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Autobiography As Fiction: A Study of Thomas Wolfe’s Look Homeward, Angel and Of Time and the River

Sangeeta Kotwal
Associate Professor
Department of English
Navyug Kanya Mahavidyalaya
Lucknow
Email: drsangeetakumar@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

Thomas Wolfe, an American novelist of the 1920s and 30s, is one of the most misunderstood and underestimated writers of his generation, His reluctance to follow the traditional path of the novel or to compete against any standard but his own has not been taken seriously, Most of Wolfe’s critics have shown an exaggerated concern about his life which is revealed in his works. There have been attempts to see him in the role of an autobiographer, and often critics have tried to pursue his experiences in the hope of finding their sources. Some critics have recognized him as an artist, but they do not acknowledge the significance of his experiences. His experiences are significant, and so is his art. A brilliant picture of life emerges in his novels as we relate one to the other. His novels arouse strong reactions -both positive and negative, but they remain true to life. His earlier works Look, Homeward Angel, and Of Time and the River are more autobiographical than the others. At this stage, Wolfe was still trying to harness his intense emotions while transforming them into art. Hence the maturity we see in the later novels is missing in the earlier ones. And yet we cannot but be surprised by the flashes of brilliance in his works that not only demand appreciation from critics and the public but also inspire scholars like me to delve deeper into his works for a better understanding of his life and art.

Keywords: Experience, Art, Emotions, Autobiographer, Thomas Wolfe.

Wolfe's assertion that "all serious work in fiction is autobiographical"(Preface, Angel) though highly controversial in itself, reflected his strong desire to express himself through his art. Endowed with a Whitmanesque urge to sing of America, he made a conscious attempt to furnish himself with the varieties of experience by exploring the wildness, the undeveloped potential, and the hidden promise of the American continent. His unquenchable thirst for ‘drinking life to the lees’ led him to accumulate a wide variety of experiences which was later to form the background of his novels.



For almost all of Thomas Wolfe's work, it can be said that he drew from the contemporary social scene of which he had made himself an integral part. Affirming his choice of material, Wolfe said that "man must use the materials and experience of his own life if he is to create anything that has substantial value." (Story 21) Statements like this at times led critics to underestimate his artistic ability and focus more on his life. Wolfe recorded most of his experiences in his letters, notebooks, and two books- *The Story of a Novel* and *Wolfe's Purdue Speech*. He was confident of his ability to use them as raw material for his fiction, and he did exactly that. Most American novelists, from Mark Twain to Norman Mailer, have given accounts of themselves in their novels in one way or the other. Perhaps none has been as intense or as impressive as Wolfe.

While going through Wolfe's works, one is caught in such a whirling vortex of emotions that it is almost impossible to remain unaffected. His desire to explore every aspect of life brought him a flood of experiences that even he found hard to contain. Wolfe's life was as interesting as it was eventful. His turbulent life shaped his attitudes - and ideas which influenced his writing throughout. Thus, to get a proper perspective of his work, it becomes almost essential to get acquainted with his life.

Both North and South joined in Wolfe's background. His father was a native of Pennsylvania, and his mother belonged to North Carolina. They made an unhappy couple with the result that the household was always torn by dissensions and frustrations, and the children were the worst sufferers. It was a similar situation that Wolfe later described in his novel *Look Homeward, Angel*, while presenting the Gant household.

The turbulent period of Wolfe's childhood was responsible for many complexes and frailties that he later developed in his personality. Being the youngest member of a large and unhappy family, he never had a chance to grow up in a congenial atmosphere. When in 1906, Wolfe's mother left her husband's home to manage her own boarding house, she took young Thomas along with her. This move affected Wolfe greatly, as from then on, he was forever torn between the two worlds of his father and mother.

The drab atmosphere of his mother's boarding house and her intensely possessive attitude made Wolfe hate all the things which she stood for, the real estate business, in particular, this also forced him to turn toward his father whom he had come to idolize early, in his life, His father's love of poetry and drama instilled a great love of literature in Wolfe. He was very much



attracted by his father's abundant way of living and his unique personality. Once in a letter to his mother in March 1923, when he was still intent on becoming a dramatist, he wrote :

....guard Papa's letters to me with your life... he is the most unique human being I have ever known... He is headed straight not for one of my plays, but for a series... I verily believe I can recreate a character that will knock the hearts out of people by its reality. (Terry, 46-47)

As it happened, Wolfe did recreate the character, not in his play but two of his earlier novels, *Look Homeward, Angel* and *Of Time and the River*, and explicated all its dramatic possibilities. In both these novels, Wolfe presented him as the father of the protagonist, old Gant, a symbol of the old America, both corrupted and frustrated by increasing commercialism in society and making him one of the most memorable characters of the American novel. But the fact that the solid strength which his father represented was taken away from him early in his life also gave him a feeling of insecurity, resulting in his endless search for a father figure both in his life and in his novels.

At the University of North, Carolina, Wolfe came under the influence of Professor Horace Williams who inducted him into the philosophy of great experts, including Plato whose theory of pre-existence interested him deeply. The teachings of Professor Williams and John Livingston Lowes at Harvard made deep impressions on Wolfe's mind and helped him to form his philosophy later in his life.

Wolfe's first attempt at playwriting began at Chapel Hill with *The Return of Buck Gavin* which was produced on the stage by the Carolina Playmakers. Although the play initiated him in the world of writing, his serious efforts at becoming a playwright began in Professor George Pierce Baker's '47 Workshop' at Harvard. In Baker's workshop, Wolfe produced two one-act plays - *The Mountains* and *Welcome to our City* but it was his play *Mannerhouse* with which his serious writing began. The play focused sharply on the conflicting ideals of the North and the South and attacked the white aristocracy for its gentility and the tradition of slavery. Although the play reflected Wolfe's conflicting views and the confused state of his mind, it focused on the time when he was undergoing a significant change of ideas and hinted at the creative power that was developing gradually.

These changing views of Wolfe were responsible for his disillusionment with Professor Baker's workshop. His disgust with the current trend of art, which produced the kind of artist who was nothing but an escapist or a fashionable aesthete, also brought on this feeling of disillusionment. Although Wolfe had not fully realized the implications of this trend at the



time, he had begun suspecting the sincerity of its efforts, and it was certainly a beginning for him. His sharp criticism of this group of artists appeared in *Of Time and the River*, where he presented a satiric picture of Professor Hatcher's playwriting circle and made Francis Starwick a true representative of this class.

After leaving Harvard, Wolfe moved into a steadily widening world starting from Boston to New York, and finally to Europe; his journey came to full circle with his return to America. In the words of Holman, Wolfe's life was "successively pastoral, provincial, urban, national and international," (Holman 162), and where it provided him with a vast range of experience, it also gave him a deeper perspective. Though his teaching stint at New York University provided him with financial assistance, it did not give him the satisfaction he craved desperately. To escape from the stifling atmosphere of the University and to explore new facets of life he undertook a journey to Europe. The trip proved to be a turning point in his life as he not only had his first taste of the oriental culture but also, in his seething loneliness and an acute feeling of homelessness, he rediscovered America for himself. In *The Story of a Novel*, he expressed it thus:

I had found out during those years that the way to discover one's own country was to leave it, that the way to find America was to find it in one's own heart, one's memory, and one's spirit, and in a foreign land. (30)

This aching sense of homelessness was also brought on by the tragic deaths of his brother Ben and his father Oliver Wolfe. Both deeply influenced Wolfe's life, and their end created a void within him. His deep feelings for them were revealed in the poignantly touching death scenes of *Look Homeward, Angel*, and *Of Time and the River*, where he recalled both the events.

Another person who greatly influenced Wolfe's life and helped him in shaping his career as a novelist was Aline Bernstein. In his return journey to New York in 1925, Wolfe met Aline on the ship. Eighteen years older than Wolfe, Aline was a rich Jewish theatrical designer, the wife of a successful stockbroker, and the mother of two grown-up children. Although the differences between her and Wolfe lay wide, their similar temperaments and creative urge brought them closer and swung them into a long, passionate affair which a few years later ended in bitterness and disillusionment. In the form of Aline, Wolfe not only found a sympathetic lover but also a wealthy patroness who provided him with both financial and moral backing, helping him to write his first novel. She also got him acquainted with the city ways and introduced him to the



circle of the wealthy and affluent. Through her, he came to know about the ways of the rich society, and the knowledge he gained proved invaluable as he used it in his later writings.

Wolfe's early happy years with Aline provided him with a chance to work without any hindrances and he began working on the manuscript of *Look Homeward, Angel*, earlier titled 'O Lost'. He was following in the footsteps of great writers such as Fielding, Dickens, and Dostoevsky and was still under the influence of English Romantics, particularly Wordsworth and Coleridge. He only wanted his novel to "swarm with life, peopled by a city" and announced beforehand that it would be "immensely flavored with me." (Donald,146).

When Wolfe's first novel *Look Homeward, Angel* appeared on the literary scene of America in 1929, it was greeted with mixed reactions by the critics. Barr Stringfellow hailed it as "the South's first contribution to world literature." (Stringfellow,312) Eminent writer Sinclair Lewis commented: "His first book is so deep and spacious that it deals with the whole of life." (Reeves,34) However, most of the critics pointed to the autobiographical aspect of the novel rather than its artistic merit, and some of them rejected the novel outright on this basis. Discarding the views of those who saw traces of genius in Wolfe's writing, Bernard Devoto in his famous essay "Genius is Not Enough" struck hard, claiming that a large portion of the novel contained "raw gobs of emotion, aimless and quite meaningless jabber" (3-4) Robert Penn Warren raising the problem of objectivity in an autobiographical novel, criticized Wolfe's seeming lack of discipline and the excessive use of his experiences into his art. These observations were strengthened by Wolfe's admission in the author's note in the novel that "the author has written of experience, which is now far and lost, but which was once part of the fabric of his life." (n.pg.) In the opinion of critics, statements like this amounted to a confession, subsequently, more efforts were spent on determining the novel's "accuracy as personal history" (Holman,158) rather than evaluating it on its artistic merit.

Not only the critics but - from the inmates of his hometown also Wolfe got rough treatment. The small-town community not only recognized the facts, but it also claimed to recognize what was fiction or fiction based on facts. As a result, a backlash of anger, hatred, and condemnation was directed toward Wolfe which affected him badly. His hurt sentiments were reflected in *You Can't Go Home Again* where the protagonist George Webber undergoes a similar experience and recovers from it only after his friend Randy drives a few home truths into him.

One of the things that often led Wolfe into trouble was his desire to record everything that his prodigious memory brought back. and to be honest, in his writing, he sometimes forgot to



separate fiction from truth. He made extensive use of his childhood experiences in *Look Homeward, Angel*. Almost all the facts were presented with childlike honesty. Some of his family members appeared under their names in the novel such as W.O., Ben. and Grover and others were instantly recognizable even after assumed names. There was hardly any doubt about the fact that the hero Eugene was none other than Wolfe himself.

Even though the novel, as Wolfe told Aline, was written “almost with a child's heart”(Donald,148) and contained some of the bitterness and pique that Wolfe as a child must have felt against his family and the small-town community, it was no scribbling by a child. His imaginative perspective, instinctive understanding of human nature, and his effort to capture what was universal in his individual experiences saved the novel from being a mere autobiography and raised it to the level of fiction, which, according to him, was "charged with purpose.” (Author’s note, *Angel*).

A child protagonist in conflict with his circumstances was a theme through which Wolfe attempted to explore his experiences in *Look Homeward, Angel*. His protagonist was equipped with a similar hunger for life and restlessness of spirit, which were characteristics of Wolfe. As an infant Eugene is afraid to sleep lest he should miss "a day of sparkling life"(36). An almost insane hunger seizes the child as he finds himself unable to define the experience. Although such reflections of the infant mind were deplored by critics like Thomas C. Moser and considered the "gross violation of probability” (Moser, 148) by presenting them Wolfe probably wanted to make his readers aware of the nature of the struggle which an artistic mind goes through from the very beginning. He introduced the theme of loneliness through Eugene and the members of the Gant family as each of them is lonely and is struggling against the circumstances in which he finds himself trapped.

Wolfe's preoccupation with the past and his belief in the Platonic myth of pre-existence took a significant place in *Look Homeward, Angel*. By infusing a "tragic consciousness of the past” (Hassan, 54) in Eugene's mind, Wolfe presented the conflict between the physical and the spiritual, the lost ideal world of the spirit, and the immediate transitory world of the physical self. Eugene is caught in the dilemma between timeless reality and the changing world of his immediate present and has to struggle constantly to come to terms with his world. Although the concern with time, particularly with time past, never left Wolfe, it was more evident in his earlier two novels than in his later works.



Despite having committed the mistake of using material that was by his admission, "too naked and direct for a work of art," (Story, 21) Wolfe conferred a symbolic significance both on his characters and the simple experiences of his life, and by doing so he tried to elevate them to a higher realm of art. Wolfe's experience as a newspaper boy becomes a significant event in his protagonist's life as it teaches him to accept his burdens. At first, Eugene hates the job but gradually begins to experience a sense of freedom in his entrapment. For him, it is a step towards freedom and maturity "day after day he fought his way up to liberation. He knew all the sorrow of those who carry weight, he knew, morning by morning, the aerial ecstasy of release," (299)

Wolfe's own family presented as the Gant family, forms the center around which most of the things move in the novel. His description of the workings of the household is packed with such energy and vitality by him that in Margery Latimer's words :

Wolfe makes you experience a family through twenty years of its existence. He gives the disharmony, the joy, the hideous wastefulness, and the needless suffering, and yet not once do you dare shrink from life, and you never feel the resentment and loathing for reality and experience. (Latimer, 10)

As a novelist Wolfe not only highlighted the significance of his experiences but also infused them with life. His power to perceive deeply and to find beauty in even the common experiences of life gave intensity and a new dimension to his experiences. The death of his brother Ben was an event which had affected Wolfe greatly in his life but his reactions and his observations were different from that of an ordinary human being. Recalling this tragic event, he wrote to his mother in April 1923:

I think of a boy of twenty-six years heaving his life away, and grasping to regain it, 'I think of the frightened glare in his eyes and the way he seizes my hand..., I think of a woman who sits with a face as white and set as if cut from marble, and whose fingers cannot be unclasped from his hand.... And the boy of eighteen [Wolfe] sees. and knows for the first time that more than a son is dying, that part of a mother is being buried before her --life in death-- that something which she nursed and loved, something out of her blood, out. of her life, is taken away. It's terrible but it's beautiful. (Letters, 51)

All the agony, terror, and grief that he witnessed and felt at the time of his brother's death was filtered in the novel in the scene of Ben's death, making it so poignantly tragic that one can feel the acute sense of loss that comes with it.



The two death scenes that Wolfe took from his own life -- one of his brother and the other of his father's death, were infused with such vitality that they became his artistic triumph. Although he heard the account of his father's death from his sister and mother, in *Of Time and The River*, the scene appears with such intensity that it has the verisimilitude of good reporting. As Pamela H. Johnson asserts, all the elements of “power and pity and horror” (79) join together to make it one of the best death scenes in American fiction. The dying Gant making his peace with his wife, remembering his childhood days, and accepting the futility of his search, appears as a tragic figure. By presenting this scene Wolfe, apart from revealing his fascination with death, also highlighted the tragedy of his parents’ lives, which was rooted in the conflicting image of the two essentially American characteristics - spiritual restlessness and earthy materialism.

Wolfe’s more sympathetic treatment of his family members in *Of Time and the River* was a way of rectifying his mistakes earlier. His intense desire to present a realistic picture of America brought an excessive flow of experience into his work. Although he was unable to check the flow in *Of Time and The River*, he tried to shift his somewhat subjective stance in it and nearly achieved success in acquiring an objective outlook that gradually became stronger in his later works.

Wolfe's second novel *Of Time and the River* appearing after a gap of six years established his place in the literary circle of America. Giving his book the subtitle *A Legend of Man's Hunger in His Youth* Wolfe released a vast range of experience in it. Although he continued with his earlier protagonist and the theme, he adopted a slightly different approach towards them. The theme of alienation took a stronger hold in the novel. Wolfe's handling of such characters as Helen, Dr. McGuire, and Abe Jones and Eugene’s experience in the city and his relationship with the Simpson family reflected sharply upon the inner loneliness and disorder of America and its people.

Wolfe's growing concern with the lives of people other than his protagonist took him a step further in *Of Time and the River*. In the novel, it was evident in his description of people who had no direct link with the protagonist, such as the Coulson family and Rhodes Scholars. Although the protagonist still appeared as a raving, frenzied youth, he was used more to highlight others' lives than his own. This shift in Wolfe's attitude was an outcome of his experiences in Europe and Brooklyn. His various trips to Europe enriched his experiences and broadened his views. But Wolfe's evaluation of Europe was different from that of his



contemporaries. He saw and admired the cultural heritage of European tradition but mourned its slow death. Despite all the problems plaguing his own country, he felt that America held a promise which was lacking in Europe. Unlike the expatriates, he was never much influenced by European culture. In *Of Time and the River* Eugene's rejection of Starwick parallels Wolfe's rejection of a pallid estheticism represented by the expatriates.

Despite having a real admiration for Germany and its people Wolfe was unable to accept the Nazi philosophy. His later visits to this country jolted him out of his blind admiration for it and made him see the truth, his disgust with the Nazi rule is reflected in *You Can't Go Home Again* which presents a searing picture of the disintegrating German society, manipulated, dominated, and ripped apart by Hitler's regime. His earlier impressions of the simple, cheerful lives of the German people were soon dispelled when in his later visits, he felt the sufferings of Germans and sensed the presence of the unseen. Evil in his beloved country. It is as George reflects in *You Can't Go Home Again*, "a picture of the Dark Ages come again -- shocking beyond belief, but true as the hell that man forever creates for himself." (666) Thus, the experience that left a deep scar on Wolfe's heart because of his forced farewell from his beloved land, became the motivating factor of his protagonist in the novel who, after his experience in Germany, becomes more determined to fight for the cause of humanity. What contributed to his growth as a human being was the hardships endured by the Depression-stricken people of America. During his Stay in Brooklyn, Manhattan, and New York he witnessed the struggling existence of 'those poor people. Expressing his shock, he wrote:

Everywhere around me... I saw the - evidence of an incalculable ruin and suffering... And that universal calamity had somehow struck the life of almost everyone I knew... I saw, lived, felt, and experienced the full weight of that horrible human calamity.** (Story, 59)

The change that gradually appeared in Wolfe's views and made him more socially conscious was the result of his eventful artistic journey. It was reflected in his protagonists' intense quest for a solid footing in his novels which served as a medium for this quest. The six-year period he spent in the writing of his second novel *Of Time and the River* was for him a time of intense soul-searching and a confrontation with the outside world. All the discords and confusions he endured were reflected in *Of Time and the River*, which is the most chaotic of all his novels. Leo Gurko rightly calls it "the great battleground of Wolfe's emerging art" (Gurko, 107) as the writing of this novel for him was an exploration of his "resources as a man and as a writer." (Story, 41)



The personal stresses and anxieties that underlay the writing of his earlier two novels, found confessional expression in ‘The Story of a Novel’ which holds an “intimate account of his creative process and artistic growth.” Referring to *Of Time and River* he asserted :

With all the waste and error and confusion it led me into, it brought me closer to a concrete definition of my resources, a true estimate of my talents ... and most of all, towards - a rudimentary, a just beginning...(Story, 48)

Whatever seemed significant -- things seen, events witnessed, and stories heard in his childhood, was retraced, and recreated by Wolfe and presented as "a vivid, moving chronicle of mountain life and legend" (Kohler, 2) in his novels. In 1970 Martin Wank confidently declared that Wolfe’s time is “Now and the Future”, (Wank, 255) and one feels inclined to agree with him. In an age of technical mediocrity, Wolfe’s novels provide a breath of fresh air as they reveal the basic values and simplicity of human life.

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