

## INTRODUCTION



Thomas Wolfe

(1900-1938)

Thomas Wolfe is remembered for *Look Homeward, Angel* (1929), the first and best of his 4 passionate novels about the exaltations and frustrations of aspiring youth in America. A giant of a man who wrote gigantic manuscripts, the prolific Wolfe was hailed by many as a genius. One critic entitled an article about him “Genius Is Not Enough,” but for many readers, it *is* in the case of Thomas Wolfe. The common reader is more likely to enjoy Wolfe than reading Joyce or Pynchon or other Postmodernist novelists touted by critics. As his publisher said, “Each new generation as it comes along rediscovers and claims this book for its own. For Wolfe wrote about youth, and he spoke to youth more convincingly than any American writer has ever done.” Wolfe is the most autobiographical, most effusive, most bombastic, most prolix, most undisciplined in style, and most Romantic major American novelist. His lyrical prose is sometimes so rhythmic it can be scanned as iambic pentameter, as in verse drama. He is robust, intense, and overflowing with vitality--but an uneven writer best read in adolescence when his faults do not matter. In 2000, he was honored on a U.S. postage stamp.

## AESTHETICS

Although influenced by the stream-of-consciousness technique used by James Joyce in *Ulysses* (1922), Wolfe is the opposite of a Modernist: (1) presenting only one point of view; (2) celebrating the Romantic theme of self-realization without any ironic detachment; (3) using traditional genres including the family chronicle and the apprentice novel of education--rather than being innovative in form; (4) formlessness that required editors to cut and structure his work; (5) lacking Neoclassical aesthetic values such as coherence, order and economy; (6) purely expressive and explicit with little implicit content or intellectual complexity; (7) projecting an egocentric vision. Wolfe excels at creating “the illusion of life” through detailed realistic characterizations, emotional intensity and authentic human drama. At his best he is precise, vivid, powerful, moving, and beautifully lyrical. Some critics have said that the best lyrical passages in Wolfe match the quality of poems by Walt Whitman. Like Whitman, Wolfe is expansive and wants to represent America, but he does not expand much beyond himself. He anticipates Jack Kerouac in *On the Road* and the counterculture of the 1960s in his hunger for experience, his Romantic questing and his outpouring prose style.

The stylist F. Scott Fitzgerald admired Wolfe for his ability to evoke "the exact feel of a moment in time and space." On the other hand, his opposite as a stylist, Hemingway called Wolfe "the over-bloated Lil Abner of literature"--in reference to the comic strip rustic by Al Capp. Again to the contrary, as a generous fellow southerner and Expressionistic prose stylist, Faulkner appreciated Wolfe's ambitious rhetoric, though comparison of the two makes clear that Wolfe is much the lesser writer: "I rated Wolfe first [among Faulkner's contemporaries] because we had all failed but Wolfe had made the best failure because he had tried the hardest to say the most....My admiration for Wolfe is that he tried his best to get it all said; he was willing to throw away style, coherence, all the rules of preciseness, to try to put all the experience of the human heart on the head of a pin, as it were."

## WOLFE AND FAULKNER

Wolfe and Faulkner were both influenced by southern oratory and were disposed to write long emotive sentences. Wolfe was too effusive to write successful plays, Faulkner too effusive to write successful poems. Both were Expressionists influenced by Joyce in *Ulysses* and both adapted his version of the stream-of-consciousness technique, Wolfe to express himself and Faulkner to represent a diversity of characters, transcending himself. Whereas Wolfe could not edit, organize or structure his voluminous writing, as if he was born without a left brain, Faulkner excels all other novelists in the number, diversity, and significant implications of his various novel structures--a more impressive achievement than *Ulysses*. Faulkner's intellect subdued his romantic sensibility (much as the North subdued the South), producing a prose style that is both intensely expressive and controlled--a synergy of sense and sensibility, head and heart. Faulkner made stream of consciousness more coherent than Joyce did by increasing poetic selectivity and order. As a Modernist he relied like Eliot and Hemingway upon the "objective correlative" and the "iceberg principle." In contrast Wolfe pours out his heart and spills his guts. Wolfe produced two distinguished novels, whereas Faulkner produced half a dozen novels, one novella and a dozen short stories that are world class masterpieces.

## BIOGRAPHY

Thomas Wolfe was born the youngest of 8 children in the mountain town of Asheville, North Carolina. His father was a robust stonecutter and tombstone sculptor powerful in body and personality who recited Shakespeare to his son in a booming theatrical voice and urged him to read histories that glorified America: Wolfe said of him, "He dramatized his emotions to a greater extent than anyone I had ever known." To some extent Wolfe modeled himself on his father--a passionate, impulsive, extravagant man whose strict wife refused to tolerate his drinking. "The deepest search in life," Wolfe wrote, "was man's search to find a father, not merely the father of his flesh, not merely the lost father of his youth, but the image of a strength and wisdom external to his need and superior to his hunger, to which the belief and power of his own life could be united."

His parents were temperamental opposites. His mother was a practical, smart and disciplined woman who eventually succeeded as a real estate speculator. All his life Wolfe needed mothering from strong women. One of his most intense early experiences was the death of his brother Grover when Wolfe was only 4. Another was having to move from his father's house into the impersonal boardinghouse run by his mother: "I was without a home--a vagabond since I was seven--with two roofs and no home....I think I learned about being alone when I was a child...and I think that I have known about it ever since." As a boy he also felt tormented by shame at being so large, at having such a proud spirit in "such a grotesque tenement." Wolfe was 6 and a half feet tall--a head taller than most men--weighed about 250 pounds, walked in long aggressive strides and threw his arms about with theatrical gestures. He looked even larger than he was and seemed to be constantly in motion.

## EDUCATION

Wolfe attended public school and then a private school in Asheville. At age 15 he enrolled at the University of North Carolina, where he developed a passion for literature and drama, graduating in 1920. Two of his plays were produced locally and in one he played a leading role. He used to say that the most tragic event of his life was the death of his favorite brother, Ben, when Wolfe was 18. He went on to Harvard with gargantuan ambition he expressed in letters to his mother: "I will go everywhere and see

everything. I will meet all the people I can. I will think all the thoughts, feel all the emotion I am able, and will write, write, write." He set out to read everything and to explore life "with an encyclopedic thoroughness." He studied playwriting with Professor George Pierce Baker in his famous "47 Workshop." Although he had a play produced at Harvard that was almost accepted on Broadway, Professor Baker discouraged him from becoming a dramatist. Wolfe had no talent for economy or dramatic form. His plays were too long to be produced. He once wrote 80,000 words of conversation that were supposed to take 5 minutes on stage. He earned an M.A. at Harvard and from 1924 to 1930 taught freshman English intermittently at New York University. "Details and the teaching of mechanics--the rules of grammar--torture me." Yet according to legend, his scribbled comments on student essays sometimes ran longer than the essays.

#### LOVER AND PATRON

Steaming home from an escape to Europe in 1925 he met Aline Bernstein, a scene designer for the Theater Guild. Bernstein was 18 years older, the wife of a wealthy stockbroker with two children. They had a tumultuous affair that lasted 5 years. She encouraged and mothered and supported him as lover and patron. He dedicated *Look Homeward, Angel* to her, but soon after its publication--just 11 days before the stockmarket Crash of 1929--he ended their affair. In his next novel he based the character Esther Jack on Aline Bernstein.

#### EDITOR MAXWELL PERKINS

He began writing *Look Homeward, Angel* while homesick in London in 1926. Often he wrote in a frenzy for as long as 15 hours straight. Apart from Aline he lived in solitude and took long walks at night--"in the city of myself"--striding through the streets talking to himself and chanting. Sometimes he found someone to listen. On one occasion he is said to have talked to a friend in a restaurant for 16 hours. Most of his first novel was written in New York and Brooklyn and when submitted to Scribner's it was assigned to Maxwell Perkins, the editor of Hemingway and Fitzgerald. Perkins had to cut, organize and edit a virtual trunkload of chaotic pages scrawled all over in pencil, eventually producing a publishable novel. Perkins worked closely with Wolfe and became a father figure to him, which contributed to Wolfe's eventual feeling that Perkins was editing him too severely.

#### *Look Homeward, Angel* (1929)

The title comes from the famous elegy "Lycidas" by John Milton, in which the poet asks the angel St. Michael to look back toward England and pity a noble young man who has drowned. In the novel the stone sculptor Oliver Gant sculpts stone angels. The novel is an intensely emotional chronicle of the Gants, a large southern family as experienced by the tormented adolescent hero Eugene Gant--young Tom Wolfe--from his birth to age 19, when he is able to escape his contentious family and the restrictions of his provincial home town by going off to Harvard.

The Gant family in Altamont corresponds in detail to the Wolfe family in Asheville. His parents are the dominant characters among over 200. "To me...they were the greatest people I had ever known...If I could get my magnificent people on paper as they were." He was such a Realist in rendering Asheville, even the street addresses in the novel were unchanged. Wolfe described real people in such accurate detail that he outraged many who knew him in Asheville, incited a number of lawsuits, alienated members of his family and even provoked death threats from the community. One nice lady wrote that he should be dragged across the public square in Asheville and lynched. The critical reception was largely favorable but mixed, as some reviewers faulted the book for awkwardness and lack of form.

#### LIFESTYLE

The huge commercial success of *Look Homeward, Angel* enabled Wolfe to quit teaching and devote all his time to writing and traveling and eating and drinking and striding around big cities. He was awarded a Guggenheim fellowship in 1930 and toured Europe gathering material for books. "During that summer in Paris [1930], I think I felt this great homesickness more than ever before, and I really believe that from this emotion, this constant and almost intolerable effort of memory and desire, the material and structure of the books I now began to write were derived." In London he met Sinclair Lewis, winner that year of the Nobel

Prize for Literature. He dined and drank with Lewis, who encouraged him in his writing. After he returned to his hotel early in the morning and got into bed, the phone rang. It was Lewis urging him to come back to the hotel right away--it was an *emergency!* Wolfe hurried into his clothes and rushed back to the hotel and into the bar where Lewis turned to another man beside him, gestured at Wolfe and exclaimed to the man, "You see! Didn't I tell you he was a *big* bastard!"

Wolfe remained a bachelor with ravenous appetites. Customarily, he ate one very huge meal a day. As a young man he once made a covenant with God swearing to "hereby abjure the mental and carnal fleshpots--beasts which have well-nigh destroyed" him. Yet just five years after that he began keeping a series of 35 pocket notebooks, from 1926 to his death in 1938, in which he catalogued his sexual relations. In 1930-31 he listed 13 women by name with whom he had slept during the previous 16 months. In 1934 his list included the states in which the women were born. The following year on a trip to Europe, drinking heavily, he recorded his frequent visits to brothels. In Paris he "went to swell whorehouse but departed after haggling over price--then to whorehouse Rue du Moulins-lay with big blonde." His handwriting was confusing to read and he once remarked, "I can always find plenty of women to sleep with, but the kind of woman that is really hard for me to find is a typist who can read my writing."

#### *Of Time and the River* (1935)

By 1933 he had written enough new fiction to make a dozen novels and he could not stop. His editor Max Perkins said he felt like a man trying to hold on to the fin of a plunging whale. Perkins took control and from the huge manuscript he extracted a second novel. *Of Time and the River* is a continuation dramatizing Eugene Gant's experiences at Harvard, his return home to his father's funeral, his relationships and his travels in Europe. The momentous death of his father old Oliver Gant is one of the most admired episodes in the novels of Wolfe. *Look Homeward, Angel* has a relationship to *Of Time and the River* that is similar to that between Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1916) and *Ulysses* (1922). An apprenticeship is followed by college and a going forth into the world. In *Of Time and the River* young Eugene Gant's experiences are rendered in greater depth and with more thoroughness and greater intensity. The book succeeded commercially, but this novel is not as successful as his first artistically: It lacks structure and the connections between its episodes are weak. Although it contains some of his best writing, scenes well realized and filled with memorable characters, there is also more bombast and ranting in this book than in any of his others.

Before his death Wolfe also published a collection of stories, *From Death to Morning* (1935), and an account of his literary intentions, *The Story of a Novel* (1936), identifying himself like Walt Whitman with the "enormous space and energy of American life." Then he visited Nazi Germany, disliked what he saw happening to the Jews and wrote a short novel about the Hitler regime called *I Have a Thing to Tell You* (1937). As a result, he and his books were banned in Germany.

#### DEATH

"During the summer of 1938 he toured the Pacific Northwest in a publicity effort to encourage tourism in national parks. His group visited 11 parks in 13 days, leaving him exhausted. He caught a steamer up to Vancouver and while on board he shared a flask of whiskey with a man who appeared to have the flu. Wolfe soon came down with a cold that turned into pneumonia and he was hospitalized with a temperature of 105 that remained elevated for 3 days. X-rays revealed a spot on his lung.

He underwent surgery at Johns Hopkins Hospital in Baltimore, where doctors decided that he had contracted tuberculosis some years before but had healed. His current pneumonia had reopened the lesions, releasing bacteria into his bloodstream that was now reaching his brain. His family gathered around his bed. He slipped into a coma and two days later he died of cerebral infection, leaving behind a pile of manuscripts 8 feet high. At the end of *Look Homeward, Angel*, the Gant mother cautions her son: "You'll get lung-trouble as sure as you're born if you go all humped over."

An unusually large coffin had to be built to accommodate his body. Wolfe had once started a novel about characters on a train journey home, entitled *K-19*--their train car number. He had left that manuscript

unfinished. Now, six years later, members of his family lifted his big heavy coffin aboard a train bound for Asheville. Someone among them called attention to something in the one of the train windows. It was a sign designating the train car as number *K-19*.

#### POSTHUMOUS NOVELS

Wolfe felt overedited by his savior Max Perkins and changed publishers to Harper & Row, where a different editor reduced his 8-foot pile of manuscript to 2 long novels: one somewhat coherent, *The Web and the Rock* (1939), and the last a patchwork of fragments, *You Can't Go Home Again* (1940). Wolfe tried to become more objective in his last cycle of autobiographical fiction. He renamed himself George Webber and changed his appearance and some particulars of his youth. In *The Web and the Rock* he becomes a successful novelist and attains a full maturity. When he returns home in *You Can't Go Home Again* he is dismayed by the changes to the town--his father's tombstone shop has been replaced by a skyscraper--and by the unfriendly treatment he experiences, recalling hostile reactions in Asheville to *Look Homeward, Angel*. Most critics thought the increase of objectivity came at the expense of vitality, Wolfe's greatest gift. Max Perkins appears in the two novels as the editor Foxhall Edwards.

#### WOLFE ON WRITING

"My memory is characterized...by the intensity of its sense impressions, its power to evoke and bring back the odors, colors, shapes, and feel of things with concrete vividness."

"As I have said, my conviction is that all serious creative work must be at bottom autobiographical, and that a man must use the material and experience of his own life if he is to create anything that has substantial value....In spite of this, it is impossible for a man who has the stuff of creation in him to make a literal transcription of his own experience. Everything in a work of art is changed and transfigured by the personality of the artist. And so far as my own first book is concerned, I can truthfully say that I do not believe that there is a single page of it that is true to fact."

"Although I am able to criticize wordiness and over-abundance in others, I am not able practically to criticize it in myself. The business of selection and revision is simply hell for me--my efforts to cut out 50,000 words may sometimes result in my adding 75,000."

#### SAMPLES OF HIS STYLE

"His life was like that river, rich with its own deposited and onward-borne agglutinations, fecund with its sedimental accretions, filled exhaustlessly by life in order to be more richly itself, and this life, with the great purpose of a river, he emptied now into the harbor of his house, the sufficient haven of himself, for whom the gnarled vines wove round him thrice, the earth burgeoned with abundant fruit and blossoms, the fire burnt madly."

"They fed stupendously, Eugene began to observe the food and the seasons. In the autumn, they barreled huge frosty apples in the cellar. Gant bought whole hogs from the butcher, returning home early to salt them, wearing a long work-apron, and rolling his sleeves half up his lean hairy arms. Smoked bacons hung in the pantry, the great bins were full of flour, the dark recessed shelves groaned with preserved cherries, peaches, plums, quinces, apples, pears. All that he touched waxed in rich pungent life: His Spring gardens, wrought in the black wet earth below the fruit trees, flourished in huge crinkled lettuces that wrenched cleanly from the loamy soil with small black clots stuck to their crisp stocks; fat red radishes, heavy tomatoes...."

"The plum-tree, black and brittle, rocks stiffly in winter wind. Her million little twigs are frozen in spears of ice. But in the spring, lithe and heavy, she will bend under her great load of fruit and blossoms. She will grow young again. Red plums will ripen, will be shaken desperately upon the tiny stems. They will fall bursted on the loamy warm wet earth; when the wind blows in the orchard the air will be filled with dropping plums; the night will be filled with the sound of their dropping, and a great tree of birds will sing, burgeoning, blossoming richly, filling the air also with warm-throated plum-dropping birdnotes."

Thomas Wolfe  
*Look Homeward, Angel* (1929)

#### PORTRAIT OF WOLFE

“Thomas Wolfe came over to Paris and to the bookshop just after *Of Time and the River* was published. He said Max Perkins had handed him a check and put him on a boat bound for Europe. He talked about the influence of Joyce on his work; he was trying to get out from under it, he said. Wolfe was indubitably a young man of genius, and perhaps very unsatisfactory as a social being. Mrs. Adelaide Massey, to whom he had a letter, mothered him while he was in Paris, and he needed it.”

Sylvia Beach  
*Shakespeare and Company*  
(Harcourt/U Nebraska 1956, 1980) 208

Michael Hollister (2018)

