

ANALYSIS

The Web and the Rock (1939)

Thomas Wolfe

(1900-1938)

“*You Can’t Go Home Again* [1940] is a sequel. Both are clearly autobiographical. George Webber, born in 1900 in Libya Hill, a small city in the state of Old Catawba (North Carolina), grows up torn between the Southern values of his mother’s family and the more dynamic ways of his father, who came from Pennsylvania and who deserted his family when George was a boy. When his father dies, George receives a small inheritance that allows him to attend a local Baptist college, where his friends include Jim Randolph, a football star, and Gerald Alsop, an intellectual aesthete. In time all seek a larger life in New York City, but Jim goes on to South America, looking for the excitement and adulation he had known in college, and Alsop grows more and more precious and reactionary. George has an affair with Esther Jack, an older, married woman, a sophisticated member of theatrical and literary society. Although she helps him by trying to get his lengthy novel published, their relations are tempestuous and he storms off to Europe. He is torn between the desires of his Mind and his Body, as he puts it, as well as between the inspiration of foreign lands and recollections of youth, and the recognition that ‘you can’t go home again’.”

James D. Hart

The Oxford Companion to American Literature, 5th edition
(Oxford 1941-83) 807

“*The Web and the Rock* (1939) is a fresh start; Wolfe begins attacking his autobiographical material all over again. The hero, George Webber, called ‘Monk’ because of his extraordinary proportions, is a child of divorced parents; he goes to live with his Uncle Mark and Aunt Maw in the town of Libya Hill (still Asheville). There are many anecdotes of the Joyner clan, to which Mark and Aunt Maw belong. George’s friend and protector is the half-Indian Nebraska Crane, athlete, adventurer, and later baseball star. Crane is one of the few entirely fictional characters in Wolfe’s work. A notable incidental scene is the rampage and death of Dick Prosser, a pious Negro who goes berserk and is finally killed by a posse, who put his corpse on exhibition in a store window. The story continues with George’s college days at Pine Rock College; his hero is the popular social leader Jim Randolph.

After a brief interlude in New York with Jim and others, Monk goes to Europe; on the return trip he meets Mrs. Esther Jack (based on the character of Wolfe’s friend Aline Bernstein), a Jewish costume designer, wealthy, attractive, understanding, yet maddening to Monk in her suave *savoir-faire* and her sophisticated society attachments, even in her self-assured Jewishness. Monk’s affair with Esther occupies the rest of the novel. At last, emotionally exhausted and creatively empty, he blames the loss of his vitality on Esther and abandons her to go back to Europe.”

Donald Heiney

Recent American Literature 4
(Barron’s Educational Series 1958) 172

“Here Wolfe follows his autobiographical hero, George Webber, to the ‘Enfabled Rock’ of New York, where, in the midst of his youthful literary struggles, he meets the gifted scenic designer Mrs. Esther Jack (modeled on Mrs. Aline Bernstein). During their turbulent love affair he is at first entranced by and then disillusioned with the magic of the city that is so much a part of Esther’s personality. In passages of mingled satire and lyricism Wolfe develops the cultural conflict of Christian and Jew, yokel and city dweller. At length George breaks from Esther’s web of devotion and flees abroad to seek in an older culture the stability he could not find in the American city.”

Max J. Herzberg & staff

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

Michael Hollister (2015)