

ANALYSIS

You Can't Go Home Again (1940)

Thomas Wolfe

(1900-1938)

“It is a sequel to *The Web and the Rock* [1939]. George Webber, aged 29, returns to New York City from his emotional residence in Germany to resume his love affair with Esther Jack, the older, married, wealthy society woman who is an acclaimed stage designer. George also returns to an earlier life when he revisits his hometown of Libya Hill in the Southern state of Old Catawba to attend the funeral of his Aunt Joyner, who reared him after his father deserted the family and his mother died. But he sees how much his childhood world has changed as the townspeople are intent on making money during boom times to such an extent that even a leading citizen like Judge Rumford Bland takes usurious advantage of black people to become rich but morally bankrupt.

Returning to New York, George falls prey to social lion hunters when his novel is published as a great success. Disaffected by both worlds, he becomes a recluse in Brooklyn, trying unsuccessfully to write a second novel, then flees to London and to Germany. But everywhere George is disillusioned, by contemporary values in the U.S., by the sterility and frustration of its most famous author, and by the evil he discerns in the rise of Nazism. Even upon his return to New York George can find no surcease and breaks with Fox Edwards, the brilliant editor who had helped to shape his novel, accusing him of fatalistically accepting the world as it is, while George declares that although ‘I believe that we are lost here in America.... I believe we shall be found’.”

James D. Hart

The Oxford Companion to American Literature, 5th edition
(Oxford 1941-83) 855

“In *You Can't Go Home Again* (1940) Monk comes back from Europe and renews his intimacy with Esther. His novel is accepted and his relations with the editor Foxhall Edwards (Maxwell Perkins) are described. Aunt Maw dies; he returns to Libya Hill for the funeral but finds the town modernized and altered. He feels awkward and out of place, and realizes ‘you can't go home again’; the happiness of youth cannot be recaptured by returning to its geographical setting. Back in New York he goes to a lavish and abandoned party at Esther's, during which a fire breaks out and kills two elevator boys. This fact is kept secret from the revelers. It is this party which makes it clear to Monk that he is not of Esther's world; he breaks with her definitely. Monk's existence in Brooklyn during the Depression years is next described at great length. Later he goes to London, where he meets Lloyd McHarg (Sinclair Lewis), who praises and encourages him. The novel closes with an analysis of his break with Foxhall Edwards.”

Donald Heiney

Recent American Literature 4
(Barron's Educational Series 1958) 172-73

“The sequel to *The Web and the Rock*, this novel deals again with the experiences of George Webber, Wolfe's semi-autobiographical hero, during the 1920's and 30's. Webber, now an author of some renown, revisits his home town and is disillusioned both by what he sees and by the reception he meets with. This episode parallels Wolfe's own experience in his home town of Asheville, North Carolina, after the publication of *Look Homeward, Angel*. Webber sojourns for a while in New York, where he is involved with Esther Jack (modeled on Mrs. Aline Bernstein), a talented stage designer, and then he travels to Europe. Like the majority of Wolfe's work, the novel is uneven in quality, sometimes massive and overpowering, sometimes turgid; the section generally most admired is that dealing with Esther Jack. Wolfe's description of Webber's meeting with the novelist Lloyd McHarg, for whom Sinclair Lewis was the prototype, was also highly praised. Maxwell Perkins, Wolfe's one-time mentor and the editor responsible for the publication of Wolfe's first two novels, appears as Foxhall Edwards.”

Max J. Herzberg & staff
The Reader's Encyclopedia of American Literature
(Crowell 1962)

Michael Hollister (2015)