

ANALYSIS

Of Time and the River (1935)

Thomas Wolfe

(1900-1938)

“*Of Time and the River: A Legend of Man’s Hunger in His Youth*, semi-autobiographical novel by Thomas Wolfe, published in 1935 as a sequel to *Look Homeward, Angel* [1929]. Eugene Gant leaves his Southern home for graduate work at Harvard, where the scope of his immense romantic appetite for experience is broadened as he reads voraciously, studies playwriting in the class of Professor Hatcher, and cultivates eccentric acquaintances, including his absurdly erudite uncle, Bascom Pentland. After losing his first bewildered feeling of strangeness, he finds a valued friend in Hatcher’s youthful assistant, Francis Starwick, a cultured, fastidious, and affected scholar. During these two years, Eugene tries to bend his creative talent to the exacting dramatic form, and achieves a limited success before he leaves for a brief visit at home, where his father dies after a long and terrible illness.

He goes north again. This time to serve as a college instructor of English in New York City, which provides the setting for his tumultuous mystic vision of the modern ‘manswarm.’ Companions of this period include Abe Jones, an earnest Jewish student; Joel Pierce, who introduces Eugene to the luxurious life of the Hudson River social set, and whose sister is one of a number of girls who are the objects of Eugene’s sudden passions; and bitter, disillusioned Robert Weaver and his mistress, Martha Upshaw. Careful saving makes possible a European tour, during which Eugene meets Starwick, now even more febrile and affected. With Ann and Elinor, two Boston girls, they spend several weeks as tourists in Paris and the provinces. Eugene falls in love with Ann, Elinor with Eugene, and Ann with Starwick, who responds to neither, giving himself up to dissipation during mysterious disappearances. Appalled and disgusted when he discovers that Starwick is a homosexual, Eugene leaves his friends, to tour Europe alone until he is forced by lack of funds to return to the U.S.”

James D. Hart

The Oxford Companion to American Literature, 5th edition
(Oxford 1941-83) 553

“*Of Time and the River* (1935) continues the story of Eugene Gant. He studies playwriting at Harvard under Professor Thatcher (George Pierce Baker), ‘tears the entrails’ from two thousand books a year, and spends thousands of good hours brooding over a waitress with whom he has fallen in love. At Harvard he meets Francis Starwick, an affected and precious young litterateur; Eugene is impressed with Francis’ sophistication and elegance, and they become friends. After his graduation Eugene goes to New York to teach English; later he and Francis go off on an escapade to Paris. Romantic complications occur, and then Eugene discovers that his idol Starwick is a homosexual. Disillusioned, he abandons him to wander over Europe alone until his money runs out. The novel also contains an account of the father’s reconciliation with Eliza and his pathetic death.”

Donald Heiney

Recent American Literature 4
(Barron’s Educational Series 1958) 171-72

“A sequel to *Look Homeward, Angel*, this novel appeared at the publisher’s office as an enormous, diffused manuscript of several thousand pages entitled *The October Fair*. Working long hours with editor Maxwell Perkins of Scribner’s, Wolfe was persuaded to prune away a good part of the manuscript and divide the remainder into two works. The second half was included in *The Web and the Rock*, published posthumously in 1939. *Of Time and the River* deals with Eugene Gant’s studies in a playwriting course at Harvard, work as an English instructor at New York University, and his European tour. Wolfe’s powerful and exuberant style, his poignant descriptions, his ‘chants and soliloquies and prose poems,’ and the violence of his reactions make this novel an exciting and important work.”

Max J. Herzberg & staff

The Reader's Encyclopedia of American Literature
(Crowell 1962)

“As the book progresses, Eugene becomes more and more a vehicle for the expression of Wolfe’s attitude toward America and less and less the apprenticeship hero. As this shift in emphasis occurs, the plot line grows fainter and fainter. In its later parts, *Of Time and the River* becomes almost an anthology of episodes, tone poems, incantations, and apostrophes by its author or its protagonist. Some of the portions become dithyrambic celebrations of America or incantations in time, and the distinction between fictional character and actual author is difficult to maintain. Yet it is also true that these later parts of the novel contain some of Wolfe’s best writing. The book differs from *Look Homeward, Angel* also in the greater depth and intensity with which it explores Eugene’s consciousness. But otherwise, *Of Time and the River* continues the story of the growth toward maturity of Eugene Gant from the point where it left off at the end of *Look Homeward, Angel*.

The book follows Eugene to Harvard, recounts his experiences there, describes his father’s death and its effect on Eugene, follows him then to New York City where he teaches in the School of Utility Cultures, from there to Europe where he begins the writing of a novel and has a frustrating love affair with a girl named Ann, carries him on a poetic train trip to Southern France, and concludes as he meets a girl named Esther on the boat back to America. *Of Time and the River* contains some of Wolfe’s finest writing.”

C. Hugh Holman
Introduction
Of Time and the River: Young Faustus and Telemachus
(Scribner’s 1965) xiv-xv

Michael Hollister (2015)