but to the reading public. The novel uses pejorative terms that have become unacceptable in American society. The summary of this chapter refers to one of those incidents where the racial and gender attitudes are so rank. There are many of them in the book, but for purposes of this summary and analysis, only a few examples will be mentioned.

Part 1, Chapter 10

Part 1, Chapter 10 Summary

Eliza and Gant require the boys to go out and get jobs when they are still quite young, feeling that it will make them independent and self-reliant. Ben has a paper-route, which he begins at 3:00 a.m. He has become quiet and withdrawn and quits school after the eighth grade. The parents take little notice of the life he is living. At home, he plays with Eugene, giving him money and buying him presents, and he always remembers birthdays of all the family members with gifts.

Eugene must get up at six-thirty to fill baskets with garden produce and peddle them throughout the neighborhood. He gets to keep his own money, but Eliza requires that he put money into a bank to which she holds the only key. On Saturdays he *sells The Saturday Evening Post* on the streets. Luke is a stutterer but has a talent for sales, and he is generous with gifts for his parents. Once a week, he sends out a group of little boys to sell his magazines, teaching them high-pressure sales techniques, which are an embarrassment to Eugene. Ben objects to Eugene being made to work in this way, but to no effect.

Part 1, Chapter 10 Analysis

In Ben, we also see the effects of the cruel and uncaring parenting of Eliza and Gant. Why does no one notice that he is withdrawn? Even so, he retains a sweetness that continues with him for the rest of his life. He is earning his own living when he is very young. The child-labor laws that were enacted later in this country were introduced because of children like Ben. He knows it's wrong; he objects when little Eugene is being forced to do the same thing. There is irony in the character of Luke. The pressures of his upbringing cause him to stutter, yet he becomes a salesman!

Part 1, Chapter 11

Part 1, Chapter 11 Summary

Eliza buys a rooming house called Dixieland. Gant has made the down payment for her and had the papers made out in her name. She will pay the remainder off in annual installments. Eliza takes Eugene with her, essentially separating from Gant; Helen stays with her father. Steve has been away from home most of the time since he turned eighteen, sometimes forging checks on his father, and coming home occasionally when he claims to be sick.

Eugene, eight years old, goes back and forth between the two houses. He sleeps in the same bed with Eliza, and she clings to him when she is not so preoccupied that she doesn't miss him. He prefers to go home and sleep with Ben, whose room has two beds. Gant goes to the boarding house once in a while to rant about Eliza leaving him and disgracing the family. She is so abusive toward the black women who work for her that she can't keep help, so she calls Helen to come and help out from time to time. Gant and the boys frequently go to the boarding house for the evening meal, and Gant sits on the porch and entertains with stories or political orations.

Eugene is ashamed of Dixieland but dares not say so. When the house fills, he and his mother move from room to room, and when the boarders must be fed, Eugene must wait. On Sundays, he goes to the Presbyterian Church and participates in a special service for the children. Most of his friends are Baptists because that is the religion of the lower classes, so he is a stranger at the Presbyterian Church.

Part 1, Chapter 11 Analysis

Distinctions between classes are mentioned frequently in this novel. Eugene and his brothers and sisters see themselves as lower-class, yet they separate themselves from that distinction by going as strangers to the "upper-class" Presbyterian Church. Eugene's attitude toward the black people in the community, of whom there are many, is derogatory and insulting. They are lower than the lowest. He pictures them as being dirty or indolent. There are no sympathetic blacks in this story.

It's unhealthy for a mother to continue to sleep with a son until he is eleven or twelve years old, as Eliza does with Eugene. He is never able to establish a sexual relationship with a girl his own age. In fact, in this story, he never does have a successful relationship with any woman. The women he has sex with are either older than he or are prostitutes. The relationship between Helen and her father is equally incestuous, at least emotionally if not physically. She lives her life for him, and even when she is married, she cannot break those bonds.

Part 1, Chapter 12

Part 1, Chapter 12 Summary

The summers are miserable and many of the boarders have bronchial disorders. Eugene likes the summers better when sultry southern women inhabit the hotel. He stays at home with Helen in the mornings, and she feeds him and spoils him, but sometimes she becomes verbally abusive until he reacts with rage, which seems to satisfy her.

Eugene is being introduced to sex through his observation of the southern women who come to stay at the boarding house in the summertime. Mrs. Selbourne is married to a man who owns a livery stable and has two children. He sends her checks, as does a lumberman she has an ongoing affair with, but she also makes herself available to men in Altamont.

Steve is now in his early twenties and has returned home from New Orleans after being away for a year. He is physically and verbally abusive, and Eugene and Ben hate him. Mrs. Selbourne becomes his mistress. However, she becomes friends with Helen and realizes what her relationship with him is doing to the family, so she breaks it off. Helen goes to South Carolina to visit Mrs. Selbourne occasionally in the wintertime.

Daisy marries in June following Eliza's purchase of Dixieland, to a grocery clerk from South Carolina in an elaborate wedding in the dining room of the Gant house.

Part 1, Chapter 12 Analysis

Eugene's sexual development, even from an early age, is an underlying theme in this bildungsroman, just as it is in Catcher in the Rye. Wolfe's account of life at the boarding house has an ongoing sexual undercurrent. Some of the women who are living there are apparently prostitutes. Many of them are women from the South, who are coming for the summer and seem to be looking for male companionship for the period of their stay.

Daisy plays a minor role in the story. We know little about her not only before she marries but afterward. In Chapter thirteen, we find that she and her mother do not get along, which brings Eliza home early from a visit there. It is Daisy who introduces Helen, whom we come to know very well in the story, to her husband, Hugh Barton, in Henderson, where she lives.

Part 1, Chapter 13

Part 1, Chapter 13 Summary

Until his eleventh or twelfth year, Eugene frequently travels with his mother to Florida and Arkansas in search of a cure for her Bright's disease and still sleeps with her. She is called to South Carolina to help Daisy at the time of the birth of her first grandchild, but mother and daughter quarrel, and Eliza and Eugene soon leave. The following winter she takes him to New Orleans.

Soon after their return, Gant, drinking again, suffers an attack of inflammatory rheumatism. He and Helen depart for Hot Springs for treatment. Letters describing the good life in Hot Springs add a new dimension to Eugene's horizon. Gant praises Helen's goodness and help, tells about the expenses of the journey, the hotels and wealth, and the life they are seeing, which infuriates Eliza, who vows to show them,. Eliza and Eugene go to Hot Springs the following winter, where he goes to one of the public schools. She also sends him out in the streets to sell *The Saturday Evening Post* and to distribute cards advertising the Dixieland.

Part 1, Chapter 13 Analysis

This marriage relationship seems to oscillate between blaming each other for the children's difficulties, each taking credit for their accomplishments, and competing over what their money goes for in terms of their own personal pleasure and indulgence.

Part 2, Chapter 14

Part 2, Chapter 14 Summary

Ben is still working for the newspaper, and a squadron of boys deliver for him. Ben is twenty years old. This chapter gives a vignette of the people who live and work in Altamont through conversations with people Ben works for and with and others who are having breakfast at a lunch room, including Dr. McGuire, a drunk; Horse Hines, the undertaker; Coker, a lung specialist; and young Dr. Jefferson Spaugh. Ben also describes several residences in the town, including that of the Presbyterian minister.

Part 2, Chapter 14 Analysis

This novel is sometimes likened to James Joyce in using "stream of consciousness" techniques, and this chapter is a good example of this. "Stream of consciousness" is the capturing of a flow of impressions, not necessarily arranged logically, but reproducing what goes on in the mind normally. The novel includes many aspects of romanticism, a movement that is considered to have ended by the mid-nineteenth century, but it also borrows much from the movement toward realism that replaced romanticism. Certainly, Wolfe's depictions of the struggles of the family and the nature of the parenting of Eliza and Gant fit better in the realist movement.

Part 2, Chapter 15

Part 2, Chapter 15 Summary

Eugene is growing up and becoming aware of the North/South fusion in him reflecting the dichotomy of his parents - Eliza's inward brooding and Gant's expanding outward.

Eliza's business is doing well, and the property has increased in value. She has added rooms and baths and enlarged the property. She uses the cheapest materials, but her bank account is growing, and she has a life insurance policy that will be paid up in two years. She also has joint ownership of Gant's shop and several other properties. All told, between them, by 1912, their property is worth about $100,000, and they have a yearly income of $8,000 to $10,000. Meanwhile, Will Pentland's fortune is estimated at between $500,000 to $700,000.

A deranged multimillionaire, Simon, moves into the boarding house. He gives Eugene handfuls of coins from time to time. He has attendants who look after him, and he is disruptive at first, but all become fond of him.

Eugene's absences from Altamont due to his traveling with his mother and his not living at the Gant house has severed his friendships with his childhood associates, although he continues to see them from time to time. He has developed strong likes and dislikes, as well as prejudices. He loves sports but plays games badly. He always wants to win, and he always wants to be loved. He is tormented by the many humiliations he has experienced.

Part 2, Chapter 15 Analysis

So the Eugene of this stage is torn between the Southern personality of his mother and the Northern one of his father. He is at war with himself, and this seems to be true through much of his development toward maturity. Even as a mature man, he was difficult and a bit of a mess. His hair was wild; his demeanor suggested turmoil. Many editors did not want to work with him. He had two starts with Maxwell Perkins before he was able to settle in and work with him to produce a publishable manuscript.

At the stage of his life where we read about him in this chapter, he is no good at sports, which is not surprising. He is growing very tall rapidly and is quite thin. He is awkward and gangling. For a normal-sized and normal-looking person, working through the identity crisis of the teen years is difficult, but for a child who is growing so rapidly and so out of proportion to his peers, the process of maturation is arduous. His parents are certainly not understanding or supportive. It's pretty much up to Ben to keep him on even keel.

The parents are doing well financially, yet both of them conduct their lives as if they were dirt poor and moan and complain to the children about the expenditure of a cent.

This discrepancy between what is true and what his parents say accounts for much of the conflict within Eugene in his search for identity.

Part 2, Chapter 16

Part 2, Chapter 16 Summary

There is a new principal in Eugene's school named Leonard, who requires all the children to write a composition. It is to be a competition with a prize of $5. The paper is to be about the meaning of a French picture called The Song of the Lark, which depicts a barefoot peasant girl with a sickle in her hand with her face turned upward into the morning light as she listens to the song of a bird. Eugene wins the prize of $5 for his composition.

The Leonards are starting a private school for boys, and on the basis of the composition, they are choosing students. They must now persuade the Gants to send him to their school. Eliza agrees after a long recitation about her own history and how she became a teacher. The school is named Altamont Fitting School, it is set in a pre-war house on a hill and is among big old trees.

Part 2, Chapter 16 Analysis

If Eugene's precocity had not been apparent before, it is now. This is a small town, and everybody knows about his achievements. Why wouldn't these parents, who have the wherewithal to do so, not be willing to come up with the tuition? This novel about the development of a remarkable child is revealing of what it takes to turn out a genius. A little support would have gone a long way with Eugene. The Leonard school was by far the most important influence in his life, as attendance at this school determined what Eugene would become.

Part 2, Chapter 17

Part 2, Chapter 17 Summary

Eugene blossoms in the four years he is in the Leonards' school. He studies Greek and Latin and the literature from those cultures with Mr. Leonard. The curriculum is preparatory for a liberal education. He lives more at Dixieland now, and Eliza requires him to continue to work drumming up trade for the boarding house. At the end of the first year, Eliza refuses to pay the tuition for the school, so the Leonards agree to cut it in half and to allow Eugene to help by recruiting students.

Margaret Leonard becomes a second mother to Eugene, and he flourishes under her concern and care. He prefers to be at school rather than anywhere else.

Part 2, Chapter 17 Analysis

Eliza continually humiliates the children. When, at the end of the book, Eugene is nineteen and looking back at what has formed him, what comes to the fore is the pain of the continuing humiliation throughout his life due to the insensitivity of his mother. At the Leonard school, he is introduced to the elements of a liberal education, which is a freeing influence for him and remains the focus of his life until his death. But even more so, the mothering and loving influence of Margaret Leonard helped him find the emotional stability he needed to find his way.

Part 2, Chapter 18

Part 2, Chapter 18 Summary

As the influence of Eliza waned in Eugene's life, that of Ben increased.

Steve has married a woman from Indiana named Margaret, whose father has left the family a small amount of money and a farm. Steve brags about living on her money, and the brothers and Helen are disgusted. He is drinking and sliding into violence, ultimately attacking Luke one evening. Ben steps in and all of his pent-up anger at Steve causes him to lose control. He has to be pulled off by the other brothers and all are ashamed that they have attacked each other. Eugene is proud of Ben. Margaret and Steve move to Indiana, and Steve is constantly in trouble with her brothers. He shuttles back and forth between Altamont and Indiana.

Helen and her friend, Pearl Hines, travel through the South for three years, singing at moving-picture theatres in small towns. She frequently writes home, usually to Gant. She has a group of young men who follow her around. The partnership ends when Pearl gets married.

Luke enrolls in the Georgia School of Technology in Atlanta and works as a salesman to pay his way, but he is unable to make it as a student and comes home and works for an auctioneer. Gant has bought a car, which Luke drives. When he withdraws from the technical school, he goes to Pittsburg and to work for Westinghouse, then on to Dayton, where he works in a boiler factory engaged in the fabrication of war materials. He comes home from time to time bringing his father a suitcase stocked with beer and whiskey.

Part 2, Chapter 18 Analysis

That the relationship between the brothers erupts in violence is not surprising. Steve's failed life is the unfortunate result of the disastrous marriage between Gant and Eliza.

Helen's close relationship with her father from an early age is interfering with her establishing a lasting relationship with a man. She is attractive; she has admirers and suitors, but nothing comes of them.

Alcoholism runs rampant through this family, and Luke's gift of alcohol seems unwise. However, it seems normal and natural to him. There seems to be a lack of awareness on the part of the children of the real nature of their father's behavior. Nowadays, it would be identified as what it is. Gant mentions several times that he hopes Eugene will not inherit it, so he is more aware of it than the others.

Part 2, Chapter 19

Part 2, Chapter 19 Summary

Gant is sixty-five now, and his age is showing in his stooped figure. He sleeps later and sometimes sleeps during the day on the couch in his shop. Helen and Luke, the two he feels closest to, still live with him. Eliza wants the stone angel he has been keeping in front of his office for many years for the grave of a girl who has worked for her, so he sells it to her.

Part 2, Chapter 19 Analysis

The transaction over the angel indicates the state of the marriage. They are not sharing much of anything at this stage. If she wants the angel, she must buy it.

Part 2, Chapter 20

Part 2, Chapter 20 Summary

Luke and Helen are often gone, so Gant goes to Eliza's, but she discourages it. He makes trouble for her when he comes. Even so, he comes and regales the boarders with his stories and is popular with them. He and Eugene go to movies together from time to time. Gant has prostate cancer and is in pain but refuses to have surgery; the family members are aware that he is slowly dying.

Eliza, on the other hand, is in her mid-fifties and is in good health. She pretends that Gant is not seriously ill, which infuriates him. Dr. McGuire is also aging and not taking many patients, but he spends much time tending to Gant. He doesn't feel that surgery is a good choice.

Part 2, Chapter 20 Analysis

Gant is an embarrassment to Eliza, but the boarders are entertained by him. This is a character that readers both admire and detest. He is larger than life and fills the canvas of this story much of the time. It's not to be missed that he also had an indelible influence on the growing child, Eugene. The adult Thomas Wolfe still had many of the characteristics he gave to Gant in this story.

Part 2, Chapter 21

Part 2, Chapter 21 Summary

There had been a temperance campaign for local choice in town several years before, and Gant, the alcoholic, had publicly supported it. He rents a room to a 49-year-old widow and her son and has an affair with her until he tires of it. One day, he comes home after drinking and goes on a rampage, driving her out.

Meanwhile, Ben, still working at the paper, has become a ladies' man, although most of the women he has affairs with are at least ten years older than he is.

Part 2, Chapter 21 Analysis

Irony of ironies. The raging, raving alcoholic comes out on the side of a temperance ordinance. He constantly plays to the crowd. He has a robust appetite for female flesh and has not been very discriminatory in his selections, which has played a role in Steve's stunted development because Steve had to fetch Gant from the brothels of Altamont when Steve was still quite young. Now that Eliza has gone her own way, Gant finds a temporary substitute in the widow. But not for long; one good drunken bout and she's gone.

Ben, like Eugene, can't seem to relate to women his own age. Even so, Ben is a sympathetic character. We like him and are not offended when he finds pleasure and contentment, even if it's only temporary.

Part 2, Chapter 22

Part 2, Chapter 22 Summary

At fourteen, Eugene takes a paper route under Ben's supervision. He hates the impersonality of life at the boarding house and resents helping his mother. The retiring carrier of his route, Jennings Ware, teaches him how to get paid regularly. The route is Niggertown, and collecting the pay is difficult. However, Jennings tells him he can "take it out in trade" with some of the women. Eugene is more successful than most of the previous carriers on this route at getting his subscription fees because he persistently harasses and hunts them down until they pay. He is praised for his success at the paper office. He tries to "take it out in trade" with a yellow-skinned customer but is so revolted that he backs out at the last minute.

Part 2, Chapter 22 Analysis

This is Eugene's first attempt at sex, and he fails, which is not a good way for a young man to find himself. We see later that the second attempt is a failure also. In the first place, he is too young, at age fourteen, to be trying to engage in a tkte-a-tkte with an older prostitute. In the second place, he is growing rapidly physically and coping with too much emotionally to pull this encounter off. This is another place in the novel where the attitudes toward women and racial minorities disgust the contemporary reader.

Part 2, Chapter 23

Part 2, Chapter 23 Summary

Eugene doesn't tell the Leonards that he is getting up early and delivering papers. By the beginning of his fifteenth year, he knows almost every English poet and has committed many of the poems to memory. Mrs. Leonard inspires him and encourages his scholarship. Eliza goes to Florida, and Eugene rooms and boards at the Leonards. The Leonards make good reports of him, and Gant hears about his accomplishments from his friends.

Part 2, Chapter 23 Analysis

Again, we can see what an important role the Leonards and their school are playing in the development of this extraordinary child. They see to it that the community knows about his accomplishments, which will, of course, get back to his parents. Whether or not the community does this deliberately, we do not know. For someone whose attitudes are so ingrained and confirmed as are Eliza's, it makes very little difference. It doesn't lead the parents yield to the Leonards' advice when he finishes at the school.

Part 2, Chapter 24

Part 2, Chapter 24 Summary

Eugene rooms with Guy Doak, an older student from New Jersey. The Leonards are struggling to make ends meet with their little school, and the meals are meager. Guy slips out a window at night and brings back food for him and Eugene. The teachers tease Eugene and treat him with affection. He is a quick student but sometimes not a dedicated one.

The remainder of this chapter is a visit through town by Eugene and George Graves. It is a vignette of the town with conversations between merchants and others. Talk of war enters into the conversations from time to time.

Part 2, Chapter 24 Analysis

Eugene's developing frame needs a lot of food! This is just one of several times in the story when he does not get enough to eat. Once he is in college, we learn that he is extremely thin and very tall. This chapter is another of those "romantic" episodes where Wolfe uses dialogue between characters to paint a picture - this time of the town. Eugene and his friend, George Graves are walking through town, and we get a vignette of the downtown.

Part 2, Chapter 25

Part 2, Chapter 25 Summary

Midsummer, war is declared in Europe. Eugene follows it feverishly in the newspapers, and Margaret Leonard gives him books about war to read. Ben wants to go to Canada and enlist, so he goes to Dr. Coker for a physical to find out if he would be accepted. The doctor gives him an ambiguous answer and tells him he should wait until this country becomes a part of the conflict. Ben goes out feeling that he is not well and that the doctor has not told him the truth.

Part 2, Chapter 25 Analysis

This is the first indication we have that Ben is not well. It foreshadows his death in Chapter thirty-six.

Part 2, Chapter 26

Part 2, Chapter 26 Summary

At the beginning of his fifteenth year, Eugene goes on a short trip to Charleston with a group of his friends, chaperoned by Mrs. Bowden, mother of one of the boys. Two older young women; Josie, Mrs. Bowden's niece, and Louise, a waitress, are in the group. Eugene stays in his room the first day, so he can sleep while the others go to the navy yard. Louise comes to his room and comes on to him, but he is so flustered that she just has him get dressed so they can go meet the others.

Helen takes Gant to Johns Hopkins to have the prostate tumor removed, and he shows her where he once lived in Baltimore. He is dying of cancer.

Part 2, Chapter 26 Analysis

This is the second time when Eugene has an opportunity to have sex with a woman, each time one who is older than he is. And again, he can't perform. Remembering that this is a developmental story - a story about the development of a young man - we are getting a frank and realistic look at what it's like to grow up sexually. He is only fifteen. He is still very young. It's premature, but he certainly doesn't see it that way. He sees it as yet another failure in his effort to become a man.

In Wolfe's next novel, *Of Time and the River*, he tells of Gant's dying and his recollections of his past.

Part 2, Chapter 27

Part 2, Chapter 27 Summary

Helen is married to Hugh Barton, who she had met in Henderson on a visit with Daisy. The big wedding is held in the Presbyterian Church. Gant has determined that Eugene will go to the state university, even though Eugene does not want to go there. He and Margaret had planned that he would go to Vanderbilt or Virginia for two years, to Harvard for two more, and finish with two years at Oxford. He is not quite sixteen, and the Leonards feel that he should wait another year for college, but Gant has decided that now is the time. He intends for him to redeem the family by becoming a great political leader.

Part 2, Chapter 27 Analysis

This lower-class family with the resources to be at least middle-class hold a high-class wedding at the Presbyterian Church, the church of the upper-class. The Pentlands, whom we see very little of in this story, come out to this wedding in force. We know that Will, whose partner Gant had been in the early stages of his and Eliza's marriage, has done well, so there has always been friction because of Eliza's comparing Will's success with their own.

So many aspects of his development have come too soon for Eugene. He had to go out and earn a living when he was too young. He has felt pressure to have sex before he was ready for it. And now, his parents, without taking into account whether or not he is ready, send him off to the university. Not only that, they lay on him the responsibility, at sixteen, to go out and redeem this irredeemable family.

Part 3, Chapter 28

Part 3, Chapter 28 Summary

Although not quite sixteen, Eugene is already six feet and three inches tall, but he weighs only 130 pounds. He has a "wild energy of mind and body" that devours and exhausts him. The Leonards have come to love him as their own and part with him sadly and reluctantly.

Eugene is not prepared for university life and becomes the butt of jokes. He is very lonely and finds the classes superficial and unchallenging. The most rewarding class is Greek, and he learns to read and enjoy Homer.

Part 3, Chapter 28 Analysis

Eugene survives his first year by some miracle. He is younger than everyone else, and he has no preparation for the social aspects of college life. He is meagerly supported financially. What redeems him is his appetite for learning.

Part 3, Chapter 29

Part 3, Chapter 29 Summary

Jim Trivett, a fellow student, takes him to a Negro prostitute, and he catches some unidentified infection that he's convinced he will kill him. When he goes home for Christmas, Ben takes him to Dr. McGuire, who gives him a prescription. He goes back to school with more confidence and in a better frame of mind.

In April, the U.S. declares war on Germany. All the young men at the University who are eligible are going into the service. Eugene is far too young, but he wants to go to war.

Eliza visits Helen in the spring. Hugh, an insurance agent, has applied for the job of managing the company's office in Altamont. Eliza and Helen go the University to see Eugene, and his mother embarrasses him by asking his friend to drum up business for the boarding house for her. When Eugene goes home in May, Hugh and Helen are living there.

Part 3, Chapter 29 Analysis

Once again, Eugene is pushed into a sexual escapade, and this time he is successful but comes out of it with an infection that he does not understand. He feels filthy and ruined. Ben is his salvation again. We don't know what the infection is, but it is presumably not syphilis because this is before antibiotics and a prescription would not have cured it. The war is yet another reminder that he is out of step. He is too young to do what the other young men are doing - becoming soldiers and going to war.

Even at the university, Eugene must suffer the humiliation that his insensitive mother causes. In the final chapter, when Eugene decides to leave Altamont forever, it is largely because he needs to escape the humiliations. In a developing young person's life, this writer is telling us that these are the things that damage.

Part 3, Chapter 30

Part 3, Chapter 30 Summary

Laura James, the only daughter of a wealthy merchant, spends her summers at Eliza's rooming house. She and Eugene spend time together, and he falls in love with her. She is twenty-one to Eugene's sixteen. The age is no problem for him, but it is for her.

Part 3, Chapter 30 Analysis

This relationship is consummated, so we see Eugene moving forward in his sexual development. Unfortunately, he is very vulnerable when he goes into this relationship, and he never fully recovers from Laura's rejection.

Part 3, Chapter 31

Part 3, Chapter 31 Summary

Laura goes home for the July 4th celebration and writes him a letter telling him that she and the man she has been engaged to for a year are going to run away and get married. Eugene is devastated. At the prodding of Eliza, he writes a letter to Laura that is boastful and full of Latin, Greek, and English verse and is embarrassed the minute he sends it. To make matters worse, everyone is making fun of him for having lost his girl. Then he begins to spend time with a prostitute at the boarding house, a Miss Smith.

Ben has been rejected for the army because his lungs are weak. He doesn't have tuberculosis, says Dr. McGuire; he just has a weakness. Luke has enlisted in the Navy. Gant's illness has advanced, and Helen and Ben will go with him to Baltimore for treatment.

Eugene goes to visit the Leonards, telling them of his pain over Laura, but they pass it off lightly and tell him that when he is older, he will find true love. He feels wounded and alone. He becomes friends with a woman at the boarding house and pours out his feelings of loss to her.

Part 3, Chapter 31 Analysis

It's too early for the connection between lung disease and cigarette smoking to be made, but Ben is a chain-smoker, which probably contributed to his "weakness." Meanwhile, Eugene is distraught and unable to find anyone who can understand and sympathize with his pain over Laura's rejection.

Part 3, Chapter 32

Part 3, Chapter 32 Summary

In the fall Eugene rooms with Bob Sterling, who had been the best student at Altamont High School. Bob is nineteen years old and has a heart condition, but he is well-organized and tries to help Eugene develop more discipline. However, his illness overcomes him, and his mother takes him back home to Altamont, where he soon dies. Eugene can't stand to live in the room with Bob gone so goes to the dormitory to live with two older students.

The doctors in Baltimore give no hope for Gant; they marvel that he's still alive. Helen stays with her father as much as she can, but Hugh has bought a house for her to get her away from the family. She is ill and is drinking.

Eugene is desperately frustrated by his father's illness and his family's behavior, but he has now made many friends at the university, albeit no close ones, and he has become a joiner, something he has never done before, and is on the staff of the college paper and magazine.

The family comes together at Christmas. Ben has been traveling throughout the South selling ads, and Luke, who is in the Navy, has given skin from one of his legs to a fellow sailor who was burned, and is limping as a result. Luke brings a lot of liquor, and they all drink, including Eugene for the first time. After Eugene is alone, he goes to the kitchen and drinks more until he is quite drunk, wondering why no one had ever told him how happy and powerful it could make one feel. He understands now why his father drinks. He staggers downtown to the drugstore where some of the men take over, and being careful that he is not seen by anyone, take him home and put him to bed.

However, the family come home and find him drunk in the bed. They gather around and Gant takes care of him, getting him to vomit up what he has in his stomach. They are all kind and forgiving at first, and then Ben and Luke, particularly, begin to pick at him. They are resentful that after all he has been given, he has come home and gotten drunk. When he has had enough, Eugene attacks Ben physically and is restrained by Luke. He pours out all his discontent and his loneliness at living in a house where he has never truly been given anything - not love or generosity. He says they sent him to the Leonards only because the community knew of his capabilities, and that they only sent him to college, and not the one he chose, because of the reputation he had built at the Leonards' school. And now they resent his superior learning and remind him again that he is nothing. He tells them that he will find a way out of his loneliness alone. "Alone?" asks his mother. "Where are you going?"

"Ah," answers Eugene, "you were not looking, were you? I've gone."

Part 3, Chapter 32 Analysis

One would hope that having a college roommate who is a good friend die would not be a part of the growing-up process, but it is with Eugene. He has had two major losses - Laura and now Bob - and no one seems interested in comforting him. He is on his own. Eugene's pain is compounded by his concern for his father, who is dying. It's a lot to bear for a young man, who is trying to get his feet on the ground.

Eugene's experience with getting drunk for the first time - another part of growing up - is treated insensitively and brutally by the family. They go from forgiving him to attacking him. They are, of course, conditioned by their father's alcoholism and are acting out of fear that their brightest hope will be lost to alcoholism. But for him, the result is cathartic. He has a chance to confront them with the very negative role they have played in his development. Eliza, of course, doesn't understand when he tells them that he will forge ahead, but alone.

Part 3, Chapter 33

Part 3, Chapter 33 Summary

Eugene visits Ben at Easter in "the tobacco town." Ben, who has always been drawn to older women, is living with one now. He is well-known in the small town and proudly introduces his tall, younger brother to the people he has come to know.

When Eugene comes home in the spring, he announces that he is going away to Virginia. His father gives him money, and he takes off. He goes to the town where Laura lives but never contacts her. He runs out of money and must find work so bounces from job to job and is often hungry. He is now over six-foot-four and weighs less than 130 pounds. At the end of summer, he goes back home with $130 final pay in his pocket. Loathing the idea of going home, he stays in Richmond at a good hotel and lives well for several days. He writes Laura a letter and tells her he was in her town and went to her house, that he doesn't need her anymore. "The world is full of women;" he writes, "I got my share and more this summer." He feels shame and remorse the minute he turns loose of the letter at the post office.

Part 3, Chapter 33 Analysis

Why doesn't Wolfe tell us what the town is instead of "the tobacco town"? He is often ambiguous and obscure for no particular reason.

Keeping in mind that this novel is about the development of a young man, this chapter is very important. He is changed when he comes back from Virginia. He has made leaps into maturity. He works out his frustration and despair over Laura by living near her but not seeing her. He even goes to her house but does not make himself known. He experiences what it's like to be totally dependent on his own resources. He finds what it means to manage his wages in such a way that he doesn't starve, although he comes very close to starvation for the first time in his life. His already spare frame becomes extremely lean. Then, on his own with money he has earned himself, he lives the good life for a few days without his mother's penurious limitations or his father's lamentations over the ruin that he is bringing on himself and his family. These are life-changing experiences.

The conflicts in this story are between Eugene, a precocious, treasured, loved, but abused child and the world, in his attempt to survive, overcome, and become an adult. There have been many obstacles, most of them the result of a very dysfunctional family, an insensitive mother, who is simply not interested in trying to understand what is going on with him, and a father so preoccupied with his own demons that he is incapable, most of the time, of understanding.

Part 3, Chapter 34

Part 3, Chapter 34 Summary

During his two weeks at home before Eugene goes back to the University, he rooms with Ben at the boarding house. Gant is there also, weaker and quieter now.

At the University, Eugene struggles with his conscience because he is not in the military fighting alongside the other young men. He eats voraciously and exercises, trying to gain weight. When he turns eighteen, he receives a letter from his father telling him that Daisy has brought her family home and left two of the children there for a visit. They are down with the flu and many people are dying from it; it seems to hit the strong first, he says. He admits that Helen is suffering from alcoholism and again expresses the hope that Eugene will not fall victim to it. Eugene doesn't hear from his family again for several weeks until a telegram comes telling him to come home because Ben has pneumonia.

Part 3, Chapter 34 Analysis

This is the influenza epidemic that killed so many people in this country. Just when Eugene seems to be bouncing back, he is dealt yet one more blow. The one person in the world who has cared enough to try to understand him and whose love has sustained him for most of his life, is now gravely ill. We have been prepared for this because we already know that Ben has weak lungs.

Part 3, Chapter 35

Part 3, Chapter 35 Summary

Eugene takes the train home and is awakened in his berth upon arrival in Altamont by Luke and Hugh at 3:00 a.m. They drive to the boarding house. Ben had influenza and then came down with pneumonia. It is in both lungs, and he is very ill. All the family is there except Daisy, and they wait for two days while he dies. Ben refuses to allow Eliza into the room as long as he has the strength to refuse her; however, the last two days, he is unconscious most of the time, so she comes and sits with him and holds his hand, remembering the death of Grover, Ben's twin, in St. Louis so many years before.

Part 3, Chapter 35 Analysis

It was Ben who confronted his mother about her treatment, not of himself, but of his little brother, Eugene. He despises her, but she insists on being in the sick room, even though he doesn't want her there. So much has happened in this family since they were in St. Louis, that the memory of Grover's death takes us by surprise. Ben's life is sad because he was sent out to earn his own living at a difficult job when he was so young and has never been able to have a normal life, and his parents are to blame. Eliza's insensitivity and self-absorption are revealed clearly in these last days of Ben's life.

Part 3, Chapter 36

Part 3, Chapter 36 Summary

It is early morning; Ben has died at last, and Luke and Eugene go downtown to notify the newspaper office and to get something to eat--on the way, they meet a paperboy. Eugene tells him that he was once a paperboy and next to his brother, Ben, he was the best they ever had. He gives him a dollar bill.

They go for breakfast to the lunch room where Ben always spent his early mornings with Dr. McGuire and the others, including the undertaker, Horse Hines. They go home again and sleep until past noon, then go to the funeral parlor to choose a casket. Horse Hines makes a sales pitch, and they go to look at the body. Luke complains that Ben is too pale, so the undertaker, with a flourish, takes a rouge stick and makes the cheeks rosy. He pronounces it a work of art, and Eugene laughs hysterically. It has all been too much for him.

Part 3, Chapter 36 Analysis

There is a lot of humor in this story. The themes are so serious and disturbing that the humor is sometimes overlooked. In this scene in the funeral parlor, the humor is so macabre that it is shocking. It's easy to understand Eugene's hysteria, however. The absurdity of the undertaker's behavior triggers release, and, instead of tears of sorrow, there is helpless laughter, inappropriate as it might have seemed. The undertaker recognizes it, however.

Part 3, Chapter 37

Part 3, Chapter 37 Summary

Ben's funeral is grand with all the family, including the Pentlands, there. Held in the Presbyterian Church and presided over by the Scotch Presbyterian minister, it concludes with the pallbearers carrying out the body and the interment in the cemetery. Eliza and Helen cry throughout. Eugene goes to the Barton house with Helen and her husband. Helen, upset and almost hysterical, swears that she will no longer look after her father.

Part 3, Chapter 37 Analysis

Ben was overlooked and exploited in his life, but he is given a grand going-away, which is, in itself, absurd.

Part 3, Chapter 38

Part 3, Chapter 38 Summary

Eugene goes back to the university, and three weeks later the war is over. He has a victorious semester and is big man on campus with a finger in everything. He and other students go out of town to visit prostitutes.

Part 3, Chapter 38 Analysis

That Eugene feels at home at the university and involved and accepted in university life is a signal that his experiences have served to bring him through the assaults on his emotional and physical development. He is in control of his sexuality now, even though his going to prostitutes does not bode well. We wonder whether he will ever be able to have a normal, healthy relationship. In this aspect, his experiences may have forever damaged his wholeness.

Part 3, Chapter 39

Part 3, Chapter 39 Summary

At nineteen, Eugene graduates with his parents in attendance. They are proud of him; it is clear that he has made a name for himself on campus. In their minds, he is now ready to go out and make his mark in the world. Eugene had decided by the time he was a sophomore that politics was not for him. He has a favorite professor who encourages him to go to Harvard before he settles into a career. He seems destined for some vague kind of literary career.

Gant is more dead than alive and lives in a back room at the boarding house. Eliza now has her hands on his property and is selling it, including the home Gant had built for them before they were married and where the children grew up. She turns the boarding house into a rooming house that is managed by an old maid and is obsessed with and talks about real estate endlessly. The rooming house is valuable now; she has turned down an offer of $100,000. She is sixty and in good health and is feverishly trading, buying, and selling. At the same time she has become even more niggardly. Helen, who is unable to have children, sees that her father is fed and cared for because Eliza ignores him.

Eugene feels that the sale of the house is the last step in the breaking up of the family. Eliza has talked Gant into making a will that leaves $5,000 to each of the children. The estate, of course, will be worth much more than that. Helen's husband, Hugh, has begun trading in real estate also and has begun to influence Eliza. Eugene knows that he must leave forever. He can't handle the greed and the bickering. He persuades his mother to pay for a year at Harvard, and she finally agrees, but Hugh draws up a paper for him to sign declaring that the money for the year at Harvard is in lieu of the $5,000 he is due from his father's estate.

Part 3, Chapter 39 Analysis

This chapter is the climax of the action of the story. The little boy who faced the world so alone except for one brother who cared for him has made it. He has overcome the obstacles that might have destroyed him. He has scars and is somewhat bruised and battered, but he has made it.

The remainder is denouement - the unraveling of all the threads. It is not surprising that Eliza has achieved her goals. She is where she always planned to be - in charge of all the property. The sale of his home is the last signal Eugene needs that the past is over, and the future is his. Hugh and his mother are now in league, and it is Hugh who delivers the final blow. Eugene is exchanging his year at Harvard for his inheritance. It is cruel, considering that the family now has considerable wealth, but it also enables him to "shake the dust off his feet" and move on to make a life of his own.

Part 3, Chapter 40

Part 3, Chapter 40 Summary

Eugene goes alone to his father's shop, which Eliza has already sold, and which will be replaced by a skyscraper. He finds Ben there. When asked, Ben says he is not a ghost. He also tells Eugene that he, Eugene, is going away and that he will never come back. Eugene sees the angels in his father's shop move around, and Ben tells him not to believe everything he's told. He looks at the Square, and all the towns Eugene has learned of in his studies blend together. Suddenly, Ben is no longer there, but Eugene is prepared to leave forever.

Part 3, Chapter 40 Analysis

This final dream-like sequence where Eugene visits his father's shop, which is no longer owned by the family, and finds Ben there again helping him when he needs it most, is lyrical, almost poetic. Wolfe seems to be writing poetry here:

"Then I of yours the seeming, Ben? Your flesh is dead and buried in these hills:

my unimprisoned soul haunts through the million streets of life, living its

spectral nightmare of hunger and desire. Where, Ben? Where is the world?"

"Nowhere," Ben said. "You are the world."

Characters

Principal Armstrong

Armstrong, a fat, "delicate" man, is Eugene's first school principal.

Hugh Barton

Hugh is Helen's husband, an eloquent salesman ten years older than she. Although he takes her to Sydney, where Gant lived during his first marriage, Hugh eventually moves back to Altamont, where Helen can once again take care of Gant. Hugh complains that Gant takes advantage of his closest daughter, but eventually he is silent in response to Helen's strong will.

Miss Brown

Although this is unlikely to be her real name, "Miss Brown" is a tenant of Dixieland from the Midwest who sleeps with Eugene. Eugene does not have any money, so she accepts his medals from Leonard's school as payment.

Dr. J. H. Coker

Coker is the doctor who comes, too late, to deal with Ben's pneumonia. He is always smoking a cigar and is characterized by a profound weariness.

Ella Corpening

Ella is a poor mulatto resident from the African American section of Altamont. Eugene comes very close to losing his virginity to her when collecting for his paper route.

Guy Doak

Guy is Eugene's roommate at the Leonard's school during Eliza's trip to Florida. He is one of the few northerners in the book and has "a sharp, bright, shallow mind, inflexibly dogmatic."

Ben Gant

Ben is Eugene's closest brother, who dies of pneumonia at the end of the novel. He is a scowling and independent child not very close with anyone in the family except Eugene. His success at the newspaper office makes him money, with which he is generous, and

he always disparages Eliza for being cheap. The family is devastated that Eliza's hesitation in spending the money for medical attention may have been responsible for Ben's death.

Although he wants to join the army, Ben is never allowed to because of his ill health, and this makes him more cynical and frustrated about the purpose of his life in Altamont. Ben is always making the comment, "Listen to this, will you," to an imaginary witness (an "angel") that understands the ridiculous situation he believes himself to be in. His closest companion is Miss Pert, who nurses him when he starts to become very sick.

Eugene feels so close to Ben partly because he is outside the dynamic of the family. Ben teaches his younger brother a great deal and always looks out for him despite masking this feeling in cynicism. He buys Eugene presents, gives him far more money than Eliza or Gant, and thinks in broader terms than most people in Altamont. He does not answer Eugene's tortured questions at the end of the novel, but his scowling honesty about the purpose of life is very important to how Eugene grows up.

Bessie Gant

Bessie is Gant's cousin, who grimly nurses Ben during his pneumonia.

Daisy Gant

A "timid, sensitive girl, looking like her name," Daisy is Eugene's oldest sister. Since she is much older than Eugene and gets married when he is still young, he never becomes very close to her.

Eliza Pentland Gant

Eugene's mother, Eliza, is a stubborn woman who manages her family through many difficult years. An extremely hard worker, able to organize the family's finances much better than her husband, Eliza is also characterized by her stinginess and property hoarding. She almost always pretends not to have very much money, and this is a constant source of regret and annoyance for her family. At the same time, this determination helps her drive herself and the family through years of conflict.

Her relationship with her husband is a huge battle, one that she eventually seems to win. Gant frequently launches tirades against her for having ruined his life and tied him down, but at certain points he becomes very tender towards her; for example, when he sells her his sacred stone angel. They often do not live together and cannot reconcile the profound antipathy of their natures, but they and the family have a lasting bond nonetheless.

Eugene has mixed feelings for his mother. He is repulsed by her stinginess, yet he feels very strongly drawn to her and ultimately finds it extremely difficult to leave her. Her youngest son is particularly important to her; they have an inexplicable bond, and through the novel she always insists that he live with her no matter where she moves. Eliza has very high expectations of Eugene that he means to fulfill, and ultimately she is the one to pay for all of his schooling.

Eugene Gant

Eugene is the protagonist of the novel, an autobiographical version of Wolfe himself. He is drawn as a very dramatic and self-conscious hero, a "dreamer," who changes drastically through the overview of his first twenty years. One of the main subjects of the novel is how Eugene is formed by his family and by Altamont in general, and what of the wide experience of growing up there he wants to take with him as an adult. For example, the conflict between Gant and Eliza also takes place within Eugene: how much to push forward rashly as a "lost" adventurer (like his father) and how much to dwell conservatively at home with his mother.

A lanky child with no athletic ability, Eugene's talent is in reading and writing literature. Margaret Leonard is so important to his development because she teaches him the classics of English literature and a love for writing that will presumably continue throughout his life. At college, Eugene is very awkward at first, which is why he is ridiculed. He eventually compensates for this lack of social grace with overconfidence in his intellect. He is sometimes babied within his family and is often treated as the "last hope" of success; Gant wants him to be a politician, and the others have less defined ideas of money and fame.

The development of Eugene's sexuality is a very important theme in the novel. He has no relationships with girls of his own age but many with older women, including prostitutes. His only feelings of love are directed towards Laura James and his mother, but Eugene feels betrayed and shameful when Laura leaves to get married, and it is clear she has deceived him. In general, he is only capable of becoming boundlessly romantic, as with Laura, or of detaching sex from emotion entirely, as with any of the older prostitutes.

Eugene has some friends, but his closest and most lasting relationships are with adults, including Ben, who is quite a bit older. He is a lonely child who goes out of his way to prove himself and maintain his pride. When Ben dies, Eugene reaches the height of being alone and no longer feels bound to Altamont.

Grover Gant

Ben's twin, Grover is Eugene's "gentlest and saddest" brother. When he dies of typhoid at only twelve years old, Eliza moves back to Altamont from St. Louis, profoundly saddened.

Helen Gant

Her father's daughter, Helen has an "insatiable" and tireless motherly impulse. She has always been close to Gant. She takes care of many men, especially Gant, but also her husband, Hugh, and her brothers, by taking complete control of the situation and babying them to the point of stifling them with food, comfort, and warmth. Often she erupts in anger when they seem to fall out of line—when Gant becomes recklessly drunk or Eugene displays "Pentland queerness"—but after she releases her anger, Helen goes back to her controlling motherly impulse.

Like her father, Helen is an alcoholic, but she does not admit this to herself and finds her alcohol in various, more dangerous, medicines and tonics. She goes on singing tours and toys with various men but ultimately marries a safe choice, a salesman ten years older named Hugh Barton. Hugh loves her deeply but eventually begins to feel jealous of Helen's consuming affection for her father. When the Bartons move back to Altamont, Helen complains more frequently of wasting her life away taking care of Gant, but she continues to do so through to the end of the novel. Helen competes with Eliza to be the true mother of Eugene and ultimately loses, although her youngest brother does find her to be a sort of "goddess" of the home.

Luke, closest to Eugene in age, is the town's favorite among the children. He is not a good student, but his social skills are excellent and he has a talent for selling and hustling in a variety of contexts. He has a stutter but still manages to order around younger boys and win the affection of older people. After dropping out of college and finding a successful job, Luke joins the navy and is stationed at different bases around the country. When Ben dies, Luke and Eugene take care of many of the arrangements.

Steve Gant

Eugene characterizes his brother Steve as a heartless outcast from the family. Steve drops out of school at fourteen and travels around without a job, occasionally coming home, where he is grudgingly received, sometimes with fighting among the brothers. Gant has always hated his eldest son, and Eliza is the only one in the family who thinks he is a good person.

William Oliver Gant

Gant is the tall, grandiose, passionate father of the family. Known to everyone, even his wife, as "Mister Gant," Eugene's father is a somewhat mysterious figure as well as a constant and important presence throughout the novel, even when he is sickly with old age. *Look Homeward, Angel* follows his steady degeneration from a violent, powerful, intimidating man with an unquenchable thirst for adventure into a senile and ineffectual old man stricken with cancer and on the brink of death.

When Eugene is young, Gant is characterized as a master of loud rhetoric, often directed against his wife, who eats huge amounts and constantly creates mammoth fires. An often unreliable and brutal alcoholic, he epitomizes excess and limitless desire, and he provides a complete opposite to his overly frugal, property-hoarding wife. Gant loves his house, but he hates the idea of accumulating property and blames all of his problems on Eliza, in part because this is her obsession. He is much closer to his eldest daughter Helen, who eventually comes to resent him for requiring that she take care of her father all his long life.

Gant wants Eugene to become a senator or president, and he insists that Eugene go to college at only sixteen. He instills in his son a boundless desire for new experiences. Gant begins to get sick early in Eugene's life and gradually loses his energy (with occasional alcoholic releases) for opposing Eliza. By the time Eugene is ready to leave home, Gant has faded from the main thrust of the novel and the family is waiting for him to die.

Gilbert Gaunt

Gant's father, Gilbert Gaunt, is an Englishman who comes to America before the Civil War begins. He marries a Pennsylvanian woman after immigration authorities change his name to "Gant."

Horse Hines

Horse is a friend of the family and is the undertaker who dresses Ben for burial. He takes his craft very seriously, and the pride he takes in the "natural" job he has done on Ben's corpse makes Eugene laugh with "pity" and disgust.

Pearl Hines

Pearl is Helen's friend and singing companion. When Pearl gets married to a man from Jersey City whom she met during their travels, Helen moves back home.

Laura James

Laura is Eugene's first love, whom he meets at Dixieland. She is not a pretty girl, and Eugene does not realize he loves her right away, but soon he falls for her subtlety and aristocratic charm. Although she says she meant all of the vows they made to each other, Laura had been engaged for a year before she met Eugene, and this sparks a great deal of resentment.

Eugene sees Laura as a paradox of virtue and deception. Although he writes her two letters and follows her to Virginia, Eugene never sees Laura after she returns home to

get married. Nevertheless, Laura is the only woman with whom Eugene falls in love and is one of his only opportunities to avoid being, as he says, "alone."

Jannadeau

Gant's large and muscular close friend, Jannadeau is the family's Swiss neighbor.

Lily Jones

Lily is the owner of a brothel near Eugene's college, and he loses his virginity to her during his first year.

Sinker Jordan

Sinker, an adventurous wartime worker, is Eugene's only friend and fellow money-waster during his adventure in Norfolk, Virginia.

Miss Amy Leonard

Miss Amy, John Leonard's sister, is a large, "powerful" woman who teaches mathematics and history.

John Dorsey Leonard

Leonard is a strong, somewhat dull but "honorable" man who runs Eugene's private school. Formerly the principal of the public school, he teaches athletics and Latin, but Eugene learns little from him as compared with what he learns from Leonard's wife.

Margaret Leonard

Margaret is Eugene's frail teacher with a vast knowledge of literature that she teaches passionately. She is the one who chose him to be in the Leonards' school, and he feels very close to her even when he is regularly misbehaving. Eugene idealizes both Margaret and the literature she finds so important, and she thinks of him as a son.

Louise

Louise is Eugene's first romantic partner. A "plump" twenty-one-year-old waitress, she meets Eugene on a school trip to South Carolina when he is fifteen.

Miss Irene Mallard

An "elegant" woman "mixed of holiness and seduction," Miss Mallard teaches Eugene to dance. Like Miss Brown, except without any physical relationship, she is a tenant of Dixieland to whom Eugene turns after Laura James leaves.

Mrs. Morgan

A tenant of Dixieland whom Gant says is a Cherokee Indian, Mrs. Morgan receives the rare benefit of Eliza's generosity because she is struggling and pregnant.

Will Pentland

Will, Eliza's entrepreneurial brother, represents the "insatiate love of property" that characterizes the Pentland family.

Miss Pert

Nicknamed "Fatty," Miss Pert is Ben's closest companion, and he visits her room at night in Dixieland for many years. Although their relationship is obscure, it is clear that she was the only person to help Ben in the early and dangerous stages of his pneumonia. Eliza kicks her out of Dixieland while Ben is dying, and Ben's death leaves her somewhat incoherent. At the end of the novel, she meets Eugene by Ben's grave and tells him she is moving back with her granddaughter in Tennessee.

"Pap" Rheinhart

"Pap" is one of Eugene's closer friends from the Leonards' school. He has a kindly look and partakes in many of Eugene's wandering adventures through Altamont.

Mrs. Selborne

Mrs. Selborne is a married tenant of Dixieland who sleeps with Steve. She is also a friend of Helens and briefly a "living symbol of desire" for Eugene.

Jim Trivett

Jim is the student who lives near Eugene's college boarding house and takes him to a brothel. Resentful because Eugene will not write a paper for him, Jim says he will make a man out of the sixteen-year-old student and brings him to the prostitute Lily Jones.

Vergil Weldon

An old philosopher who enjoys having Eugene in his class, Mr. Weldon is Eugene's most important teacher at college. He encourages Eugene to study further at Harvard.

W. O.

See William Oliver Gant.

Themes

The American Experience

Wolfe is interested in portraying a representative American experience and an allegory of American youth in his novel. Although Wolfe is often associated with expatriate American writers such as Hemingway and Fitzgerald, and made several long trips to Europe while he was writing *Look Homeward, Angel*, the author saw himself within the American tradition. Wolfe would not have deemed his writings "modernist" in the international sense of the term. He is better classified as an American romantic.

This is not to say that Wolfe's first novel is not innovative or daring; indeed, no one would publish it except Charles Scribner's Sons (a firm famous for publishing innovative modernist works). Even though Wolfe worked within the American tradition and was compared to writers such as Walt Whitman and Henry David Thoreau, he was attempting to establish a new form of American romantic writing in a modern context.

Much of *Look Homeward, Angel* is frankly sexual in nature, and much of it relies on a concept of a stark break with the past to achieve a radical new understanding of the truth of the world. These concepts would be associated with modernism. Simultaneously, however, the aching desire to return home and to elaborately establish a vision of the traditional South are common romantic themes. There are also naturalist tendencies in certain long and seemingly disjointed passages about life in Altamont. Wolfe and his contemporaries would have understood him as using characteristics of the new style to develop a traditional American form.

Bildungsroman

This German term for "novel of development" is popular among critics, such as Richard S. Kennedy, in describing the form of *Look Homeward, Angel*. The opposing forces of adventurous departure and conservative return to the home, represented by Gant and Eliza, the northern man and the southern woman, reveal the struggle in Eugene's growing process. Indeed, the theme of growth is important not only to Eugene's character; it serves as a metaphor for the "American experience" discussed above. Wolfe is interested in the ways America develops through the first decades of the twentieth century, and his novel details the rise to maturity of the South in particular.

Born in 1900, Eugene is an appropriate symbol for the infancy of the South in a new century. Wolfe spends a considerable amount of time discussing old southern values, including racial superiority, Confederate patriotism, and landowning. In the novel, these ideas develop and change based upon Eugene's understanding of them, and their compatibility with such drastic political events as World War I. After Ben dies, Eugene finds that he must leave, although not without a certain affection, and go to the North. Wolfe seems interested, as displayed in his long passages about the way southern life

is changing, in bringing the South itself along on this journey of modernization while still retaining a certain amount of tradition. A break is ultimately necessary, however, as the division grows sharper and Eugene can no longer idealize his home.

Although Eugene needs to break away from his home in order to develop into an adult, Wolfe does not make it clear that a break from southern values is the single key to successful maturation. The idea of development in the novel also requires an understanding of and even a longing for the past. While Eugene seems to have reached a certain kind of maturity when he is ready to depart for the North, he is perhaps not so far away from the romantic tradition of the southern experience and the "look homeward" of the title.

Style

Wolfe's style has often been called "romantic," both because of the emotional extremes of its sprawling style and because of the American tradition it is not entirely outside. American writers like Walt Whitman, who among other achievements captured a broad sense of American life, were very influential over Wolfe's authorial intentions. Wolfe frequently wrote that he loved America and wished to represent its "grandness"; part of this process in *Look Homeward, Angel* consisted of melding traditional American and modern European techniques, similar to his melding some of their important themes (discussed above).

This results in a unique and varied style. Often Wolfe goes on at great length in what seems to be a "stream of consciousness" style, something present in modernist writers such as James Joyce, and sometimes he exhibits some of the frankness about sexuality that is common in modernist style. But his work simultaneously reads like a southern epic, with involved natural description and even invocations of dramatic verse such as the "O Lost" refrain. These styles sometimes conflict, and in particularly melodramatic passages such as a description of Helen and Gant preparing food, for example, are unrestrainedly romantic. This allows Wolfe a certain dexterity in describing certain events by the technique he finds most suitable; and it suggests what Wolfe would have liked to create: a new stylistic tradition in southern writing that melds old and new methods.

Historical Context

By the beginning of the twentieth century, America was rapidly developing into a modernized country with a consumer economy. Southern towns, like their northern counterparts, were quickly expanding, and new jobs and industries were resulting from the continued growth of the leisure class. A resort town such as Asheville, North Carolina (the double for Wolfe's Altamont), was a popular site for investment during these years. Successful careers in real estate and property management were not uncommon during this time of expansion.

World War I was a key drive to American production. America's entry into the war in 1917 marked the beginning of an unprecedented period of production and economic prosperity. The Roaring Twenties continued until the massive stock market crash of 1929. Meanwhile, in the North, a cultural upheaval had been occurring since the war; "flappers" challenged the domestic constraints of women, while jazz and modernist literature were drastically changing artistic tradition.

In general, the South was much slower to adopt these new ideas. Race relations were extremely poor; lynching remained a frequent occurrence from 1900 well through the publishing of *Look Homeward, Angel*, and discrimination was overt and debilitating throughout the South. Although the long Reconstruction period after the Civil War had finished by the turn of the century, southerners retained their traditional values well into the twentieth century.

American writers, such as Fitzgerald and Hemingway, frequently traveled to Europe in the 1920s, where they joined an expatriate literary movement known as modernism. Characterized by its rejection of the previous generation's value system and its experimentation in form, modernism was the cutting-edge style of the era. Modernism is generally considered to have begun around the beginning of World War I in 1914, because of the connotation of a rupture from the past that the Great War signified; but Americans came somewhat later upon the scene.

Wolfe lived in Europe for some time during the writing of *Look Homeward, Angel*, and he certainly employed some modernist ideas. But his interest in the American tradition of romanticism lay outside the mainstream goals of his contemporaries. Other American authors diverted from the course of modernism, but most either continued in the naturalist tradition of Edith Wharton or experimented in new forms entirely. Wolfe was somewhat unique in his desire to form a neo-romantic tradition.

Critical Overview

Although it sparked some resentment in Asheville, North Carolina, *Look Homeward, Angel* received a considerable amount of praise in the both the North and the South when it was published in 1929. As John Earl Bassett writes in his essay "The Critical Reception of *Look Homeward, Angel*": "Four favorable articles in important New York newspapers were instrumental to the success that *Look Homeward, Angel* did have."

Some critics, most notably Bernard DeVoto in his 1936 article from the *Saturday Review*, argued that Wolfe has a tendency towards "bombast, and apocalyptic delirium." This group tends to disparage "romantic" American novels generally. But even DeVoto writes that parts of *Look Homeward, Angel* show "intuition, understanding, and ecstasy, and an ability to realize all three in character and scene, whose equal it would have been hard to point out anywhere in the fiction of the time." In 1951, William Faulkner rated Wolfe the highest (the only person above himself) among contemporary American writers.

The majority of criticism on Wolfe is strongly biographical; John Lane Idol Jr. writes in *A Thomas Wolfe Companion* that the "tallest heap would be labelled 'The Life and Legend of Thomas Wolfe,' since it focuses on his reputation as a kind of American giant." Idol suggests that many critics are interested in psychoanalytical reading of Wolfe's works because his novels are only understood after "seeing him in his time and place." Critics such as Richard S. Kennedy, on the other hand, are interested in how Wolfe's life and its relation to art represent the early twentieth-century American experience.

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1
- Critical Essay #2
- Critical Essay #3
- Critical Essay #4

Critical Essay #1

Trudell is a freelance writer with a bachelor's degree in English literature. In this essay, Trudell discusses the sexual and racial symbolism in Wolfe's novel.

Look Homeward, Angel remains Wolfe's most popular and respected work, but it has gone through a significant decrease in critical attention. This is partly due to the novel's views on race and gender and partly due to what John Hagan calls "the still prevailing notion that Wolfe's first novel, though undeniably powerful in some respects, is mere 'formless autobiography,' the product of a *naïf* who had no 'ideas' and only a rudimentary technique."

Throughout *Look Homeward, Angel*, Eugene displays a somewhat worried attitude toward sexuality. Whether it is the feeling that his loins are "black with vermin" after the frequent visits to Lily Jones's brothel or the deception by Laura James that undermines his extreme passion, Eugene has almost uniformly unhealthy relationships with women. His romance with Louise, the first of his many brief affairs with older women, marks the beginning of a tendency either to unrealistically idealize women or to degrade them, and this habit continues through Eugene's dramatic break from his mother at the end of the novel.

A psychoanalytical reading of *Look Homeward, Angel* would partially account for this tendency by revealing Eugene's massive and unresolved Oedipal complex. Wolfe, who practiced some dream therapy himself and was certainly aware of the pervasive influence of Freudian theory at the time, seems to acknowledge this quite explicitly in passages such as, "every step of that terrible voyage which his incredible memory and intuition took back to the dwelling of her womb." Freud wrote that degradation of sexual partners was a common by-product of an unresolved Oedipal complex, and he would have seen Eugene as a classic case. The feeling of "incestuous pollution" with Miss Brown is perhaps the clearest example of Eugene's attempting to live out the incest taboo in a different context, and in a more general way, this may account for the vast age differences in all of Eugene's affairs.

Wolfe develops this idea in a variety of contexts. The relationship of Helen and Gant, also clearly Freudian, arouses an outwardly jealous battle between mother and daughter that ultimately results in Eliza's firmer hold on Eugene. And Wolfe connects Eliza's bond with her youngest son inextricably with his other relationships. Eliza is actively jealous of Laura James and Miss Brown in particular; Eugene must confront his mother and kiss her four times before he can finally sneak away to sleep next to Laura for the first time.

Indeed, it is clear that Wolfe is conscious of the Oedipal complex and that he uses it for much of his most important romantic symbolism. The refrain itself, "O Lost," employs the "exile" from the "dark womb" as a metaphor for the human experience, and it is clear that this is a fundamentally important image for Wolfe when he connects it to his grandest and most universal themes: "our earliest ancestors had crawled out of the

primeval slime; and then, no doubt, finding the change unpleasant, crawled back in again." Wolfe seems to be developing an idea of the womb as an ambiguous mix of messy slime and uncorrupted perfection, in line with the Freudian concept that the incest taboo is often merged with idealized romantic desire.

Wolfe is very interested in the interdependency between universal and local themes, and, as C. Hugh Holman writes in his essay " 'The Dark, Ruined Helen of His Blood': Thomas Wolfe and the South": "this universal experience was for him closely tied up with the national, the American experience." Since these political and symbolic areas are so connected for Wolfe, it is not surprising that personal or even Oedipal connections are so frequently tied to political ideas; this is why Gant represents the North, and Eliza is a fixed symbol of the American South.

This basic association has some interesting consequences. Underneath Eugene's surface conflict—that he must eventually tear himself away from the South (his mother) he loves and wander to the firm intellectual land of the North—there is a complex web of desire. For example, Eliza's obsession with property represents a variety of ideals for her son. Although Eugene finds his mother stingy and petty, and the Pentland family seems to be more of a lowborn "clan" than an established or elitist family, Eliza's obsession with hoarding property is nevertheless connected to Wolfe's notion of the majestic, traditional, southern aristocracy.

It is no coincidence that the name of Wolfe's hero means "well born"; the fantastical and romantic vision of the book seeks to ascribe the traditional superior values of the upper class to Eugene's character while he leaves his home. It turns out to be difficult or impossible for Eugene to retain these values; he seemingly must reject the South altogether by the time he leaves Ben's ghost. But the desire and the idealization of establishment and property remain; indeed, the best example comes from the allegorical story of the Hilliards' estate during Eugene's infancy. While attempting to move towards the aristocratic house which is "crudely and symbolically above him," Eugene is punished with "the mark of the centaur"; Wolfe is clearly implying some nobility of nature in Eugene that is suppressed by circumstance.

In this example, the aristocratic ends happen to be thwarted by a "slovenly negress" and a "God-damned black scoundrel," two African Americans whose laziness and dirtiness seem to place them at blame for the situation. Since the episode is so highly allegorical, it seems quite unlikely that this is a coincidence. Poor whites and African Americans seem to curse Eliza and her son's search for established wealth. A quick search through the text finds a number of supporting examples; the poor, unreliable African American section of town makes Eugene's paper-collecting route notoriously difficult, prostitutes and degenerates make Dixieland an extremely difficult place to run, and Eliza is constantly having problems with the African American girls who work at Dixieland—eventually none of them will work for her because she is so cruel. Indeed, Eugene's subverted desire for aristocratic privilege sullied because of the "inferior" classes.

Returning, then, to the theme of subverted sexual desire towards the Oedipal symbol for the South, it begins to become clear how exactly this works out in a political and social allegory. The aristocratic, traditional South, represented by Eugene's mother, is continually in danger of sexual, economic, and social degradation. Wolfe finds a suitable allegory here because, by its very definition, the desire for the mother is an incestuous, unclean taboo. Eugene cannot possess his mother, or the South, in its pure form, so he finds a series of older women (reminiscent of his mother) whom he must degrade, according to Freud's formula, in order to have them as sexual partners.

In the process of this symbolism, however, Wolfe continually returns to his most convenient and overt symbol of sexual impurity and incestuous danger. African Americans are associated in *Look Homeward, Angel* not only with laziness and dirtiness; they are characterized as a disease of poverty and incest that endangers the pure white race. When Eugene rides on his paper route, "past all the illicit loves, the casual and innumerable adulteries of Niggertown," he is depicted as a romantic hero on the brink of an abyss of despair, gathering money from a black menace in service to an idealized white paradise. The novel is extremely invested in developing this idea of an incestuous and forbidden threat to the pure South and the white mother. Wolfe is not casually racist, or racist as a product of his time and place; the allegory of his first book actively advocates an urgent program of racial superiority.

Eugene's encounter with Ella Corpening, whose name resembles the Latin word for "body" (*corpus*), is perhaps the best example of the base physical and sexual threat that African Americans pose to Wolfe's idea of white purity. Seemingly a prostitute of sorts, whose moaning makes her appear completely crazy, Ella seems to inspire a desire in Eugene that he sees as forbidden and evil to a romantic extreme. But what is particularly significant about Ella is her "mulatto," or mixed African and Caucasian, blood. It is precisely this (to Wolfe) deceptive mix of purity and impurity that constitutes the allegorical danger in the situation. Wolfe is careful to highlight "the rapid wail of sinners in a church" after this near brush with racial mixing that, in the allegorical logic of the novel, is even more dangerous than the consummated encounters with poor white prostitutes.

The dense web of Eugene's submerged desire for the South seems to be rejected by the end of *Look Homeward, Angel*. Eugene breaks with his mother in an episode of emergence from the Oedipal complex and moves north, and Wolfe seems to abandon the type of racist allegory described above. But a deep longing remains for the values of the South, including racial superiority and purity from incestuous or "slovenly" sexual ideas represented by African American women. The title itself commands the pure white, "lost" soul to look homeward, back towards a mythical purity in constant threat of what Wolfe represents as pollution by racially mixed sexual desire.

Source: Scott Trudell, Critical Essay on *Look Homeward, Angel*, in *Novels for Students*, Gale, 2003.

Critical Essay #2

In the following essay, Joyner discusses the popularity and merits of Look Homeward, Angel*.*

"Genius is Not Enough," the catchy title of Bernard De Voto's negative review of Thomas Wolfe's essay *The Story of a Novel*, was not written of *Look Homeward, Angel: A Story of the Buried Life*. Ever since the publication of Wolfe's first and unarguably best novel, it has been a target for critical attack and encomium. But the severest attacks Wolfe suffered were in reaction to his subsequent work. If Wolfe had never written anything else, *Look Homeward, Angel* would have more stature today. It has been dismissed as a "novel of youth," attractive only to teenagers; it has been excoriated as formless, verbose, shallow, and altogether too personal. While there is some truth in all of those accusations, the novel stands as a unique, perdurable monument of American literature. Richard Walser has called it "the most lyric novel ever written by an American," while Wolfe's principal British champion, Pamela Hansford Johnson, finds it the most "clear-sighted" of his novels, portraying his world "with an objectivity altogether remarkable." These traits of lyricism and realism, along with a Joycean complexity and exuberant good humor, are the most compelling qualities of the work.

An unabashedly autobiographical *Bildungsroman*, the book recounts the inner and outer life of the first twenty years (1900-20), of Eugene Gant. Eugene is the youngest of seven children of W. O. and Eliza Gant, a couple who live in the mountain village of Altamont. W. O., a Pennsylvanian with a penchant for rhetoric, alcohol, and prostitutes, owns a stonecutter's shop; his wife is a native of the area with a well-developed head for business and an interest in real estate. After a brief stint in 1904 in St. Louis, where one of her twins dies, she opens a boarding house in Altamont named Dixieland. The precocious Eugene starts school, aged five, against his mother's wishes. He spends his high school years in a private academy and at 15 enrolls in the university at Pulpit Hill. On his first summer vacation he has a brief romance with Laura James, a boarder at Dixieland. During the next summer he works as a laborer in Norfolk and that fall his favorite brother, Ben, dies of influenza. He graduates from college and leaves Altamont to study in the north.

All of the events of the preceding paragraph are exactly parallel to Thomas Wolfe's life. Only the names of the living characters and some place names have been changed. Altamont is the fictitious name for Asheville, North Carolina; Pulpit Hill is Chapel Hill. Floyd C. Watkins, after identifying 250 or 300 names of characters and places in *Thomas Wolfe's Characters*, maintains that there is not a single entirely fictional character or incident in the novel.

Anticipating negative reactions from the easily identifiable characters he portrays, Wolfe explains in a prefatory note that "all serious work in fiction is autobiographical" and that "he meditated no man's portrait here." Many of his readers did not accept that disclaimer, however, and were enraged when the book appeared (coincidentally in the same month as the stock market crash). That reaction is incorporated into his later work

in two ways: fictionally in *You Can't Go Home Again* and factually in *The Story of a Novel*.

In *The Story of a Novel* Wolfe observed that "the quality of my memory is characterized . . . in a more than ordinary degree by the intensity of its sense impressions, its power to evoke and bring back the odors, sounds, colors, shapes, and feel of things with concrete vividness." Wolfe's special talent, then, is not a reportorial one but one which exercises almost total recall of sensory images. It is important to remember that he produced the bulk of his enormous manuscript, originally 350,000 words, while he was living in London during 1926-28. That he was far removed in space and time from the events he describes makes the sense of immediacy in his writing all the more impressive.

In spite of charges of formlessness, *Look Homeward, Angel* is carefully constructed. It attains unity and shape through the focus on Eugene, the chronological sequence of events, the preservation of the theme of the search for identity, and the balance, in Chapters 5 and 35, of the death scenes of the twins.

The tombstone in the form of an angel is a significant unifying device. "An angel poised upon cold phthisic feet, with a smile of soft stone idiocy" is first mentioned on the second page of the novel. It is the focus of Chapter 19, "The Angel on the Porch," an excellent vignette published in slightly different form in the August 1929 issue of *Scribner's Magazine*. A similar angel is present in the last scene of the book when Eugene has a conversation with his dead brother, Ben. As all symbols must, this one holds a multitude of meanings: death, remembrance, existence on a spiritual plane, W. O. Gant, and the stone-like quality of people in their inability to communicate with each other. When the original title of the novel, *O Lost*, was changed to the inspired borrowing from Milton's "Lycidas," the angel imagery was further strengthened.

Finally, one should not overlook the pervading humor of the novel. Bruce R. McElderry, Jr., in fact, has found it to be the funniest book in American literature since *Huckleberry Finn*. One manifestation of the humor may be seen in the comedic appeal of the characterizations—W. O.'s bombast, Luke's stuttering, Eliza's habit of pursing her lips and nodding her head. Another element of humor is found in the tone and timing. One instance involves the scene early on when the baby Eugene's face is stepped on by a dray-horse, Eugene having escaped from his yard into an adjoining alley and the driver of the encroaching wagon having fallen asleep. A physician is called: " 'This looks worse than it is,' observed Dr. McGuire, laying the hero upon the lounge.... Nevertheless, it took two hours to bring him round. Everyone spoke highly of the horse."

Look Homeward, Angel was published in the same year as William Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury* and Ernest Hemingway's *A Farewell to Arms*. While it does not currently enjoy the prestige of those other landmarks of American letters, it has never been out of print and continues to attract popular and critical attention. If Wolfe's genius was not enough to sustain a universally acclaimed writing career, it was ample for the creation of a genuine literary achievement.

Source: Nancy Carol Joyner, "*Look Homeward, Angel*: Novel by Thomas Wolfe, 1929," in *Reference Guide to American Literature*, 4th ed., edited by Thomas Riggs, St. James Press, 2000, pp. 1015-16.

Critical Essay #3

In the following essay, Ruppersburg examines narration in Look Homeward, Angel*, concluding that it "is a first-person novel, narrated retrospectively by a narrator who clearly sympathizes and identifies with the young protagonist."*

The authors of such semiautobiographical novels as *Remembrance of Things Past* and *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* relied on narrative point of view to maintain a critical, objective distance from their text. Thomas Wolfe, another autobiographical novelist, did the same. Though often criticized for his apparently narcissistic inability to remain separate from his story, Wolfe used point of view in *Look Homeward, Angel* (1929) to exploit the experiences of his own life for artistic rather than merely egotistical purposes. As a significant component of narrative form and meaning, point of view in Wolfe's first novel thus merits careful examination.

Curiously, critical opinion on the subject has been sparse and divided. Expressing the traditional attitude, Richard S. Kennedy describes the novel's point of view as third person. C. Hugh Holman believes the narrator is "some unidentified person—not Eugene Gant (unless he is telling the story in the third person)." In contrast, Louis D. Rubin observes that readers "come to identify the authorial personality with that of Eugene when older, . . . recreating the events of his childhood in order to understand them." Joseph Millichap calls the narrator an "older and wiser" Eugene, while Carl Bredahl suggests that the narrator is Eugene metamorphosed from his old, cast-off self into an artist. Fortunately, this divergence in opinion can be resolved. The novel provides sufficient evidence to support a specific identification of the narrator and his role in the narrative process.

Look Homeward, Angel reflects many of the typical characteristics of third-person narrative. Physically uninvolved in the action, the presiding external narrator calls little attention to himself. Instead he focuses on Eugene, the Gants, and Altamont. Eschewing the indifference of most third-person narrators, however, he often seems so interested in telling the story that many readers identify him with Wolfe, widely known to have based the novel on events and people from his own life. Such an identification is incorrect. The narrator possesses an existence and personality distinct from the author's —so distinct that we can regard him as a "third person" only with difficulty. Gérard Genette argues that third-person narration is physically impossible to begin with. Every narrative is, he writes, "by definition, to all intents and purposes presented in the first person . . . The real question is whether or not the narrator can use the first person to designate one of his characters." Accordingly, Genette would regard Wolfe's novel as narrated by a physical being who speaks it aloud or writes it down—a "first-person" narrator. But is this theoretical being an actual character?

Concrete evidence in the published text and the "O Lost!" typescript reveals that he is a character, a first-person speaker, and an actual participant, of one sort or another, in the story he tells.

The strongest such evidence is the narrator's occasional habit of referring to himself with first-person pronouns. Singular and plural first-person pronouns occur throughout the book in literary allusions, stream-of-consciousness passages, and indirect discourse. The antecedents of these pronouns are usually clear. In at least five instances, however, the antecedent of the pronoun "I" proves to be none other than the narrator himself. These self-references occur on pp. 4, 29, 204, 223, and 522. In each case the narrator uses the "I" while explaining or qualifying something he has said. In Chapter 1, he interrupts an account of W. O. Gant's life in Baltimore by remarking: "—this is a longer tale. But *I* know that his cold and shallow eyes had darkened with the obscure and passionate hunger that had lived in a dead man's eyes, and that had led from Fenchurch Street past Philadelphia" (my emphasis). In Chapter 18, he describes the emotions of Eugene and his brothers after they have fought among themselves: "They were like men who, driving forward desperately at some mirage, turn, for a moment, to see their footprints stretching interminably away across the waste land of the desert; or *I* should say, they were like those who have been mad, and who will be mad again, but who see themselves for a moment quietly, sanely, at morning, looking with sad untroubled eyes into a mirror." A similar metaphor concludes the novel: "as [Eugene] stood for the last time by the angels of his father's porch, it seemed as if the Square already were far and lost; or, *I* should say, he was like a man who stands upon a hill above the town he has left, yet does not say 'The town is near,' but turns his eyes upon the distant soaring ranges." These self-conscious first-person references reveal the narrator's undeniable presence and establish his relationship to the narrative. They show that he knows a great deal, for with self-confident omniscience he relates the thoughts and feelings of the people he describes. More importantly, they show his desire to explain the events of the story according to his own knowledge of time and human nature.

The narrator also occasionally refers to himself with objective and possessive case pronouns, and with the first-person plurals "we," "us," and "our." The latter often simply indicate a narratorial we (like the royal we, or the narrator of many nineteenth-century British novels) which does not differ significantly from the five singular references. An example occurs as the narrator begins to discuss Eugene's infancy: "*We* would give willingly some more extended account of the world his life touched during the first few years" (my emphasis). Aside from indicating his presence, the narrator uses these plural pronouns to evoke in the reader a sense of kinship with the protagonist, whose experience becomes metaphorically representative of all human experience. He also uses them to confirm his own kinship to the reader, whom he groups with himself and the protagonist in the mutually inclusive category of the human race. The novel's proem introduces the kinship, which the opening paragraphs of the first chapter emphasize: "Each of us is all the sums he has not counted . . . The seed of our destruction will blossom in the desert, the alexin of our cure grows by a mountain rock, and our lives are haunted by a Georgia slattern, because a London cutpurse went unhung." The narrator further cements the relationship by habitually addressing the reader as "you." The plural "we" and pointed "you" literally compel the reader's identification with the narrative, Eugene, and the narrator. They invest the reader with a sense of participation in, and commitment to, events he is only reading about. They likewise denote the narrator's active presence in the novel.

A number of the narrator's self-references were evidently edited from the "O Lost!" typescript by Scribner's editor Maxwell Perkins. According to Francis Skipp, Perkins deleted twenty-two cases of what he considered inappropriate "authorial comment" (which were really narratorial comment), a total of 442 lines. In a description of these cuts, Professor Skipp has identified at least four instances of the plural "we" (for example, "We believe, reader, we told you some time ago that Julia [Eliza] had begun to think of Dixieland") and one of the singular "I" ("But pardon, reader, I diverge"). In other deleted passages the narrator expresses his opinions (he calls "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner" the "greatest romantic poem that has ever been written in the English language," for instance, and attributes the lynching of Negroes for rape to the hypocrisy of the "deacon retreating up the alley towards his black wench").

Similar expressions of opinion occur in the published novel. Despite them, the narrator generally assumes an objective attitude towards the story. His first-person singular references are rare; first-person plural pronouns usually occur only in the most lyrical passages. He also tends to distance himself from the main characters by focusing a semiomniscient viewpoint most often on Eugene, less frequently on such characters as W. O. and Eliza. Within these restrictive perspectives, the narrator speaks with insight and intimacy about the characters' feelings, thoughts, and reactions to the world. As a result, we come to believe that we know a great deal about Altamont, though we see it only through the eyes of a few inhabitants. Because of the contrast between the limited perspectives of characters and the narrator's more broadly encompassing view, the novel gives the impression of being related by an omniscient voice, when in fact it is told mainly through its characters.

The narrator is also distanced from his story by time. In several instances he notes what the protagonist will think or remember "years later." Commenting on Eugene's zealous loyalty to Southern tradition, he explains: "Years later, when he could no longer think of the barren spiritual wilderness. . . he still pretended the most fanatic devotion." When Eugene notices Margaret Leonard's deformed index finger, the narrator observes that "it was years before he [Eugene] knew that tuberculars sometimes have such fingers." Skipp cites three similar examples in the material cut from the "O Lost!" typescript. One even describes a trip which Eugene makes to Europe well after the time of the last chapter. Thus, the narrator tells the story retrospectively, and he remains acquainted with what Eugene thinks and does long after the novel's conclusion.

At times, however, the narrator abandons his objectivity and involves himself emotionally in the narrative. His separation from the protagonist then seems to vanish almost entirely. One such moment occurs at the end of Chapter 30, the climax of the Laura James episode. In a lyric eulogy to lost youth and love, the narrator exclaims, "Ghost, ghost, come back from that marriage that *we* did not foresee, return not into life, but into magic, where *we* have never died, into the enchanted wood, where *we* still lie, strewn on the grass" (my emphasis). The eulogy first appears to employ another example of the universalizing "we," inviting the reader to compare his own memories of lost youth and love with Eugene's. Repeated examination, however, suggests that the narrator has given this particular "we" a special ambiguity. Taken literally, the passage foreshadows Laura's revelation of her engagement. The narrator calls her marriage one

"*we* did not foresee." His reference in this context to a specific event in the protagonist's life implies unmistakably that he is describing his own grieving memories of lost love. Indeed, circumstantial evidence suggests that the narrator is an older, more mature Eugene, that the "we" refers both to his older and younger selves.

The argument for this identification merits review: the first-person narrator reveals intense emotional involvement with what he describes, though he remains physically separate from the action. He speaks from a future vantage point in time, often sympathizing strongly with his protagonist. When he comments on what Eugene will remember in later years, he draws an implicit comparison between the past-time character and what he became in the future. First-person pronouns not only imply that the narrator is a character but also reveal at rare moments that both he and Eugene have the same experiences in common. Finally, in several scenes Eugene remarks pointedly, "I shall remember"—as if to remind himself and the reader that in narrating the novel he has done just that, preserving his memories in the story he relates, confirming his life's significance in the reflexive structure of a narrative which bends ever back towards a past that itself moves steadily towards the future moment when he begins to remember.

The narrator-protagonist's role fits smoothly into the structure of *Look Homeward, Angel*. To the chronicle of a young man's life and society it adds the story of the narrator's, and the protagonist's, self-discovery. It also imbues the book with a certain symmetry: in the final chapter Eugene sets out towards his destiny. Years later, he tells his life story in order to rediscover the events and people who made him what he was then, what he has now become. The lyrical dithyrambs of Chapters 30, 35, and 37 thus dramatize the older Eugene's emotions as he remembers his younger self. His identity also explains the predominant use of Eugene's perspective in narrating the novel. An uninvolved third-person narrator's reliance on a single character's perspective would require no justification. But with a narrator who pronounces himself a character—a limited, fallible inhabitant of a world governed by natural laws—we inevitably must question how he knows what he knows. Who but a narrating Eugene could better remember, describe, and analyze his own experiences?

Unfortunately, Eugene's role as narrator does not explain his ability to reveal the innermost thoughts of such individuals as Eliza and W. O., or to give the description of town life in Chapter 14 (during which Eugene is asleep). Perhaps these apparent inconsistencies point to a structural flaw in the novel. Or maybe Eugene learned about what they describe from family members and townspeople. Yet such contrived explanations only partially satisfy, and they fail to recognize the narrator's motives for telling Eugene's story. *Look Homeward, Angel* is no dry, historical chronicle whose narrator must document his every statement with footnote and bibliographical entries. It is art, literary fiction, an excursion into the buried lives of its characters—and the narrator's quest to discover his past by remembering and reconstructing it.

The narrator seems most interested in discovering and understanding his father. Chapter 19, for instance, records in detail the thoughts and feelings of W. O. Gant during his talk with the prostitute Queen Elizabeth. Eugene does not witness this

encounter, and it may never have actually occurred. But no factual biography could so vividly illuminate an aging man's inner being, his awareness of impending senescence "in a world of seemings." Though such a scene does not present known facts, it nonetheless uncovers reality—the truth which transcends fact—as the narrator succeeds in reconstructing it. Discovery through creation also occurs in the seventh chapter, a "stream-of-consciousness" narrative focused on W. O. Gant's half-formed thoughts, feelings, and perceptions as he walks through town. Here again the narrator recreates his father, attempting to view hint objectively, yet also with the subjective prejudice and admiration of a son. By explaining Gant to the reader, he simultaneously explains the man to himself. Discovery through creation (or recreation) is the fundamental force which compels the narrator-protagonist to tell his story in the first place.

Eugene's narratorial role thus provides an appropriate vehicle for exploring the effects of the past—one's individual past, his family heritage, and world history—on the present. The continuity of linear time links the present moment to all others. In his opening "Note to the Reader," Wolfe introduces this theme: "we are the sum of all the moments of our lives—all that is ours is in them." The theme's structural metaphor lies in the novel's reflexive narrative structure, which moves inevitably towards the final chapter's climax and Eugene's decision to leave Altamont and seek "in the city of myself, upon the continent of my soul" the "forgotten language, the lost world, a door where I may enter, and music strange as any ever sounded." Chapter 40 marks the critical moment of the narrator-protagonist's life. The destiny towards which Eugene embarks the narrator achieves in his narration. The consequences of this episode ultimately enable his telling of the story, hence the creation of the novel itself.

Additional evidence for the narrator's identity lies in his relationship to the author. Wolfe made his book in his own image, modeling the protagonist on his younger self. Yet he found significance in Eugene's life not became it was his own but because he saw it as the metaphoric embodiment of every human life. Not possessed of the compulsion for impersonality prominent in the fiction of Conrad, Joyce, and Faulkner, Wolfe wanted to insure that his readers understood him, that they shared his vision. He thus makes his personality everywhere apparent in his novel. The narrator is his persona, through whom he can dispassionately relate the protagonist's life, and who at rare moments allows him to participate directly in Eugene's experience. Both Wolfe and the narrator-protagonist undergo the same contemplative process of remembering as they produce the novel. The narrator evaluates the impact of his early life on his present. Through the narrator, Wolfe does the same. Yet in no sense does he narrate. The narrator is his alter-ego, the authorial personality who narrates for him. If the narrator is an older version of the young Eugene, and Eugene a fictional version of the young Wolfe, then it seems logical to regard the narrator as a fictional version of the author. Wolfe himself never speaks, and the illusion of fiction is never violated. What Max Perkins took for intrusive "authorial commentary," what critics mistake as Wolfe's voice, is actually the voice of the narrator, Wolfe's fictional counterpart and persona.

Perhaps because of the close link between Wolfe and his protagonist-narrator, the narrative source of the emotional lyrical passages has often puzzled readers. C. Hugh

Holman speculates that they are produced by "a person located in the time of writing rather than the time of action yet intimately bound up with the action of an intense emotional bondage," but he implies that this person is Wolfe, speaking through the veil of third-person narrative. Richard S. Kennedy suggests that in one instance, the apostrophe to Laura James in Chapter 30, Wolfe speaks unabashedly in his own voice: "You who were made for music, will hear music no more: in your dark house the winds are silent. Ghost, ghost, come back from that marriage that we did not foresee, return not into life, but into magic, where we have never died, into the enchanted wood, where we still lie, strewn on the grass." Kennedy believes these lines "refer to death and the grave. The marriage that we did not foresee is death. Since there is nothing in *Look Homeward, Angel* about Laura James' death, . . . it seems evident that Wolfe has reference to Clara Paul [his model for Laura James], who really did die in the influenza epidemic a year or so after young Tom Wolfe knew her." Professor Kennedy properly identifies the episode from Wolfe's life which exerted a major influence on the diction and intensity of the passage, but the novel's preoccupation with memory and the past suggests another interpretation: the narrator-Eugene is remembering his first romance. He recalls it as clearly as if it had just ended, but he realizes painfully that it belongs to the lost and dead past. Laura James is a "ghost," a ghost of his past, a memory. Her "marriage" is simply that—the marriage which ended her romance with Eugene. His wish to return "into magic, where we have never died, into the enchanted wood" is his desire to return to the past and resurrect the love affair dead for so long. Knowing that Clara Paul died a few years after her summer romance with Wolfe may enrich our appreciation of the episode, but in no way is that knowledge necessary: the episode makes complete sense without it. Narrative structure suggests a far more likely voice for the episode than Wolfe's—Eugene Gant's. Wolfe obviously used some of his own memories to write this chapter, but he did not grant them precedence over his primary interest in Eugene.

Intense, emotional moments such as the conclusion of Chapter 30 form the poetic center of *Look Homeward, Angel*. Almost always they mourn the irrecoverable past, as in the apostrophe to Laura James, Gant's vision of the town square in Chapter 19, and Ben's death. Plural first-person pronouns fuse the perspectives of the protagonist, narrator, and author and invite the reader to share their sense of loss. The most effective lyrical passages merge all four viewpoints into one cathartic, cohesive vision of the world. In this way narrative point of view reinforces the universality of Eugene Gant's experience.

Despite proof of a first-person narrator and abundant evidence of his specific identity, Eugene's role as narrator must remain only speculative. The novel's structure, the narrator's emotional involvement, Wolfe's desire to make art from his life—all strengthen its likelihood. But the novel offers no proof more substantial than the evidence I have cited. In my opinion, however, this was the book Wolfe was trying to write, the book for which his nature suited him, for which he had spent years of preparation: a young man's story, told retrospectively by that young man grown older. Wolfe's desire to be an artist in the modern sense, his awareness of methods used by such modern writers as Joyce, whom he admired, convinced him to resist his impulses and attempt a different sort of work. To a great extent he succeeded, but the narrative form to which he was

instinctively drawn remains evident in his novel's point of view, the narrator's personality, and the interrelationship between past and present.

Look Homeward, Angel, then, is a first-person novel, narrated retrospectively by a narrator who clearly sympathizes and identifies with the young protagonist. Evidence in the text further suggests that the narrator and his protagonist are the same person, that the narrator of Thomas Wolfe's first novel tells the story of his own life.

Source: Hugh H. Ruppersburg, "The Narrator in *Look Homeward, Angel*," in *Southern Humanities Review*, Vol. 18, No. 1, Winter 1984, pp. 1-9.

Critical Essay #4

In the following essay, Kennedy examines how Wolfe's literary style in Look Homeward, Angel *brings a richness and variety that elevates the story and its characters to a higher level.*

The German term, *Bildungsroman*, which can best be translated as "novel of development" or "novel of growth" has never, to my knowledge, been adequately defined or characterized as a subcategory of the novel. We recognize in the term itself the core of its meaning. It refers to a novel which has as its subject the story of a young man or young woman who goes through the struggles of growing up and in the end reaches maturity, a point at which he has sufficient understanding of life that he can bring his career somewhat under control, free from the mistakes of the past. This kind of novel has a very strong appeal for readers because the experience is common to us all and is important to us all. The appeal is not only to young people but to everyone, for we are always, all our life long, going through the process of maturing. We are always learning from experience, we are always seeking to understand the life around us, we are always wrestling with problems that affect our destinies. I would even venture to say that the reader who is tired of stories about the process of maturing is tired of life.

The theme of passing from innocence to knowing is found in many short stories which treat of a climactic episode that changes the way the central character looks at life. Katherine Mansfield's *The Garden Parts*, for instance, brings Laura to the point at which she has a new insight into the complexity and strangeness of the world around her. After viewing the dead body of the young working man and offering apologies for her hat, she can declare to her brother, "Isn't life——?" and she, wordless at this point, lets us supply the many words that can fit—fascinating, bewildering, enigmatic, surprising, and so on. A novel, however, will have a whole series of these illuminating experiences. The usual sequence is to bring the hero or heroine from birth up through adolescence. But the important point is that the struggle toward understanding must be dominant and the movement must be from confusion toward control. Thus *The Red Badge of Courage*, although it begins at the point the hero is going into the army, would be properly called a novel of development because the hero is put through many tests until at last he achieves manliness and courage. Wouk's *The Caine Mutiny*, which covers about the same age span for the hero and places him in the military service, does not fall in the category of the *Bildungsroman*. The great bulk of the book is devoted to questions of authority and justice. Dickens' *Great Expectations* has a complicated mystery which winds through its plot, yet it is a good example of the novel of development. Pip goes through moral floundering from which he gradually emerges toward the end of the book. On the other hand, Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment*, which deals with a young man and his moral groping, cannot be called a novel of development because its focus is on a social theme and a religious theme which arise out of the misapplication of a theory that has led to murder. The first half of Dreiser's *An American Tragedy* follows the pattern of the novel of growth but the last half does not. The defining characteristic, then, of the *Bildungsroman* is a series of ordeals and learning experiences through which the hero passes as if going through initiation rites at the brink of manhood.

The thematic pattern itself is very old. For example, the maturing of Telemachus is an important part of Homer's *Odyssey*. But the pattern does not turn up often until the Romantic Movement when self-consciousness became common practice in literature. Most of the great examples of the *Bildungsroman* appear in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries: Thackeray's *Pendennis*, Meredith's *Ordeal of Richard Feverel*, Melville's *Redburn*, Maugham's *Of Human Bondage*, Lawrence's *Sons and Lovers*. The list could be very long.

Thomas Wolfe's *Look Homeward, Angel* is almost a classic example. Indeed Thomas Wolfe was very perceptive about the features of the *Bildungsroman* because it was the kind of book he could handle best. He recognized, for instance, that the novel of development was actually another form of the journey novel—with life as the journey and a certain psychological geography as the ground to be covered. In the manuscript of *Look Homeward, Angel*, he placed at the beginning of his narrative the word "Anabasis," which mean in Greek "a going up." He took the term from Xenophon's account of the journey "up-country" of Cyrus the Persian in pursuit of the Greeks. Wolfe recognized, too, the sense of quest in the reaching out toward maturity. When he began work on his book *Of Time and the River*, he decided that the theme would be the search for a father—it was to be a symbolic search for a figure of authority. In his last book, *The Web and the Rock*, he intended that it would be about "the innocent man discovering life." He planned to put on the title page a quotation from *War and Peace*, "Prince Andrei looked up at the stars and sighed; everything was so different from what he thought it was going to be."

Look Homeward, Angel contains all the experiences that the apprentice-hero usually passes through, except the religious ordeal. The story presents the struggle of young Eugene Gant to free himself from his environment and particularly to break free of a possessive mother. He passes through common childhood experiences in conflict with his brothers and sisters. He opens up his imagination through the world of books. He develops sexual curiosity. He reaches out for wider horizons under the guidance of sympathetic teachers in school. He gets his first job. He finds new intellectual freedoms and bewilderments in college. He undergoes sexual initiation. He is introduced to alcohol (the sacred brew of twentieth-century initiation rites). He faces the problem of death when his favorite brother is swept away in the influenza epidemic. He falls in love and endures loss of love. He makes the break from home, and, as the book comes to a close, he reaches an interpretation of life and finds a way of life that he can follow.

But the mere presence of this subject matter (or this archetypal pattern, as one may call it) is no demonstration of the literary value of the work. A novel like *The End of Roaming* by Alexander Laing or one like *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn* by Betty Smith would have this pattern too, for any autobiographical novelist or any commercial novelist can adopt the pattern and, for his ephemeral purposes, draw upon the appeals which the pattern offers. A work must have something more if we will class it as a work of art worthy of being read more than once or worthy of being studied and of being discussed. The something more will be philosophic breadth, perhaps the kind of treatment that turns the hero into Everyman (or, one should say, Every Young Man). Or to put it another way, the something more will be the handling of the material in such a way as to create an

intricate and harmonious literary complex which will enhance the significance of the book as well as provide the aesthetic pleasure of the successful work of art.

In another place, I have discussed the complexity of ideas that provide a framework for the story of Eugene Gant in *Look Homeward, Angel*, and I have also tried to show how, by means of symbol and structural arrangement, Wolfe created a full and ordered world for his hero to operate in. Now I would like in this study to take just one other element of Wolfe's literary endeavor and point out how it makes its contribution to the richness of this work. I want to talk about Wolfe's style. I will begin with a reminder that the American writer has a good knack for taking lowly materials and surrounding them with an aura of the great and important. Melville takes a rough crew and an odoriferous whaling vessel and by means of style and structure creates a prose epic. Tennessee Williams takes a nymphomaniac and a thug and with symbol and technical manipulation creates a profound and moving tragedy. Wolfe takes the story of a lower-middle-class boy who lives in a Southern town and creates a novel of development that transcends its restricted lineaments. By various devices, Wolfe enlarges his scene beyond the family circle and beyond town life to make us aware that Eugene is part of a very large and complex world and that he is one of the participants in the history of man. Style is one of the means by which he creates a sense of variety and abundance in the book for Wolfe has a variety of styles that he employs.

One of the narrative styles may be described as rich, sometimes over florid, arranged in long, loose sentences, frequently made up of elements piled in a series:

Eugene was loose now in the limitless meadows of sensation: his sensory equipment was so complete that at the moment of perception of a single thing, the whole background of color, warmth, odor, sound, taste established itself, so that later, the breath of hot dandelion brought back the grass-warm banks of Spring, a day, a place, the rustling of young leaves[;] or a page of a book, the thin exotic smell of tangerine, the wintry bite of great apples; or, as with *Gulliver's Travels*, a bright windy day in March, the spurting moments of warmth, the drip and reek of the earth-thaw, the feel of the fire.

When the diction is concrete, as it is in this example, the style is very effective, particularly for communicating an atmosphere of plenitude—of a world that has so much in it that because of abundance itself it must be very good.

At times, Wolfe's prose takes on some of the qualities of the poetry of the Imagists. There are passages which are simple, metaphorical, and rhythmical in which an impression in the mind of Eugene is carried vividly to us—as, for example, when the boy thinks of his brother:

My Brother Ben's face, thought Eugene, is like a piece of slightly yellow ivory; his high white head is knotted fiercely by his old man's scowl; his mouth is like a knife, his smile the flicker of light across a blade. His face is like a blade, and a knife, and a flicker of light: it is delicate and fierce, and scowls beautifully forever, and when he fastens his hard white fingers and his scowling eyes upon a thing he wants to fix, he sniffs with sharp and private concentration through his long pointed nose.

The effect of passages like this is to create the impression that life is full of vivid little moments of illumination which can be responded to and experienced intensely.

I have called passages like these poetic because they have rhythm and highly charged language, but they are just one of Wolfe's characteristic ways of saying things. There are times, however, when he is consciously being "poetic": that is when he writes short, set pieces (he later called them dithyrambs) that have an elevated manner and a formality of address and of arrangement in his sentences. We find these inserted in various places in the book. Here is one which Wolfe has placed at the end of a scene about Eugene's first love-affair:

Come up into the hills, O my young love. Return! O lost, and by the wind grieved, ghost, come back again, as first I knew you in the timeless valley, where we shall feel ourselves anew, bedded on magic in the month of June. There was a place where all the sun went glistering in your hair, and from the hill we could have put a finger on a star. Where is the day that melted into one rich noise? Where is the music of your flesh, the rhyme of your teeth, the dainty languor of your legs, your small firm arms, your slender fingers, to be bitten like an apple, and the little cherry-teats of your white breasts? And where are all the tiny wires of finespun maidenhair? Quick are the months of earth, and quick the teeth that fed upon this loveliness. You who were made for music, will hear music no more: in your dark house the winds are silent.

When a prose lyric like this elegy is very personal to Wolfe, it is an intrusion, but one would never want to banish it. It becomes a memorable passage. It remains a beautiful excresence on the work. Its general function then is only its presence as part of the encyclopedic profusion of the book. More often, such passages are formal apostrophes, and the effect is rather of oratory than poetry. The reader has a feeling that a public spokesman is giving voice to a communal emotion or attitude. Again there is a sense of a larger world which surrounds the hero and with which he must come to terms.

There are other passages in which the style combines both the grand and the commonplace. The effect is to elevate or to ennoble the commonplace. When old Mr. Gant returns from a trip and looks over the home town, Wolfe begins the whole section with an epic style, even employing epithet: "How looked the home-earth then to Gant the Far-Wanderer?." The verbal contrasts that Wolfe plays with are many: he combines the rich and the spare; he exaggerates and then follows up with understatement; he joins the majestic and the Vulgar, the formal and the colloquial. The effects are varied. Sometimes he is highly comical. At other times, he makes ordinary details seem to be recurrences in the endless cycles of time. For example, here is a passage which makes use of mythological allusion and high flown language about the coming of spring—when little boys play games in the street:

Yes, and in the month when Proserpine comes back, and Ceres' dead heart rekindles, when all the woods are a tender smoky blur, and birds no bigger than a budding leaf dart through the singing trees, and when odorous tar comes spongy in the streets, and boys roll balls of it upon their tongues, and they are lumpy with tops and agated

marbles; and there is blasting thunder in the night, and the soaking millionfooted rain . . .

In *Look for Homeward, Angel* 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. Here is an example. But I will spell out the movement of thought before quoting it. Old Mr. Gant is riding through Altamont. He thinks of some of the chamber of commerce booster slogans about the town. His thought jumps to Los Angeles and its growth. He thinks then of Mr. Bowman who lives in California and who used to be in love with Mrs. Gant. This makes him think about himself and an experience with a woman in New Orleans. This then makes him remember a time long ago in New Orleans when he was robbed in a hotel room. He thinks of prostitutes in New Orleans. He then thinks of fictional heroines in stories about New Orleans. This makes him spin out a fantasy in which he plays a heroic part.

America's Switzerland. The Beautiful Land of the Sky. Jesus God! Old Bowman said he'll be a rich man some day. Built up all the way to Pasadena. Come on out. Too late now. Think he was in love with her. No matter. Too old. Wants her out there. No fool like —White bellies of the fish. A spring somewhere to wash me through. Clean as a baby once mort. New Orleans, the night Jim Corbett knocked out John L. Sullivan. The man who tried to rob me. My clothes and my watch. Five block, down Canal Street in my nightgown. Two A. M. Threw them all in a heap—watch landed on top. Fight in my room. Town full of crooks and pickpockets for prizefight. Make good story. Policeman half hour later. They come out and beg you to come in. Frenchwomen. Creoles. Beautiful Creole heiress. Steamboat race. Captain, they are gaining. I will not be beaten. Out of wood. Use the bacon she said proudly. There was a terrific explosion. He got her as she sank the third time and swam to shore.

Stream-of-consciousness passages amplify the characterizations in a book. But the general impression of the excursions through the minds of the characters in *Look Homeward, Angel* is that the hidden life of the psyche, the buried life as Wolfe calls it, is teeming with activity and that human life, such as that developing in Eugene, is a mysterious but wonderful thing.

These are some examples of the narrative styles. The presence of many different dialogue styles, of course, increases the stylistic variety, particularly because most of the characters are quite distinctive in the way they speak: W. O. Gant is full of exaggeration and rhetorical flourish; Mrs. Gant carries on in the rambling, interminable manner of free association; Ben is sharp and laconic; Luke stutters. In addition there are the currents and eddies of talk in the town—the words of clerks, servants, loafers, politicians, gatherers at the lunch counters. Much of this town talk, seemingly insignificant, is like that in Wilder's *Our Town:* it reflects the rhythms of life, comings and goings, deaths and entrances. Moreover, it is good talk, with a marked colloquial flavor. Here, for example, is Gant on the streetcar:

"Jim Bowles died while you were gone, I reckon," said the motorman.

"Pneumonia," said the motorman. "He was dead four days after he was took down."

"Why, he was a big healthy man in the prime of life," said Gant. "I was talking to him the day before I went away," he lied convincing himself permanently that this was true, "He looked as if he had never known a day's sickness in his life."

"He went home one Friday night with a chill," said the motorman, "and the next Tuesday he was gone."

Beyond this, *Look Homeward, Angel* has a number of other evidences of Wolfe's linguistic interest such as parodies of pulp fiction stories with Eugene as the hero—like the one about Bruce-Eugene Glendenning, international vagabond, who fights off the dangerous natives and keeps back two cartridges for himself and the beautiful Veronica Mullins; or Eugene's fantasies when he comes from the motion picture theater—Eugene Gent, the Dixie Ghost, who shoots it out with Faro Jim in the Triple Y Saloon. In this book, Wolfe plays with language in dozens of ways.

What I have been trying to establish is that by means of style Wolfe has done two important things. First, he has provided a swirl of experience around his hero and made the whole experience of life and of growing up seem exciting and valuable. Second, the linguistic variety has contributed to the complexity of the little universe in which Wolfe has placed Eugene Gant and which the boy is trying to understand. In his search for understanding, Eugene has been impelled to look to the city and its crowded streets and to the multiplicity of social experience that travel and wandering seem to offer. But at the end of the book, the ghost of his brother Ben, returned from the dead, tells Eugene that he is wrong. Eugene should look inside himself for the way to understanding. "*You* are your world," says Ben. The quality and the amplitude of that world has been partly conveyed to us by means of style.

Source: Richard S. Kennedy, "Wolfe's *Look Homeward, Angel* as a Novel of Development," in *South Atlantic Quarterly*, Vol. 63, No. 2, Spring 1964, pp. 218-26.

Adaptations

Look Homeward, Angel was adapted as a three-act comedy/drama by Ketti Frings, first produced in New York at the Ethel Barrymore Theatre in 1957. It was published by Scribner in 1958, won the Pulitzer Prize, and was adapted by Gary Geld and Peter Udell as the musical comedy *Angel*, performed on Broadway in 1978.

John Chandler Griffin's *Memories of Thomas Wolfe: A Pictorial Companion to "Look Homeward, Angel"* (1996) is a very helpful companion piece to Wolfe's novel, both as a source of contextual information and as a way of bringing the events to life.

Topics for Further Study

Thomas Wolfe was a legendary figure in his time. Read some primary source historical material to examine how his contemporaries viewed him. For example, read *The Journey Down* by Aline Bernstein, which remembers their passionate relationship from her point of view. How do you think Wolfe's personality affected his reputation?

What do you think *Look Homeward, Angel* says about race relations? Did the novel's treatment of African Americans offend you? What do other critics say about Wolfe's racial views? Do some reading about the African American experience in early twentieth-century North Carolina and discuss how accurately the novel portrays these circumstances.

One of Wolfe's intentions in writing his first novel was to create a new tradition of southern literature. Did he succeed? Read some other books classified as "literature of the South," such as William Faulkner's novels. What kind of tradition do these books follow? Do you think recent books by Toni Morrison, such as *Beloved*, follow Wolfe's idea of a southern tradition?

Wolfe was obsessed with the idea of "the American experience." What would Walt Whitman or Henry David Thoreau say about this idea? Read some of their writings to find out. Compare and contrast Wolfe and these American romanticists to a current writer like Phillip Roth and his version of the American experience in his novel *American Pastoral*.

Compare and Contrast

1900-1920: The infant mortality rate in the United States is 140 per 1,000 live births.

Today: Infant mortality has shrunk dramatically to below 8 per 1,000 live births.

1900-1920: The races in the American South are notoriously unequal. Segregation and discrimination are widespread, and most blacks live in poverty. During these two decades, there are 1,413 recorded lynchings of African American males, compared with 156 of whites.

Today: All races are equal under the law. There is increasing effort made to address economicinequities among African Americans and other non-whites in the South, and segregation is generally unacceptable.

1900-1920: Real estate and investment is becoming very popular among those who can afford it, given the rapid expansion of American cities.

Today: Buying property and real estate has once again become a popular way to get rich. Investment has taken on many new forms, and it is not so clear that the economy is expanding at any given moment, but developers and investors continue to try to exploit the market.

What Do I Read Next?

William Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury* (1929) is perhaps the most well-known book by this famous Southern novelist. Its experimentation with point of view and the stylization of the past in the novel represent a radical approach to storytelling.

Of Time and the River (1935) is the second installment in Wolfe's autobiographical narrative of Eugene Gant. Covering the years from 1920 to 1925, the novel begins with Eugene's journey to Harvard and ends after a series of adventures in Europe, when he falls in love with Esther Jack (a character based on Wolfe's former mistress).

The Rebuilding of Old Commonwealths: And Other Documents of Social Reform in the Progressive Era South, (1996) edited by William A. Link and part of The Bedford Series in History and Culture, provides a series of primary source historical documents which address the issue of social change in turn of the century Southern America.

Ernest Hemingway's novel *A Moveable Feast*, published in 1964, contains the author's memories about what it was like living in the expatriate modernist writing community in 1920s Paris.

Further Study

Donald, David Herbert, *Look Homeward: A Life of Thomas Wolfe*, Harvard University Press, 2003.

This new edition of Wolfe's biography gives a thorough overview of the mystique surrounding the author.

Ensign, Robert Taylor, *Lean Down Your Ear upon the Earth, and Listen: Thomas Wolfe's Greener Modernism*, University of South Carolina Press, 2003.

Ensign's critical study identifies the modernist elements of Wolfe's work but stresses the naturalism and romanticism of the author's technique.

Field, Leslie A., ed., *Thomas Wolfe: Three Decades of Criticism*, University Press of London, 1969.

This collection of critical essays provides a broad spectrum of analytical context for Wolfe's work.

Wolfe, Thomas, *O Lost: A Story of the Buried Life*, edited by Arlyn Bruccoli and Matthew Joseph Bruccoli, University of South Carolina Press, 2000.

This new version of Wolfe's first novel is based on the original manuscript, from which Maxwell Perkins cut about sixty thousand words. Although similar to *Look Homeward, Angel*, the new version has sparked a debate about what should be the standard text as well as about the current value of Wolfe's work generally.

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Introduction

Purpose of the Book

The purpose of Novels for Students (NfS) is to provide readers with a guide to understanding, enjoying, and studying novels by giving them easy access to information about the work. Part of Gale's□For Students□ Literature line, NfS is specifically designed to meet the curricular needs of high school and undergraduate college students and their teachers, as well as the interests of general readers and researchers considering specific novels. While each volume contains entries on □classic□ novels

frequently studied in classrooms, there are also entries containing hard-to-find information on contemporary novels, including works by multicultural, international, and women novelists.

The information covered in each entry includes an introduction to the novel and the novel's author; a plot summary, to help readers unravel and understand the events in a novel; descriptions of important characters, including explanation of a given character's role in the novel as well as discussion about that character's relationship to other characters in the novel; analysis of important themes in the novel; and an explanation of important literary techniques and movements as they are demonstrated in the novel.

In addition to this material, which helps the readers analyze the novel itself, students are also provided with important information on the literary and historical background informing each work. This includes a historical context essay, a box comparing the time or place the novel was written to modern Western culture, a critical overview essay, and excerpts from critical essays on the novel. A unique feature of NfS is a specially commissioned critical essay on each novel, targeted toward the student reader.

To further aid the student in studying and enjoying each novel, information on media adaptations is provided, as well as reading suggestions for works of fiction and nonfiction on similar themes and topics. Classroom aids include ideas for research papers and lists of critical sources that provide additional material on the novel.

Selection Criteria

The titles for each volume of NfS were selected by surveying numerous sources on teaching literature and analyzing course curricula for various school districts. Some of the sources surveyed included: literature anthologies; Reading Lists for College-Bound Students: The Books Most Recommended by America's Top Colleges; textbooks on teaching the novel; a College Board survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; a National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; the NCTE's Teaching Literature in High School: The Novel;and the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) list of best books for young adults of the past twenty-five years. Input was also solicited from our advisory board, as well as educators from various areas. From these discussions, it was determined that each volume should have a mix of □classic□ novels (those works commonly taught in literature classes) and contemporary novels for which information is often hard to find. Because of the interest in expanding the canon of literature, an emphasis was also placed on including works by international, multicultural, and women authors. Our advisory board members□educational professionals□ helped pare down the list for each volume. If a work was not selected for the present volume, it was often noted as a possibility for a future volume. As always, the editor welcomes suggestions for titles to be included in future volumes.

How Each Entry Is Organized

Each entry, or chapter, in NfS focuses on one novel. Each entry heading lists the full name of the novel, the author's name, and the date of the novel's publication. The following elements are contained in each entry:

- Introduction: a brief overview of the novel which provides information about its first appearance, its literary standing, any controversies surrounding the work, and major conflicts or themes within the work.
- Author Biography: this section includes basic facts about the author's life, and focuses on events and times in the author's life that inspired the novel in question.
- Plot Summary: a factual description of the major events in the novel. Lengthy summaries are broken down with subheads.
- Characters: an alphabetical listing of major characters in the novel. Each character name is followed by a brief to an extensive description of the character's role in the novel, as well as discussion of the character's actions, relationships, and possible motivation. Characters are listed alphabetically by last name. If a character is unnamed□for instance, the narrator in Invisible Man-the character is listed as □The Narrator□ and alphabetized as □Narrator.□ If a character's first name is the only one given, the name will appear alphabetically by that name. □ Variant names are also included for each character. Thus, the full name □Jean Louise Finch□ would head the listing for the narrator of To Kill a Mockingbird, but listed in a separate cross-reference would be the nickname □Scout Finch.□
- Themes: a thorough overview of how the major topics, themes, and issues are addressed within the novel. Each theme discussed appears in a separate subhead, and is easily accessed through the boldface entries in the Subject/Theme Index.
- Style: this section addresses important style elements of the novel, such as setting, point of view, and narration; important literary devices used, such as imagery, foreshadowing, symbolism; and, if applicable, genres to which the work might have belonged, such as Gothicism or Romanticism. Literary terms are explained within the entry, but can also be found in the Glossary.
- Historical Context: This section outlines the social, political, and cultural climate in which the author lived and the novel was created. This section may include descriptions of related historical events, pertinent aspects of daily life in the culture, and the artistic and literary sensibilities of the time in which the work was written. If the novel is a historical work, information regarding the time in which the novel is set is also included. Each section is broken down with helpful subheads.
- Critical Overview: this section provides background on the critical reputation of the novel, including bannings or any other public controversies surrounding the work. For older works, this section includes a history of how the novel was first received and how perceptions of it may have changed over the years; for more recent novels, direct quotes from early reviews may also be included.
- Criticism: an essay commissioned by NfS which specifically deals with the novel and is written specifically for the student audience, as well as excerpts from previously published criticism on the work (if available).

- Sources: an alphabetical list of critical material quoted in the entry, with full bibliographical information.
- Further Reading: an alphabetical list of other critical sources which may prove useful for the student. Includes full bibliographical information and a brief annotation.

In addition, each entry contains the following highlighted sections, set apart from the main text as sidebars:

- Media Adaptations: a list of important film and television adaptations of the novel, including source information. The list also includes stage adaptations, audio recordings, musical adaptations, etc.
- Topics for Further Study: a list of potential study questions or research topics dealing with the novel. This section includes questions related to other disciplines the student may be studying, such as American history, world history, science, math, government, business, geography, economics, psychology, etc.
- Compare and Contrast Box: an □at-a-glance□ comparison of the cultural and historical differences between the author's time and culture and late twentieth century/early twenty-first century Western culture. This box includes pertinent parallels between the major scientific, political, and cultural movements of the time or place the novel was written, the time or place the novel was set (if a historical work), and modern Western culture. Works written after 1990 may not have this box.
- What Do I Read Next?: a list of works that might complement the featured novel or serve as a contrast to it. This includes works by the same author and others, works of fiction and nonfiction, and works from various genres, cultures, and eras.

Other Features

NfS includes □The Informed Dialogue: Interacting with Literature,□ a foreword by Anne Devereaux Jordan, Senior Editor for Teaching and Learning Literature (TALL), and a founder of the Children's Literature Association. This essay provides an enlightening look at how readers interact with literature and how Novels for Students can help teachers show students how to enrich their own reading experiences.

A Cumulative Author/Title Index lists the authors and titles covered in each volume of the NfS series.

A Cumulative Nationality/Ethnicity Index breaks down the authors and titles covered in each volume of the NfS series by nationality and ethnicity.

A Subject/Theme Index, specific to each volume, provides easy reference for users who may be studying a particular subject or theme rather than a single work. Significant subjects from events to broad themes are included, and the entries pointing to the specific theme discussions in each entry are indicated in boldface.

Each entry has several illustrations, including photos of the author, stills from film adaptations (if available), maps, and/or photos of key historical events.

Citing Novels for Students

When writing papers, students who quote directly from any volume of Novels for Students may use the following general forms. These examples are based on MLA style; teachers may request that students adhere to a different style, so the following examples may be adapted as needed. When citing text from NfS that is not attributed to a particular author (i.e., the Themes, Style, Historical Context sections, etc.), the following format should be used in the bibliography section:

□Night.□ Novels for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 234-35.

When quoting the specially commissioned essay from NfS (usually the first piece under the □Criticism□ subhead), the following format should be used:

Miller, Tyrus. Critical Essay on □Winesburg, Ohio.□ Novels for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 335-39.

When quoting a journal or newspaper essay that is reprinted in a volume of NfS, the following form may be used:

Malak, Amin. □Margaret Atwood's □The Handmaid's Tale and the Dystopian Tradition,□ Canadian Literature No. 112 (Spring, 1987), 9-16; excerpted and reprinted in Novels for Students, Vol. 4, ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski (Detroit: Gale, 1998), pp. 133-36.

When quoting material reprinted from a book that appears in a volume of NfS, the following form may be used:

Adams, Timothy Dow. □Richard Wright: □Wearing the Mask,□ in Telling Lies in Modern American Autobiography (University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 69-83; excerpted and reprinted in Novels for Students, Vol. 1, ed. Diane Telgen (Detroit: Gale, 1997), pp. 59-61.

We Welcome Your Suggestions

The editor of Novels for Students welcomes your comments and ideas. Readers who wish to suggest novels to appear in future volumes, or who have other suggestions, are cordially invited to contact the editor. You may contact the editor via email at: ForStudentsEditors@gale.com. Or write to the editor at:

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