STUDIES IN THE NOVELS OF THOMAS WOLFE

by

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Introduction

The purpose of this thesis is the study of the four novels of Thomas Wolfe. Wolfe's work is centered in a single protagonist; a figure that is largely autobiographical, and is dominated by a number of themes. In Look Homeward, Angel, the important themes are, the isolation of individuals and their inability to communicate with each other, the influence of chance in men's lives, and the effects of the passing of time. Of Time and The River continues these ideas, but the dominant themes are those of Eugene's search for an external and permanent image of strength and wisdom, his Faustian hunger for knowledge, and the problems that beset him as an American artist. The protagonist in this book, as in the following novels, is a rounded figure, representing the whole or part of America, while in Look Homeward, Angel, he is a mirror who reflects the characters in the surrounding town.

The third novel retraces the childhood of the hero, whose name is changed from Eugene Gant to George Webber. This book continues the themes of the first two, particularly in the second half, which was written before the first half. In the last novel, You Can't Go Home Again, many of the conflicts of the themes in the first three books are resolved. The hero is no longer obsessed by his Faustian hunger, and by concentrating on the future instead of the past, escapes the tyranny of time. Instead

of trying to encompass the whole of America in his art, he has adopted principles of selectivity, and has resolved to rely upon himself, rather than upon the father-figure of his editor.

The four novels describe very completely the problems that Wolfe himself encountered in his life and in his writing. Wolfe was born and brought up in Asheville, North Carolina, which at that time was an unexploited and rural town. The schism between his parents was very similar to that described in the family backgrounds of Eugene Gant and George Webber, although the characters of the Gant family correspond more closely to Wolfe's than do those of George Webber.

Wolfe graduated from Chapel Hill, and, like Eugene Gant, then went to Harvard to study playwriting. During the years from 1924 to 1930, he taught at New York University, wrote, and travelled. When Wolfe was returning from the first of his seven trips to Europe, he met Aline Bernstein, who is Esther Jack in the novels. After Wolfe had given up teaching, he spent the remaining years of his life writing and travelling until his death in 1938. Like George Webber, he lived alone for many years in Brooklyn and in other parts of New York, and throughout his maturity worked extremely hard at his writing.

Thomas Wolfe was interested in the whole, rather than just a part of society. He refused to join any of the aesthetic and socialistic groups that were prevalent during

the thirties, because he felt that his concern for humanity could be best expressed through dedication to his art. His four long novels are the result of that dedication, and represent an individual and personal vision of life and of America.

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CHAPTER I

LOOK HOMEWARD, ANGEL

When Look Homeward, Angel was published in 1929, Thomas Wolfe was immediately labelled "autobiographical." Eugene's life in Altamont corresponded so closely to Wolfe's own boyhood in Asheville, North Carolina, that both the townspeople and many critics claimed that the book was a literal reporting of fact.

Wolfe himself felt and said, "I do not believe that there is a single page of it that is true to fact."[1] For Wolfe, all writing was autobiographical, in that a writer had to utilize what was within him in order to create.

> You can either say that there is no such thing as autobiographical writing, or you can say that all writing is autobiographical, a statement with which I should be inclined to agree. . . . My books are neither more nor less autobiographical than 'War and Peace.' If anything, I should say that they are less, because a great writer like Tolstoi who achieves his purpose, achieves it because he has made a perfect utilization of all the means, all the materials at his disposal. This Tolstoi did in 'War and Peace.' I have never yet succeeded in doing it completely and perfectly. Accordingly, Tolstoi is a more autobiographical writer than I am, because he has succeeded better in using what he had. But make no mistake about it: both of us, and every other man who ever wrote a book, are autobiographical.[2]

In a speech at Purdue University in 1938, Wolfe extended and discussed his views on autobiography in terms of the characterization of Eugene Gant.

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[1]Thomas Wolfe, The Story of a Novel (New York, 1936), p.22. Subsequent references will be to this edition.

[2]Elizabeth Nowell, ed., The Letters of Thomas Wolfe (New York, 1956), p.592. Subsequent references will be to this edition.

> For one thing, the book still showed unmistakably the evidence of the stages I had gone through . . . the special aesthetic faiths and creeds of the time. It is what is called an autobiographical novel-- a definition with which I have never agreed, simply because it seems to me every novel . . . is autobiographical. Nevertheless, it is true that this book was autobiographical in the personal and special sense: it was possible, for example, to identify the life of the hero with the life of the author . . . and . . . I believe that in this sense of the word-- in this special autobiographical sense-- was the book's greatest weakness. I believe the character of the hero was the weakest and least convincing one in the whole book, because he had been derived not only from experience but colored a good deal by the romantic aestheticism of the period. He was, in short . . . the wounded, sensitive, the extraordinary creature, in conflict with his environment, with the Babbitt, the Philistine, the small town, the family. I know that I was not satisfied with this character even at the time: he seemed to me to be uneasy and self-conscious, probably because I was myself uneasy and self-conscious about him.[3]

Wolfe felt that the weakness of the book lay in the possibility of identifying the hero's life with the author's, and this was, for him, the "personal and special sense" of the word "autobiographical." In the note to the reader at the beginning of Look Homeward, Angel, Wolfe wrote, "Fiction is not fact, but fiction is fact selected and understood, fiction is fact arranged and charged with purpose."[4] He felt that Tolstoi achieved his purpose "because he has made a perfect utilization of all the means, all the materials at his disposal." Wolfe himself had not achieved a perfect or complete use of his own experience because he

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[3]Elizabeth Nowell, Thomas Wolfe: A Biography (New York, 1960), p.147. Subsequent references will be to this edition.

[4]Thomas Wolfe, Look Homeward, Angel (New York, 1929), To The Reader. Subsequent references will be to this edition.

allowed Eugene's character to be "colored a good deal by the romantic aestheticism of the period."

In his "Note to the Publisher's Reader," written in 1928, Wolfe firmly asserts his belief in his book as both fiction and autobiography.

> It is, of course, obvious that the book is 'autobiographical.' But in a literal sense, it is probably no more autobiographical than 'Gulliver's Travels.' There is scarcely a scene that has its base in literal fact. The book is a fiction -- it is loaded with invention: story, fantasy, vision. But it is a fiction that is, I believe, more true than fact -- a fiction that grew out of a life completely digested in my spirit, a fiction which telescopes, condenses, and objectifies all the random or incompleted gestures of life -- which tries to comprehend people, in short, not by telling what people did, but what they should have done. The most literal and autobiographical part of the book, therefore, is its picture of the buried life. The most exact thing in it is the fantasy -- its picture of a child's soul. (The Letters of Thomas Wolfe, p.130)

Wolfe wanted Look Homeward, Angel to represent something more than a tale of a sensitive youth. "I have never called this book a novel. To me it is a book such as all men may have in them. It is a book made out of my life, and it represents my vision of life to my twentieth year." (The Letters of Thomas Wolfe, p.131) Look Homeward, Angel is, then, both a reconstruction and an interpretation of Wolfe's own past.

For the title of his book, Wolfe finally chose part of a line from Milton's Lycidas: "Look homeward Angel, now, and melt with ruth:"[5] Milton asks the spirit of

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[5]Lycidas, 163.

Lycidas to look backwards with pity at what was once his home. Wolfe's angel can be seen as the spirit of man in eternity in the same way. The dark angel, or guardian spirit of Eugent's brother Ben, seems to be the particularization of the title, and there are references throughout the book to the imported stone angel which stands on the porch of W.O. Gant's shop.[6] The stone angel is, then, a concrete image of a spiritual state as well as a symbol of Gant's frustration.

Wolfe was not so much concerned with plot as he was with plan. He wanted to describe the interaction of the consciousnesses of Eugene and his family.

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[6]In the book, W.O. Gant sells the stone angel, after treasuring it for many years, to mark the grave of a prostitute. Many people in Asheville convinced themselves that this episode was an example of Wolfe's literalism, although Wolfe himself wrote, "So far as I know, there was no basis in fact for this story, and yet I was informed by several people later that they not only remembered the incident perfectly, but had actually been witnesses to the transaction. Nor was this the end of the story. I heard that one of the newspapers sent a reporter and a photographer to the cemetery and a photograph was printed in the paper with a statement to the effect that the angel was the now famous angel which had stood upon the stone-cutter's porch for so many years and had given the title to my book. The unfortunate part of this proceeding was that I had never seen or heard of this angel before, and that this angel was, in fact, erected over the grave of a well known Methodist lady who had died a few years before and that her indignant family had immediately written the paper to demand a retraction of its story, saying that their mother had been in no way connected with the infamous book or the infamous angel which had given the infamous book its name." (The Story of a Novel, pp.23-24)

The book may be lacking in plot but it is not lacking in plan. The plan is rigid and densely woven. There are two essential movements — one outward and one downward. The outward movement describes the effort of a child, a boy, and a youth for release, freedom, and loneliness in new lands. The movement of experience is duplicated by a series of widening concentric circles, three of which are represented by the three parts of the book. The downward movement is represented by a constant excavation into the buried life of a group of people, and describes the cyclic curve of a family's life — genesis, union, decay, and dissolution. (The Letters of Thomas Wolfe, p.129)

The "outward movement" of Eugene, and the "downward movement" into the life of the Gant family are simultaneous. The three parts of the book describe different stages in Eugene's life. The first provides family background, and carries Eugene from his birth to his twelfth year, and the second and third each cover three years. Wolfe calls these sections "a series of widening concentric circles." In each, Eugene's physical and mental horizons are enlarged. From the encircling family he moves into the larger circle of the town, its inhabitants, and school, and finally at university escapes the hills of Altamont that had "rimmed in life." (Look Homeward, Angel, p.201)

At the same time, he develops mentally. In the first section he is predominantly bound by the world of the senses.

Eugene was loose now in the limitless meadows of sensation: his sensory equipment was so complete that at the moment of perception of a single thing, the whole background of color, warmth, odor, sound, taste established itself, so that later, the breath of hot dandelion brought back the grass-warm banks of Spring, a day, a place, the rustling of young leaves, or the page of a book, the thin exotic smell of tangerine, the wintry bite of great apples. . . . (Look Homeward, Angel, p.84)

In the second section he begins to resent the continual presence of the world, and evolves a secret imaginative life of his own. "The prison walls of self had closed entirely around him; he was walled completely by the esymplastic power of his imagination -- he had learned by now to project mechanically, before the world, an acceptable counterfeit of himself which would protect him from intrusion." (Look Homeward, Angel, p.212) He becomes aware of and confused by the passing of time, and the resulting changes in his life.

> Old haunt-eyed faces glimmered in his memory. He thought of Swain's cow, St. Louis, death, himself in the cradle. He was the haunter of himself, trying for a moment to recover what he had been part of. He did not understand change, he did not understand growth. He stared at his framed baby picture in the parlor, and turned away sick with fear and the effort to touch, retain, grasp himself for only a moment. (Look Homeward, Angel, p.201)

Like the young George Webber in The Web and The Rock, Eugene tries to impose a pattern on the random moments of Chance.

> His life coiled back into the brown murk of the past like a twined filament of electric wire; he gave life, a pattern, and movement to these million sensations that Chance, the loss or gain of a moment, the turn of the head, the enormous and aimless impulsion of accident, had thrust into the blazing heat of him. (Look Homeward, Angel, p.202)

Also like George, Eugene endows physical places and inanimate objects with moral qualities.

> The entire landscape, the whole physical background of his life, was now dappled by powerful prejudices of liking and distaste formed, God knows how, or by what intangible affinities of thought, feeling and connotation. Thus, one street would seem to him to be a 'good street' --to exist in the rich light of cheerful, abundant, and high-hearted

living; another, inexplicably, a 'bad street,' touching him somehow with fear, hopelessness, depression. (Look Homeward, Angel, p.214)

Eugene's view of himself and his relationship to the world is twofold. He can see what he wants to see: himself victorious and beloved in happy and pleasant surroundings, and can also see the reality of his relationship to the world with clear and objective vision.

In all his swarming fantasies Eugene saw himself . . . unbeaten and beloved. But moments of clear vision returned to him when all the defeat and misery of his life was revealed. He saw his gangling and absurd figure, his remote unpractical brooding face . . . he remembered, with a drained sick heart, the countless humiliations, physical and verbal, he had endured, at the hands of school and family, before the world, and as he thought, the horns of victory died within the wood, the battle-drums of triumph stopped, the proud clangor of the gongs quivered away in silence. (Look Homeward, Angel, p.215)

The difference between his fantasies and reality disturbs Eugene. He gradually becomes accustomed to the presence of both, and dimly begins to see that although fantasy may be unreal, it provides creative men with the strength to live with reality.

His faith was above conviction. Disillusion had come so often that it had awakened in him a strain of bitter suspicion, an occasional mockery, virulent, coarse, cruel, and subtle, which was all the more scalding because of his own pain. Unknowingly, he had begun to build up in himself a vast mythology for which he cared all the more deeply because he realized its untruth. Brokenly, obscurely, he was beginning to feel that it was not truth that men must live for -- the creative men -- but for falsehood. . . . Eugene believed in the glory and the gold. (Look Homeward, Angel, pp.237-238)

At the beginning of the third section, when Eugene is almost sixteen years old, Wolfe makes it clear that he is still a child, and that he remains a child throughout his four years at Pulpit Hill.

> He was a child when he went away: he was a child who had looked much on pain and evil, and remained a fantasist of the Ideal. Walled up in his great city of visions, his tongue had learned to mock, his lip to sneer, but the harsh rasp of the world had worn no grooving in the secret life. . . . His cruel eyes had missed the meaning of no gesture, his packed and bitter heart had sweltered in him like a hot ingot, but all his hard wisdom melted at the glow of his imagination. He was not a child when he reflected, but when he dreamt he was; and it was the child and dreamer that governed his belief. . . . Four years later, when he was graduated, he had passed his adolescence . . . and he was still a child. (Look Homeward, Angel, pp.417-418)

Eugene, at the end of the book, obtains permission to go to Harvard, but the other members of the family are unable to achieve "release, freedom, and loneliness in new lands." They are frustrated and thwarted either by chance or by their inability to penetrate their environment. The conflicting personalities of W.O. Gant and his wife Eliza express to a large extent the cyclic curve of the family's life, from genesis to dissolution.

W.O. Gant's frustration results from the difference between what he would like to do and what he is able to do. "He wanted to wreak something dark and unspeakable in him into cold stone. He wanted to carve an angel's head. . . . He never found it. He never learned to carve an angel's head. The dove, the lamb, the smooth joined marble hands of death, and letters fair and fine -- but not the angel." (Look Homeward, Angel, p.3) Mr. Gant's tides of flowing rhetoric and his love of voyages illustrate his wish to create and his hunger for freedom. Wolfe underlines Gant's inability to fulfill his desires throughout the book by juxtaposing

his immense vitality and joy in life with his occupation of carving headstones for the dead.

In Eugene's mother, Eliza, the instinct for self-expression appears in her avid collecting of newspapers, string, money, property, and people. The reason for her extreme possessiveness is given in terms of environment. In the Pentland family, "The four oldest children, Henry, Will, Eliza, and Jim, had passed their childhood in the years following the civil war. The poverty and privation of those years had been so terrible that none of them ever spoke of it now, but the bitter steel had sheared into their hearts, leaving scars that would not heal." (Look Homeward, Angel, p.13)

Look Homeward, Angel is subtitled A Story of The Buried Life, and the meaning of the phrase is found in Mathew Arnold's poem, The Buried Life.

> But often, in the world's most crowded streets,
> But often, in the din of strife,
> There rises an unspeakable desire
> After the knowledge of our buried life;
> A thirst to spend our fire and restless force
> In tracking out our true, original course;
> A longing to inquire
> Into the mystery of this heart which beats
> So wild, so deep in us -- to know
> Whence our lives come and where they go.[7]

Eugene, because of his personality and his youth, is the only character who is able to spend his "fire and restless force" in the discovery of his buried life. The search is

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[7]The Buried Life, 45-54.

limited by the prison of earth. "In her dark womb we did not know our mother's face; from the prison of her flesh have we come into the unspeakable and incommunicable prison of this earth." (Look Homeward, Angel, introductory prose-poem) Then, as the mortal or outer self becomes older in time, its energies are divided. The real and inner self is buried by the outer self because the outer self must use energy in obtaining food, clothing, and shelter.

Wolfe had read Wordsworth and Coleridge in a small private school called The Altamont Fitting School in the book. He emotionally accepted some of the doctrines of these poets in order to understand his feeling of isolation. Wolfe does not definitely state the doctrine of the pre-existence of the soul in any of his books, but the idea is often implicit. Life on earth is life in a prison, or real life buried, and freedom is found only before and after death. While on earth, the inner self, as identified with the experiences closest to birth and so closest to immortality, becomes more and more buried by the layers of events and activities over the years.

There are other implications in the phrase "the buried life." The boy Eugene is buried in the hills surrounding Altamont, as opposed to the flat farm land of Pennsylvania from which his father had come. He is buried in the rich fecundity of the South far from the mystic coldness of the North. He is buried in the provincialism of a small town and yearns for the cosmopolitanism of the

city, with its promise of wealth and fame.

Wolfe's fascination with trains is connected with this geographical burial. The train becomes a symbol of escape from hill-surrounded Altamont, and carries with it the promise of his father's land. Eugene is happy on a train because it represents escape, motivated activity, and certitude. The story of Eugene is the story of his buried life and his strivings and gropings to express himself from within, and is also the story of life buried in all the incunabula of the home, the family, experience, and America.

The part that America plays in Wolfe's books becomes progressively important. In Look Homeward, Angel, Eugene recognizes his feeling of isolation, but although disturbed by life as he sees it in his family and in Altamont, he does not often identify his feelings with those of other Americans. There are passages in which Eugene thinks of all Americans as being lost, because of the immensity of their land and their inability to recognize and identify their own traditions, but the statements have not the prominence of those in Of Time and The River. Eugene, the child, the boy, and the youth, is more interested in his own problems than in those of America. He wants to leave Altamont and his family behind; their values are not his values. He is repelled by Eliza's materialism, W.O. Gant's failures, and the compromises

made by his brothers and sisters. They, in turn, "felt obscurely that he was an eccentric -- 'queer,' they called it -- and of an impractical or 'literary' turn." (Look Homeward, Angel, p.636) Until the conversation with Ben at the end of the book, Eugene believes that the characteristics of his family are isolated phenomena, and that elsewhere in America, life will be different.

Look Homeward, Angel combines three traditional elements. The provincial innocent longs for the city, a young man moves from birth through adolescence, and a creative spirit tries to find a way in the world. The last two of these elements are also found in James Joyce's A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man. Like Joyce, Wolfe tightens the strands of his novel by repeating themes and motifs throughout the book.

The prose-poem that prefaces the book introduces many of the important recurring motifs.

> . . . a stone, a leaf, an unfound door; of a stone, a leaf, a door. And of all the forgotten faces. Naked and alone we came into exile. In her dark womb we did not know our mother's face; from the prison of her flesh have we come into the unspeakable and incommunicable prison of this earth. Which of us has known his brother? Which of us has looked into his father's heart? Which of us has not remained forever prison-pent? Which of us is not forever a stranger and alone? O waste of loss, in the hot mazes, lost, among bright stars on this most weary unbright cinder, lost! Remembering speechlessly we seek the great forgotten language, the lost lane-end into heaven, a stone, a leaf, an unfound door. Where? When? O lost, and by the wind grieved, ghost, come back again.

The stone, as has been seen, is a symbol of frustration, particularly Gant's frustration as an artist.

The leaf is a symbol of both death and life. Used in the Homeric and Biblical sense of the transience of this world, it also represents the richness of the cyclic productivity of the earth. Towards the end of the book, there are intimations of earthly immortality, in that Ben will return again in leaf and flower. "And Ben will come again, he will not die again, in flower and leaf, in wind and music far, he will come back again." (Look Homeward, Angel, p.617)

The "unfound door" is one of the most frequently occurring symbols of the book. It represents the isolation of individuals, the barrier between personalities, and the inability of people to communicate completely. The search for a door can also be seen as a search for a stepping-stone into permanence, and this is connected with the problem of ever passing time. In The Story of a Novel, Wolfe explicitly identifies the door with creative power. "I know the door is not yet open. I know the tongue, the speech, the language that I seek is not yet found, but I believe with all my heart that I have found the way, have made a channel, am started on my first beginning." (The Story of a Novel, p.49) Monroe M. Stearns points out in his article "The Metaphysics of Thomas Wolfe" that the words "a stone, a leaf, an unfound door" can be traced to a roughly similar trio of images in Wordsworth's The Prelude.[8]

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[8]Richard Walser, ed., The Enigma of Thomas Wolfe (Cambridge, 1953), p.202.

In trying to find lines of difference in external forms, Wordsworth says,

> an eye
> Which, from a tree, a stone, a withered leaf,
> To the broad ocean and the azure heavens
> Spangled with kindred multitudes of stars,
> Could find no surface where its power might sleep;[9]

The longing of youth for the ideal is emphasized by another of the important recurring motifs, "Remembering speechlessly we seek the great forgotten language, the lost lane-end into heaven, a stone, a leaf, an unfound door." This theme presents not so much the actual state of the ghost, or inner self, but its efforts to remember what it has lost, and to find something that will replace it.

The last line of the prose-poem introduces the word "ghost," and juxtaposes the idea of a ghost with that of the angel. "O lost, and by the wind grieved, ghost, come back again." The ghost seems to be the symbol in life of what the angel represents in after-life. The ghost is the inner self, lost and a stranger in the darkness of the world, while the angel, bathed in light, exists in eternity. When a character is beset by a lack of direction and frustration, this theme appears, either as in the prose-poem, or with the wording slightly changed.

The recapitulation of the themes keeps the central ideas of the book, as exemplified by the growth of Eugene,

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[9]The Prelude, III. 159-163.

before the reader at all times, and each occurrence carries with it the weight of those which have gone before. The result is that by the end of the book the themes have dominated the story in the way that musical themes dominate a symphony. Indeed, Wolfe often uses the emotional overtones of music to evoke a sense of eternity. When Eugene awakens from a sound sleep in the early morning, to deliver papers to the inhabitants of Niggertown, he is conscious of melody. "Strange aerial music came fluting out of darkness, or over his slow-wakening senses swept the great waves of symphonic orchestration. Fiend-voices, beautiful and sleep-loud, called down through darkness and light, developing the thread of ancient memory." (Look Homeward, Angel, p.321)

As Eugene grows up, he is conscious of the weight of the experiences of all the past generations, and of the part that Chance plays in men's actions. The second and third paragraphs of the opening section of the book contain sentences that also act as motifs, and one of these summarizes the effect of the past upon humanity. "Each of us is all the sums he has not counted: subtract us into nakedness and night again, and you shall see begin in Crete four thousand years ago the love that ended yesterday in Texas." (Look Homeward, Angel, p.1)

There are other themes woven into the book. When Eugene feels sure that he will fulfill all his desires and

experience his dreams, Wolfe interpolates the words, "He was young and he could never die." (Look Homeward, Angel, p.637) The bright moments of certainty and faith are also characterized by the phrase, "the apple-tree, the singing, and the gold." (Look Homeward, Angel, p.486) In these moments, Eugene's real self is living, unhampered by doubts or fears.

The concept of time was one of Wolfe's greatest problems. The Story of a Novel outlines three time elements with which he struggled in writing Of Time and The River, but which also apply to Look Homeward, Angel.

> The first and most obvious was an element of actual present time, an element which carried the narrative forward, which represented characters and events as living in the present and moving forward into an immediate future. The second time element was of past time, one which represented these same characters as acting and as being acted upon by all the accumulated impact of man's experience so that each moment of their lives was conditioned not only by what they experienced in that moment, but by all that they had experienced up to that moment. In addition to these two time elements, there was a third which I conceived as being time immutable, the time of rivers, mountains, oceans, and the earth; a kind of eternal and unchanging universe of time against which would be projected the transience of man's life, the bitter briefness of his day. (The Story of a Novel, pp.51-52)

All of these time elements are present in Look Homeward, Angel. The first is represented in the day to day and year to year story of Eugene and his family in Altamont. The second is implicit in many of the themes that pattern the book, particularly the following. "Each moment is the fruit of forty thousand years. The minute-winning days, like flies, buzz home to death, and every moment is a

window on all time." (Look Homeward, Angel, p.1) The third occurs in the many lyrical descriptions of the bounty of the earth, the heights of mountains and the depths of seas. The time elements are arranged contrapuntally in the book to carry the reader without obstruction from one to another.

The passing of time is connected with memory. At the end of the book, Eugene, at the age of nineteen, is afraid of forgetting things. He is afraid of forgetting the clarity of all his past experience. He realizes that one of the ties that binds him to other men is the power of memory, and that memory is a defence against the scythe of time. In his conversation with what he calls the ghost of Ben he asks,

> 'What happens, Ben? What really happens? . . . Can you remember some of the same things that I do? I have forgotten the old faces. Where are they, Ben? What were their names? I forget the names of people I knew for years. I get their faces mixed. I get their heads stuck on other people's bodies. I think one man has said what another said. And I forget-- forget. There is something I have lost and have forgotten. I can't remember, Ben.' (Look Homeward, Angel, p.658)

Eugene feels that by forgetting the old faces, he is also forgetting the links that bind him to eternity. He wants to recapture his attitudes towards life as a child, in order to understand how and why he has changed with the passage of time.

Through Ben, however, he realizes that he cannot go back to the sureness of his youth; that the experiences of the past are over and cannot be relived to provide help in the present. His young self is buried. This is the

linear concept of time, but there are also hints of time as cyclical. There is the suggestion that Ben will return on this earth in leaf and flower, and in the unending cycle of the earth there is permanence. There is also the sense that although Eugene, in this book, is not certain of the right direction for his search, Wolfe, in reconstructing and interpreting his own youth, has broken through the tyranny of time and has found a door into permanence.

There are other facets of time in the book. Eugene perceives the sensation of moments of no-time, or timeless suspension. When he is on a speeding train, he feels like a freed spirit, beyond time and place, and in this sense, the train is important in the same way that memory is important.

> It was this that awed him -- the weird combination of fixity and change, the terrible moment of immobility stamped with eternity in which, passing life at great speed, both the observer and the observed seem frozen in time. There was one moment of timeless suspension when the land did not move, the train did not move, the slattern in the doorway did not move, he did not move. It was as if God had lifted his baton sharply above the endless orchestration of the seas, and the eternal movement had stopped, suspended in the timeless architecture of the absolute. . . . Fixed in no-time, the slattern vanished, fixed, without a moment of transition. His sense of unreality came from time and movement, from imagining the woman, when the train had passed, as walking back into the house, lifting a kettle from the hearth embers. Thus life turned shadow, the living lights went ghost again. (Look Homeward, Angel, p.202)

Here, as before, light is associated with eternity, and darkness with the ghost, or the strangeness of life on earth. Such moments are for Eugene, "pinpoints of

experience and the ghostliness of all things else became more awful because of them." (Look Homeward, Angel, p.202)

The last chapter of the book, in which time is suspended until the last few lines, is an extension and culmination of these moments. All of the moments of the past in which he and Ben had felt a prick of awareness gather in the silent Square, and each moment is housed in a separate body. The collection of Bens and Eugenes is beyond time.

> And for a moment all the silver space was printed with the thousand forms of himself and Ben. . . . And as Eugene watched the army of himself and Ben, which were not ghosts, and which were lost, he saw himself -- his son, his boy, his lost and virgin flesh -- come over past the fountain, leaning against the loaded canvas bag, and walking down with rapid crippled stride past Gant's toward Niggertown in young pre-natal dawn. And as he passed the porch where he sat watching, he saw the lost child-face below the lumpy ragged cap, drugged in the magic of unheard music, listening for the far-forested horn-note, the speechless almost captured pass-word. . . . 'You! You! My son! My child! Come back! Come back!' His voice strangled in his throat: the boy had gone, leaving the memory of his bewitched and listening face turned to the hidden world. O lost! (Look Homeward, Angel, pp.658-659)

Eugene tells Ben that he wants to find, "Myself, and an end to hunger, and the happy land. . . . O Ben, brother, and ghost, and stranger, you who could never speak, give me an answer now!" Ben replies, "There is no happy land. There is no end to hunger." Eugene then asks, "Where, Ben? Where is the world?" and Ben answers, "Nowhere. . . . You are your world." (Look Homeward, Angel, pp.660-661) Eugene's world can be found nowhere but within himself.

The scene takes place in "blazing moonlight" (Look Homeward, Angel, p.653), and Ben is now able to communicate with Eugene. The barriers that were present during Ben's life have disappeared. It is not definitely implied that Ben is an angel in this scene, because he appears in his familiar body, has his usual characteristics, and speaks in the same way as when alive, but Ben repeatedly tells Eugene that he is not a ghost. The idea of an angel is ever-present, however, in that the stone angels on the porch where Ben and Eugene are sitting, are now, because of the presence of Ben, able to move. Ben, in this chapter becomes a kind of deus ex machina figure. During the conversation between the two brothers, the dominant themes and symbols of the book, which show the meaning behind Eugene's "outward movement," are resolved, and Eugene achieves some control of his destiny. The buried life is able to influence his life on earth.

Although the central themes of the book usually relate to Eugene in his various stages of growth, they also illustrate the problems of the other members of the family, and so form a part of the "downward," as well as the "outward movement." Eugene, of course, is the hero of the novel, and the family and town form his background. Wolfe is interested in making the story of Eugene and the Gants in Altamont universal in its application. Since he wants to show them in the largest possible frame, he often

enters the novel as the author in order to direct the reader. Occasionally these comments read almost as stage directions, in that the character spoken of is consciously alienated from the reader.

In the exposition of the book, Wolfe gives a certain amount of the family history of the Gants. After a brief discussion of Eugene's most remote voyage-hungry Gantian ancestor, Wolfe pauses, and switches the center of interest from the Englishman to one of his sons -- W.O. Gant.

> So, with this legacy, we leave this Englishman and are concerned hereafter with the heir to whom he bequeathed it, his second son, a boy named Oliver. . . . How . . . he had walked along a street in Baltimore, and seen within a little shop smooth granite slabs of death, carved lambs and cherubim, and an angel poised upon cold phthisic feet, with a smile of soft stone idiocy-- this is a longer tale. But I know that his cold and shallow eyes had darkened with the obscure and passionate hunger that had lived in a dead man's eyes. . . . (Look Homeward, Angel, p.2)

The Englishman is discarded as soon as the background of W.O. Gant's hunger is established.

Wolfe, the author, can appear in another way. The whole of Look Homeward, Angel was first written in the first person singular, and there are a few passages in the printed form of the book which were not changed into the third person.[10] In the description of the adolescent

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[10]Edward Aswell wrote of the manuscript of Of Time and The River, which was written over a period of years, that "the very earliest sections in point of writing were in the first person singular, as the whole of Look Homeward, Angel originally was." ("A Note on Thomas Wolfe," p.371) The later parts of Of Time and The River, and also the following two novels were written in the third person singular.

Eugene's love for Laura James, the pronoun "he" used in speaking of Eugene, suddenly changes into "I," and the reader remembers that Wolfe loved one of his mother's boarders one summer, that the girl married somebody else, and shortly afterwards died of influenza.

> O lost, and by the wind grieved, ghost, come back again, as I first knew you in the timeless valley. . . . Ghost, ghost, come back from that marriage that we did not forsee, return not into life, but into magic, where we have never died, into the enchanted wood, where we still lie, strewn on the grass. (Look Homeward, Angel, pp.486-487)

The appearance of the author is brief, however, and the next chapter, without transition, reverts to the story of Eugene and Laura.

Wolfe frequently uses the stream of consciousness and the interior monologue techniques. When W.O. Gant returns from his trip to California, the town of Altamont strikes him as small, shabby, and still, in comparison to the movements and sights that he has just enjoyed. In a state of passivity as he slowly makes his way homeward, he lets his thoughts take him where they will.

> America's Switzerland. The Beautiful Land of the Sky. Jesus God! Old Bowman said he'll be a rich man someday. Built up all the way to Pasadena. Come on out. Too late now. Think he was in love with her. No matter. Too old. Wants her out there. No fool like-- White bellies of the fish. A spring somewhere to wash me through. Clean as a baby once more. (Look Homeward, Angel, p.77)

These thoughts are not directing Mr. Gant to any particular action; an old man, he has outlived the passions of his youth.

In contrast to this technique is Eugene's interior

monologue. He daydreams, but his thoughts are motivated. Eugene retells himself definite stories that he has read in books or seen on the screen, and imagines himself in the position of the hero. The passion and egoism of his youth does not often allow his thoughts to wander haphazardly as Gant's do, but the fact that he uses cheap fiction as a means of expressing himself is not so much a judgment of Eugene's mind as it is a comment by Wolfe on the youthfulness of his hero.

Wolfe has many methods of developing the background of the town and the characters of the townspeople that give it life. One of these is the technique of paralleling. In chapter fourteen, three people are shown awakening at the same time on the same morning, and the juxtaposition of their awakenings immediately illuminates the difference in their characters.

In the same chapter, in order to preserve and extend the composite view of the town, Wolfe uses the technique of montage, which is rather more expanded. The actions described occur simultaneously, but are not similar. The illusion of reality is heightened because there are no transitional sections between the various scenes. He simply states, "Meanwhile, the following events occurred simultaneously throughout the neighbourhood." (Look Homeward, Angel, p.195) There follow at least eight separate pictures of the people of Altamont, in this expanded moment. The effect is that of a kaleidescope.

One person is cross; one working; others sleeping; others eating. Their actions are not necessarily motivated; the reader is simply given a picture of them as they live. In the novels following Look Homeward, Angel, Eugene or George Webber are direct onlookers of the people and events described in their towns; only in parts of this book does the town have a life of its own. The expanded moment briefly shows the organism of society in action, and as such is a part of the "downward movement."

There are many sections in which Wolfe uses parody, satire, and irony. In the second half of the twenty-fourth chapter, when Eugene and his friends walk slowly home from school in the spring, there is a running commentary on their actions and those which they see about them, in terms of quotations from the great poets. Wolfe directly contrasts the lines from the poets with the life of the town, and the opposition of the two elements serves as a catalyst in the mingling and mixing of all human experience.

> Dr. H.M. Smathers pumped vigorously with his right foot, took a wad of cotton from his assistant, Miss Lola Bruce, and thrusting it securely into the jaw of his unseen patient, bent his fashionable bald head intently. . . .
> 'Do you feel that?' he said tenderly.
> 'Wrogd gdo gurk!'
> 'Spit! With thee conversing, I forget all time.
> (Look Homeward, Angel, p.350)

This part of the twenty-fourth chapter clearly illustrates Wolfe's admitted indebtedness to James Joyce. In The Story of a Novel he wrote of Look Homeward, Angel,

> Like every young man, I was strongly under the influence of writers I admired. One of the chief writers at that time was Mr. James Joyce with his book Ulysses. The book that I was writing was much influenced, I believe, by his own book, and yet the powerful energy and fire of my own youth played over and, I think, possessed it all. (The Story of a Novel, p.8)

In this book, there is an important birth, Eugene's, and an important death, Ben's. Wolfe points out in a quasi-satirical manner that Eugene represents the recapitulation of all human experience when he enters the world, and his historical account is preceded by a detailed and realistic description of the drunken rages of W.O. Gant on the eve of the birth of his last child. As Louis D. Rubin states in his book, Thomas Wolfe: The Weather of his Youth,

> when Wolfe has Eugene Gant enter 'the theatre of human events in 1900,' he must first resume human history from the arrival upon land of the first amphibians up to annexation of the Transvaal Republic by Great Britain in the month of Eugene's birth, so that Eugene falls heir to all of historical experience when he enters mortal time.[11]

Eugene at birth is the sum of all the moments he has not counted.

In one of his letters Wolfe wrote, "I agree with Ecclesiates that the saddest day of a man's life is the day of his birth-- but after that, I think the next saddest day is the day of his death." (The Letters of Thomas Wolfe, p.275) The death of Ben is particularly tragic because of the waste and frustration of his life. After Ben has died, Wolfe writes,

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[11] p.64

> Like Apollo, who did his penance to the high god in the sad house of King Admetus, he came, a god with broken feet, into the gray hovel of this world. And he lived here a stranger, trying to recapture the music of the lost world, trying to recall the great forgotten language, the lost faces, the stone, the leaf, the door. (Look Homeward, Angel, p.590)

Ben lives and dies without finding a door in terms of his life on earth. His death gives the rest of the family "a brief and terrible summary of the waste, the tardiness, and the ruin of their lives. . . ." (Look Homeward, Angel, p.571) Ben's death also brings about the dissolution of the family, and so completes the cycle of the "downward movement."

Wolfe often provides idiosyncracies or tags, which are associated again and again with the personalities of specific characters. The image of Will Pentland that stays in the reader's mind, is one of a man with a bird-like nod, who constantly pares his nails, whatever the occasion. "He stood in front of the fire, paring meditatively at his blunt nails with a dull knife. It was his familiar gesture when in company: no-one, he felt, could see what you thought about anything, if you pared your nails." (Look Homeward, Angel, p.28)

Characterizing W.O. Gant are his huge trains of rhetoric, which are usually accompanied by the mention of "a faint uneasy grin around the corners of his thin wailing mouth." (Look Homeward, Angel, p.3) He is conscious that he is playing a part, but he plays it because he feels the

need of something in excess of ordinary day to day activity. Often the word "octopus" or "octopal" describes Eliza.

> Her memory moved over the ocean-bed of event like a great octopus, blindly but completely feeling its way into every sea-cave, rill, and estuary, focussed on all she had done, felt, and thought, with sucking Pentlandian intentness, for whom the sun shone, or grew dark, rain fell, and mankind came, spoke, and died, shifted for a moment in time out of its void into the Pentlandian core, pattern and heart of purpose. (Look Homeward, Angel, p.82)

The dominant feature of both Helen and Luke is the desire for good fellowship. "They wanted above all else to put a good face on before the world, to be well liked and to have many friends. They were profuse in their thanks, extravagant in their praise, cloying in their flattery." (Look Homeward, Angel, p.253)

One of Wolfe's most effective methods of characterization is conversation. The characters speak from within themselves, dramatically, and there is no sense of an intervening author. Each character, including Eugene, is surrounded by a separate aura, and the tensions of family life are heightened not only by the characters talking to each other, but also by their speeches about each other. Eugene, in his recorded thoughts and speeches, gives his impressions of the rest of the family, and in turn, they reveal what Eugene is to each of them. Because the members of the Gant family are seen through a single pair of eyes, their personalities are clearly defined, whereas the portrait of Eugene that emerges is multiple, and so indistinct. Eugene is seen by the different members of his family as a

son, a brother, a student, a wage-earner, and a "stranger," and only the spirit of Ben is able to resolve this fragmentation by telling Eugene, "You are your world." (Look Homeward, Angel, p.661)

The complexity and tensions of the family relationships reach their emotional climax during the illness and death of Ben. There are many eyes looking at the same tragedy, and yet they see different aspects of it. The death of Ben shows the precariousness of life itself. It is the culmination and final release into death and eternity of all the hints and explicit observations of disease, both physical and mental, which run through the book. Grover died of typhoid; Eliza's first child of infant cholera, two other children at birth, and Eliza's sister of scrofula. Eugene has a patch of eczema on his neck, W.O. Gant's lanky frame is ripe for illness, and Steve's body is foul, and emits a "yellow odor." (Look Homeward, Angel, p.253) Eliza's possessiveness amounts to a mania, and almost every member of the family is capable of hysteria.

Wolfe was determined to describe life as completely as he could. He wrote of Look Homeward, Angel,

> It has in it much that to me is painful and ugly, but, without sentimentality or dishonesty, it seems to me, because I am a romantic, that pain has an inevitable fruition in beauty. And the book has in it sin and terror and darkness -- ugly dry lusts, cruelty, a strong sexual hunger of a child -- the dark, the evil, the forbidden. . . . When I wrote the book I seized with delight everything that

would give it color and richness. All the variety and madness of my people -- the leper taint, the cruel waste, the dark flowering evil of life I wrote about with as much exultancy as health, sanity, joy. (The Letters of Thomas Wolfe, p.130)

Contrasted to the descriptions of disease, are those of the richness and plenty of the earth and its products. Wolfe appeals to the senses and appetites, through lists of foods and smells. The bounty of the land is sometimes used to show the flamboyant colour in the lives of the Gants, and can also serve as an ironic reminder of their lack of harmony, both in relation to one another, and to the world in general.

The story of Eugene is that of a youth struggling for communication. As a child, at the Saint Louis Fair, he is fascinated by the name of the place where his brothers work. "They were call-boys at a place called the Inside Inn. The name charmed him: it flashed constantly through his brain." (Look Homeward, Angel, p.57) The tale of Eugene's buried life ends when he accepts the "Inside Inn" as a place only to be found within himself.

CHAPTER II

OF TIME AND THE RIVER

Wolfe found Of Time and The River much more difficult to write than his first book, Look Homeward, Angel, which, he said, "In a way . . . shaped itself." (The Story of a Novel, p. 8) He struggled with Of Time and The River for five years before Maxwell Perkins persuaded him that the book was finished and that it was time for publication. Even when the manuscript was being prepared for the printers, Wolfe wrote to a friend, "There are so many things I want to go back over and fill in and revise, and all my beautiful notes I long to chink in somehow, and he [Maxwell Perkins] is doing his best to restrain me in these designs." (The Letters of Thomas Wolfe, p.416)

Wolfe's instinct was always to add to, rather than cut from his manuscript, and after Of Time and The River was published he wrote to Maxwell Perkins,

> I know for example that the great length of the book will be criticised, but the real, the tragic truth is that the book is not too long, but too short. I am not talking of page-length, word-length, or anything like that -- as I told you many times, I did not care whether the final length of the book was 300, 500, or a 1000 pages, so long as I had realised completely and finally my full intention -- and that was not realised. I still sweat with anguish -- with a sense of irremediable loss -- at the thought of what another six months would have done to that book -- how much more whole and perfect it would have been. Then there would have been no criticism of its episodic character -- for, by God, in purpose and in spirit, that book was not episodic but a living whole and I could have made it so -- the whole inwrought, inweaving sense of time and of man's past conjoined forever to each living present moment of his life

could have been made manifest -- the thing that I must and will get into the whole thing somehow. (The Letters of Thomas Wolfe, pp.444-445)

By the "whole thing," Wolfe meant the entire series of books on which he was working, and what was published as Of Time and The River was the first half of the first volume of the series that he planned.

The first few pages of Of Time and The River show clearly the scope of what Wolfe was trying to accomplish. The title itself, Of Time and The River, was interpreted by Wolfe as meaning "Memory and Change." (The Letters of Thomas Wolfe, p.279) The subtitle is "A Legend of Man's Hunger in His Youth." This is followed by a verse from Ecclesiastes, "Who knoweth that spirit of man that goeth upward, and the spirit of the beast that goeth downward to the earth?" (Ecclesiastes 111.21.) One of the tasks that Wolfe set himself in the book was the examination of that spirit.

Following the dedication of the work to Maxwell Perkins, there is a quotation from Plato's Crito, evoking the steadfastness of Socrates in the pursuit of his beliefs. "Crito, my dear friend Crito, that, believe me, that is what I seem to hear, as the Corybants hear flutes in the air, and the sound of those words rings and echoes in my ears and I can listen to nothing else." The Table of Contents carries with it the weight of seven ancient legends, which are orientations for Eugene's hunger, and before the opening of the book Wolfe cites Goethe's poem,

"Kennst du das Land, wo die Zitronen Bluhn" which opens Book Three of Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship. Finally, as in Look Homeward, Angel, there is an introductory prose-poem which presents the themes of the book. Before the book itself begins, then, Wolfe has drawn from many sources, in order to establish the mood and spirit of the tale that follows. He said of Of Time and The River, "it has a beautiful plan and a poetic logic. . . ." (The Letters of Thomas Wolfe, p.236)

Wolfe wanted his book to achieve what he felt that Tolstoy's War and Peace had achieved:

> I notice in this book that the personal story is interwoven with the universal -- you get the stories of private individuals, particularly of members of Tolstoy's own family, and you get the whole tremendous panorama of nations, and of Russia. This is the way a great writer uses his material, this is the way in which every good work is 'autobiographical' -- and I am not ashamed to follow this in my book. (The Letters of Thomas Wolfe, p.242)

He wanted the story of Eugene to tell the story of all Americans and of America itself. In a letter to the Guggenheim Foundation, Wolfe tried to show how and why Eugene was indicative of America.

> I cannot outline its plan and purpose so exactly as a scientist could his course of study: the book has a great many things in it but its dominant theme is again related to the theme of the first: it tries to find out why Americans are a nomad race (as this writer believes); why they are touched with a powerful and obscure homesickness wherever they go, both at home and abroad; why thousands of the young men, like this writer, have prowled over Europe, looking for a door, a happy land, a home, seeking for something they have lost, perhaps racial and forgotten; and why they return here; or if they do not, carry on them the mark of exile and obscure longing. This is a hasty statement, but I hope it indicates a theme, or an emotion and experience which this writer believes in passionately,

because he has felt and experienced it with all his heart. It seems to him, further, to be a very living and a very national theme. (The Letters of Thomas Wolfe, p.212)

Of Time and The River is the story of Eugene, first living away from his home in Altamont, though still in America, and then living away from America during his wanderings in Europe. Although Wolfe realised that the theme of wandering was universal and applicable to youth of any nation, he felt that because of the size of America, it applied more so to Americans than anyone else.

The book has to do with what seem to me two of the profoundest impulses in man -- Wordsworth, in one of his poems, 'To a Skylark,' I think, calls it 'heaven and home' and I called it in the first line of my book, 'Of wandering forever and the earth again.' By 'the earth again' I mean simply the everlasting earth, a home, a place for the heart to come to, and earthly mortal love, the love of a woman, who, it seems to me belongs to the earth and is a force opposed to that other great force that makes men wander, that makes them search, that makes them lonely, and that makes them both hate and love their loneliness. You may ask what all this has to do with America -- it is true it has to do with the whole universe -- but it is as true of the enormous and lonely land that we inhabit as any land I know of, and more so, it seems to me. (The Letters of Thomas Wolfe, p.239)

This passage shows Wolfe developing his theme of wandering and returning. Wandering becomes an adjunct of masculinity, and returning and the earth are associated with femininity. Thus, the brief picture of Eugene's meeting with and love for Esther at the end of Of Time and The River, is an appropriate conclusion for the story of his wandering.

Another facet of this theme appears in the following passage.

The idea becomes very early apparent that when a man returns he returns always to the female principle -- he returns . . .

to the womb of earthly creation, to the earth itself, to a woman, to fixity. But I dare go so far as to believe that the other pole -- the pole of wandering -- is not only a masculine thing, but that in some way it represents the quest of a man for his father. I dare mention to you the wandering of Christ upon this earth, the wanderings of Paul, the quests of the Crusaders, the wanderings of the Ancient Mariner who makes his confession to the Wedding Guest . . .

> 'The moment that his face I see
> I know the man that must hear me.
> To him my tale I teach.'

I could mention also a dozen myths, legends, or historical examples, but you can supply them quite as well for yourself. (The Letters of Thomas Wolfe, p.244)

Wolfe felt that a man's search for his father was a fundamental instinct of life. He wrote of Of Time and The River,

> From the beginning -- and this was one fact that in all my times of hopelessness returned to fortify my faith in my conviction -- the idea, the central legend that I wished my book to express had not changed. And this central idea was this: the deepest search in life, it seemed to me, the thing that in one way or another was central to all living 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. (The Story of a Novel, p.39)

The search for a father was a search for peace and certitude, and, in a sense, for God.

Eugene's loneliness is opposed to his belief in an external "image of . . . strength and wisdom." In The Hills Beyond, the last of Wolfe's published works, there is an autobiographical essay called "God's Lonely Man." In this essay, Wolfe describes loneliness and its opposing element love, in terms of the Old and New Testaments. "For, just as the Old Testament becomes the chronicle of the life of loneliness, the gospels of the New Testament, with the

same miraculous and unswerving unity, become the chronicle of the life of love."[1] Eugene, in Of Time and The River is identified with the Old Testament, or loneliness, through the opening quotation from Ecclesiastes.

Wolfe himself wrote,

> I know that though the way and meaning of Christ's life is a far, far better way and meaning than my own, yet I can never make it mine; and I think that this is true of all the other lonely men that I have seen or known about -- the nameless, voiceless, faceless atoms of this earth as well as Job and Everyman and Swift. ("God's Lonely Man," p.196)

Wolfe felt that love is not the basis of life; that love could bring deep joy, but also great sorrow.

> I have found the constant, everlasting weather of man's life to be, not love, but loneliness. Love itself is not the weather of our lives. It is the rare, the precious flower. Sometimes it is the flower that gives us life, that breaches the dark walls of all our loneliness and restores us to the fellowship of life, the family of the earth, the brotherhood of man. But sometimes love is the flower that brings us death; and from it we get pain and darkness; and the mutilations of the soul, the maddening of the brain, may be in it. ("God's Lonely Man," p.196)

A father cannot be found on earth, and that love, as an earthly substitute, is not enough, is clearly illustrated in the history of George Webber.

Eugene's search for a father is, then, the instinctive and unreasoned reaching out of youth for an Ideal, or permanence. In a rhetorical passage in Of Time and The River, Wolfe speaks for youth in general.

> Come to us, Father, in the watches of the night, come to us as you always came, bringing to us the invincible

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[1]Thomas Wolfe, The Hills Beyond (New York, 1941), p.194.

sustenance of your strength, the limitless treasure of your bounty, the tremendous structure of your life that will shape all lost and broken things on earth again into a golden pattern of exultancy and joy. (Of Time and The River, p.333)

Wolfe, in the closing paragraph of "God's Lonely Man" uses almost the same words in his personal invocation, but substitutes the word "brother" for "father" and identifies his "brother" as loneliness. "Come to me, brother, in the watches of the night. Come to me in the secret and most silent heart of darkness. Come to me as you always came, bringing to me again the old invincible strength, the deathless hope, the triumphant joy and confidence that will storm the earth again." ("God's Lonely Man," p.197)

Wolfe developed his themes further by founding them on mythology. In a letter to Maxwell Perkins he wrote,

You know what you said to me over a year ago about the book that might be written about a man looking for his father and how everything could be put into it -- well, you were right: don't think that I gave up what I wanted to do, only I had this vast amount of material and what you said began to give shape to it. I have gone through the most damnable torture not merely rewriting but in re-arranging. . . . The advantage of your story is not only that it is immensely and profoundly true -- namely, all of us are wandering and groping through life for an image outside ourselves, for a superior and external wisdom we can appeal to and trust -- but the story also gives a shape to things. . . . I have thought over the Antaeus myth a lot, and it seems to me to be a true and beautiful one: it says what I want about man's jointure to the earth whence comes his strength, but Antaeus is also faithful to the memory of his father (Poseidon) to whom he builds a temple from the skulls of those he vanquishes. Poseidon, of course, represents eternal movement and wandering, and in a book where a man is looking for his father what could be more true than this? (The Letters of Thomas Wolfe, p.287)

There are many other myths and legends in Of Time

and The River. Six of the eight sections of the book bear titles referring to different Greek myths, and the other two are connected to the Faustian legend. By developing the implications of the myths and legends, Wolfe was able to universalize the individual experience of Eugene Gant.

The first section is entitled, "Orestes: Flight before Fury." W.M. Frohock, in his article "Of Time and Neurosis" draws parallels between the myth of Orestes and the Gant household. "W.O. Gant as Agamemnon home from the wars to die, Eliza as Clytemnestra . . . Helen as Electra when she is not doubling as Cassandra, Eugene as the wretched Orestes . . . one feels that Wolfe cannot really have intended these things, and yet, vaguely, there they are!" (The Enigma of Thomas Wolfe, pp.228-229) Both the title and the contents of the section indicate that Wolfe recognized the analogy. Eugene leaves Altamont and his family, and after the train ride, or flight to the north, has a last meeting with his dying father.

Wolfe loved Germany and German literature. He used the Faustian story in two of the section titles, and made it one of the dominant underlying themes of the book. In the second section, Eugene as "Young Faustus" desires as much knowledge and experience as he can possibly absorb. Obsessed by amount and number, he joyfully makes great lists of the people and places he has seen and known and then sinks into despondency as he realizes the scope of what he has not seen or known. Wolfe makes it clear that this

is a young man's hunger, and that Eugene is immature.

In the last section, called "Faust and Helen," Eugene realises that multiplicity does not necessarily provide breadth and scope of vision. Through Helen, or Esther, he both loses and finds himself.

> He turned, and saw her then, and so finding her, was lost, and so losing self, was found, and so seeing her, saw for a fading moment only the pleasant image of the woman that perhaps she was, and that life saw. He never knew: he only knew that from that moment his spirit was impaled upon the knife of love. From that moment on he never was again to lose her utterly, never to wholly re-possess unto himself the lonely, wild integrity of youth which had been his. At that instant of their meeting, that proud inviolability of youth was broken, not to be restored.[2]

Two of the sections are named for heroes who are known for their voyages. They are used as symbols both of Eugene's escape from Altamont and of his search for his father. Telemachus, son of Odysseus, voyages to Sparta to try to find his father, when Odysseus fails to return from the Trojan wars. They meet each other and travel separately back to Penelope, and Odysseus, though disguised, eventually proves that he is Penelope's husband. The story includes wandering, searching, and returning, and in the section entitled "Telemachus" in Of Time and The River, Eugene, having wandered, returns to Altamont, and although W.O. Gant is dead, begins to search for a Father as "the image of a strength and wisdom external to his need and superior to his hunger, to which the belief and

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[2]Thomas Wolfe, Of Time and The River (New York, 1935), p.911. Subsequent references will be to this edition.

power of his own life could be united." (The Story of a Novel, p.39) In the fifth book, Eugene is identified with another voyaging hero -- Jason. Richard Walser summarizes Wolfe's use of the myth as follows, "In the myth Jason (Eugene) set out over the sea for distant Colchis (Europe) to recapture the Golden Fleece (the lost Father) in order that he might return to claim his father's throne (America).[3]

Wolfe at first wanted to use the myth of Antaeus for the opening part of his book. In a letter to Maxwell Perkins, he outlined the parts of the myth that interested him.

> Argument: of the Libyan giant, the brother of Polyphemus, the one-eyed, and the son of Gaea and Poseidon, whom he hath never seen, and through his father, the grandson of Cronos and Rhea, whom he remembereth. He contendeth with all who seek to pass him by, he searcheth alway for his father, he crieth out: 'Art thou my father? Is it thou?' And he wrestleth with that man, and he riseth from each fall with strength redoubled, for his strength cometh up out of the earth, which is his mother. Then cometh against him Heracles, who contendeth with him, who discovereth the secret of his strength, who lifteth him from the earth whence his might ariseth, and subdueth him. But from afar now, in his agony, he heareth the sound of his father's foot: he will be saved for his father cometh! (The Letters of Thomas Wolfe, p.278)

In the final form of Of Time and The River, Eugene is identified with Antaeus only in the sixth section, which is called "Antaeus: Earth Again," but overtones of the Antaeus legend persist throughout the book. In the early version, the city, as a general term, was identified with Heracles, because Wolfe wanted to illustrate the remoteness of the stony-hearted city from the earth

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[3]Thomas Wolfe (New York, 1961), p.84. Subsequent references will be to this edition.

itself, but later, New York was labelled Proteus, a god of many forms who could change himself at will. Paris, the second city in which Eugene lives for some time, is never explicitly called Heracles, but the name is implicit in that the sixth section, "Antaeus: Earth Again," immediately follows the Parisian scenes. This section departs from the myth (in which Antaeus is killed by Heracles) by allowing Eugene to escape from the city and to reestablish contact with "Le soleil . . . la pluie . . . la terre." (Of Time and The River, p.801) Eugene's escape is not so much from the city itself, as it is from sterility and lackadaisical living, as exemplified by Starwick (or Polyphemus the one-eyed) and his companions.

In the Argument, Wolfe states that his Antaeus is the grandson of Cronos and Rhea, "whom he remembereth." In the myth, Cronos and Rhea were Titans, who married, but because Cronos had been warned that one of his sons would overthrow him, he swallowed all the children he could find that were borne to him by Rhea. Wolfe apparently did not have this part of the myth in mind, because in the same letter containing the Argument he wrote, "the chapter is called 'Cronos and Rhea' (or perhaps simply . . . 'Memory and Change.')" (The Letters of Thomas Wolfe, p.279) At first this section was to take place on an Atlantic liner, but in the final form the section title was enlarged to read "Cronos and Rhea: The Dream of Time," and Eugene is on land. Richard Walser points out that, "the Greek word

for time is chrono; the suffix rrhea means flow." (Thomas Wolfe, p.86) Wolfe wanted Eugene to show that, "a native has the whole consciousness of his people and nation in him . . . he knows everything about it, every sight sound and memory of the people." (The Letters of Thomas Wolfe, p.279) Thus, the "grandparents" whom Eugene remembers are the flowing changes of time.

Wolfe intended to introduce a fantasy at the end of the book in which Antaeus would hear his father's voice, though never see him, but the last section of Of Time and The River, by introducing Helen, or Esther, provides love, rather than an end to the search for the father.

The first line of the introductory prose-poem is Wolfe's compact theme for suggesting the paradox of man's youth: "of wandering forever and the earth again." (introductory prose-poem) He wrote to John Hall Wheelock that these were, "the two things that haunt and hurt us: the eternal wandering, moving, questing, loneliness, homesickness, and the desire of the soul for a home, peace, fixity, repose." (The Letters of Thomas Wolfe, p.234) Man in his youth hungers simultaneously for voyages and for a home. He wants both the masculine challenge of adventure, and the feminine repose of "the big rich flowers" (introductory prose-poem) of the earth. The search for the father is inherent in the word "wandering," and the "flower of love" (introductory prose-poem) which abates the search, is inherent in the word "earth."

The prose-poem as a whole can be taken as a poetic synopsis of the themes of the novel. The search for the father is explicitly stated: "And which of us shall find his father, know his face, and in what place, and in what time, and in what land? Where?" The next line, "Where the weary of heart can abide forever, where the weary of wandering can find peace, where the tumult, the fever, and the fret shall be forever stilled" provides a general answer, but a large part of Of Time and The River is devoted to answering these questions in terms of Eugene Gant.

The question "and in what time?" was important for Wolfe. In Look Homeward, Angel he had been able to escape from time in the fantasy at the end, thus resolving the three main time elements in the book, but in Of Time and The River there is no fantasy, and Wolfe's struggles with time are continually evident. In the section "Antaeus: Earth Again" there are twenty pages of excerpts from Eugene's notebook, including a quotation from William James on the nature of time: "the time-units of both time and space are neither points nor moments -- but moments in the history of a point." (Of Time and The River, p.671)

Probably the most important recurring symbol of time in this book is that of the River. Wolfe defined the title Of Time and The River as "Memory and Change" and the word "river" itself suggests both transience or change and permanence or memory, in that it flows, and it always flows. The rivers that encircle Manhattan have a special

significance for Wolfe because the life of the city that they enclose is but a reflection of the continual flow of the rivers to the sea.

> For this will always be one of the immortal and living things about the land, this will be an eternal and unchanging fact about that city whose only permanence is change: there will always be the great rivers flowing around it in the darkness, the rivers that have bounded so many nameless lives, those rivers which have moated in so many changes, which have girdled the wilderness and so much hard, brilliant, and sensational living, so much pain, beauty, ugliness, so much lust, murder, corruption, love, and wild exultancy. (Of Time and The River, pp.859-860)

Often Wolfe uses the motif "by us, by us, by us to the sea" (Of Time and The River, p.510) to evoke the eternity of the flowing river of time.

> And then there was just loneliness and earth and night, and presently the river, the great and silent river, the noble, spacious, kingly river sweeping on forever through the land at night to wash the basal cliffs and ramparts of the terrific city, to flow forever around its million-celled and prisoned sleepers and in the night-time, in the dark, in all the sleeping silence of our lives to go flowing by us, by us, by us, to the sea. (Of Time and The River, p.474)

Although the river is often described in terms of night and darkness, Wolfe can also associate it with light, and the river, like memory, is able to bring back the golden weather of childhood. "And above all else, the Hudson River was like the light -- oh, more than anything it was the light, the light, the tone, the texture of the magic light in which he had seen the city as a child, that made the Hudson River wonderful." (Of Time and The River, p.507)

As in Look Homeward, Angel, the flow of time is also often represented by both a speeding train and the action within the train. In Section One, Eugene is on a

train, leaving Altamont and his childhood, and travelling to Harvard and the future. For a time, Eugene is the only youth in the car, and around him are old men who have forgotten their childhood, and whose main interest in the present is the amassing of money. One of them mentions Ben, and instantaneously carries Eugene back in memory to his twelfth birthday, when Ben gave him a watch.

> For a moment as the gouty old rake had spoken of the boy's dead brother, the boy had felt within him a sense of warmth: a wakening of dead time. . . . And for a moment present time fades out and the boy sits there staring blindly out at the dark earth that strokes forever past the train, and now he has the watch out and feels it in his hands. . . . And suddenly Ben is standing there before his vision, smoking, and scowls down through the window of the office at the boy. (Of Time and The River, pp.49-50)

All three of the time elements outlined in The Story of a Novel are present in the scene. Eugene is holding present time, or watch-time in his hands, and is being carried along by time and the train; the second kind of time, or the influence of the past is working upon him through memory, and the third time element, the "eternal and unchanging universe of time" (The Story of a Novel, p.52), is ever-present, both inside the train and beyond its windows.

Having exemplified the predicament of humanity caught in mortality, Wolfe summarizes the preceeding scene by inquiring rhetorically into the nature of time.

> What is this dream of time, this strange and bitter miracle of living? Is it the wind that drives the leaves down bare paths fleeing? Is it the storm-wild flight of furious days, the storm-swift passing of the million faces, all

lost, forgotten, vanished as a dream? Is it the wind that howls above the earth, is it the wind that drives all things before its lash, is it the wind that drives all men like dead ghosts fleeing? (Of Time and The River, p.52)

Eugene's memory of Ben, as a symbol of the brevity and loneliness of life, recurs throughout the book in the following theme: "Up on the mountain, down in the valley, deep, deep, in the hill, Ben -- cold, cold, cold." (Of Time and The River, p.53)

The scene on the train with the watch is also an example of Wolfe's preoccupation with moments of time that seem unimportant, and yet which are always remembered: "the 'little' things that persist so strangely, vividly, and inexplicably when the more sensational and 'important' events of life have been forgotten or obscured." (Of Time and The River, p.803) The moments themselves, above and beyond the things they signify, are often symbols of man's destiny. Of the ship that is to take Eugene back to America, Wolfe writes:

For if, as men be dying, they can pluck one moment from the darkness into which their sense is sinking, if one moment in all the dark and mysterious forest should then live, it might well be the memory of such a moment as this which, although lacking in logical meaning, burns for an instant in the dying memory as a summary and a symbol of man's destiny on earth. (Of Time and The River, p.908)

Often, when conscious of large crowds of people, Eugene hears the voice and the sound of time. He hears it in the railway station.

And caught up in the vaulting arches of those immense and grimy sheds he heard again the murmurous sound of time --

that sound remote and everlasting, distilled out of all the movement, frenzy, and unceasing fury of our unresting lives, and yet itself detached, as calm and imperturbable as the still sad music of humanity, and which, made up out of our million passing lives, is in itself as fixed and everlasting as eternity. (Of Time and The River, p.245)

He also hears it in late summer in New York, and again the sound of time is described as "murmurous" and "imperturbable."

Then -- in these nights of waning summer -- more than at any other season of the year, the immense and murmurous sound of time was audible. . . . And that voice of time, above the ugly clamor of that tormented life, was imperturbable; immense, remote and murmurous, it seemed to have resumed into itself all of the rumors of the earth, and to comprise, out of the bitter briefness of man's days, the essense of his own eternity, and to be itself eternal, fixed, and everlasting, no matter what men lived or died. (Of Time and The River, p.497)

The emphasis is always on the contrast between the domination of man's brief life by chance and change, and the eternity of flowing time.

In many places, Wolfe connects the word "dream" with time. Eugene's life often seems stranger than a dream. The word occurs when a dream of his childhood comes true, as when he visits Joel Pierce's estate, which at first fulfills the imaginings of his youth. It often describes the strangeness of the sudden mingling of the past with the present. In Orleans, Eugene lies in bed reading the newspaper accounts of the old Countess' exploits in America:

he lay in his sumptuous bed in the hotel, reading the clippings in the Countess' books -- those incredible explosions of Yankee journalese that this old woman had inspired in a thousand little towns across America -- brought back here, read here now, in the midnight stillness of this ancient town as the great cathedral bells thronged

through the air -- the miraculous weavings of dark chance and destiny, all near as his heart and further off than heaven, familiar as his life, and stranger than a dream. (Of Time and The River, p.821)

The past action has not always taken place in America. When Eugene sits for the first time at a cafe in Arles, he finds that,

the scene was strange and haunting as a dream, and yet it was instantly and intolerably familiar. It was, somehow, he thought, like a street he had been to in some small town in the hot South at the faded end of summer -- a South Carolina town, he thought it must be, and he was sure that he would hear the sound of familiar, unknown voices, the passing of feet, the rustling of quiet, tired leaves. (Of Time and The River, p.882)

Eugene then realizes that the scene is familiar because it was painted by Van Goth, and again he sees the influence of chance on his life. All the uses of the word "dream" connote the joining of a past experience to a present experience. The present is made richer by the past, and for a moment, the flow of time is stopped. The experiences of life are like a "dream" because they result from chance rather than plan, as images in a dream appear without effort on the part of the dreamer. The word also invokes a theme that was a part of Look Homeward, Angel; that all of mortal life is a dream, with reality found only before and after life, in eternity.

Wolfe's preoccupation with time and its passing appears clearly in the seventh section of Of Time and The River, subtitled "The Dream of Time." Here, Eugene lives for weeks, rather than moments, in a time-enchantment, because he is alone, and is not harrassed by the petty

annoyances of day-to-day living. He rises above present time and submerges himself in the past. During these weeks he is able to live without having to "sweat and love and suffer and enjoy as other men" (The Story of a Novel, p.25) and can plunge himself into the world of his writing.

> Day passed into night, night merged into day again like the unbroken weaving of a magic web, and he stayed on, week after week, plunged in a strange and legendary spell of time that seemed suspended and detached from the world of measurable event, fixed in unmoving moment, unsilent silence, changeless change. (Of Time and The River, p.856)

Wolfe develops the time-experience further. Eugene's sleeping, as well as his waking, hours become a part of the experience.

> In all the dreams and visions that now swarmed across his sleep, dreams and visions which can only be described as haunted fatally by the sense of time -- his mind seemed to exercise the same complete control it ever had shown in all the operations of its conscious memory. He slept, and knew he slept, and saw the whole vast structure of the sleeping world about him as he slept; he dreamed, and knew he dreamed, and like a sorcerer, drew upward at his will, out of dark deeps and blue immensities of sleep, the strange, dark fish of his imagining. (Of Time and The River, p.883)

Eugene tries to get everything remembered down on paper -- to escape from time by anchoring the past -- and his sleep becomes permeated by dreams of guilt and shame. Passages from The Story of a Novel illustrate that Wolfe himself experienced the same sort of dream:

> visions of a depthless shame, a faceless abomination of horror, an indefinable and impalpable corruption, returned to haunt his brain with their sentences of inexpiable guilt and ruin: under their evil spell he lay tranced upon his bed in a hypnosis of acquiescent horror. . . . (Of Time and The River, pp.884-885)

The guilt feeling is emphasized both by loneliness and the horrors of the weeks that Eugene had recently spent in Paris with Starwick and his companions. Eugene had become both aware of the differences between Starwick and himself and appalled by the possibility of his sinking into the lassitude that had ruined Starwick.

Finally, Wolfe indicates that Eugene's obsession with time is very close to madness.

> His life had passed into a state which, if not insane, was distinguished from insanity chiefly by a kind of quiescent understanding which surveyed the passage of time and his own actions with the powerless detachment of a spectator in a dream. . . . He had a blind consciousness that some central governance of his life and reason had been exploded, that he was spinning down out of control like a shattered airplane -- and that there was nothing he could do to save himself, that he could not get control again, that he could not 'get back.' (Of Time and The River, p.887)

Eugene has fallen into an "artistic vacuum," and Wolfe makes it clear in The Story of a Novel that this state is not desirable.

> There is no such thing as an artistic vacuum; there is no such thing as a time when the artist may work in a delightful atmosphere, free of agony that other men must know, or if the artist ever does find such a time, it is something not to be hoped for, something not to be sought for indefinitely. (The Story of a Novel, pp.25-26)

Wolfe is as concerned with the time of the past and tradition as he is with the present. In his essay, "Tradition and the Individual Talent," T.S. Eliot defines and discusses the importance of a sense of history for a writer.

> The historical sense involves a perception, not only of the pastness of the past, but of its presence; the historical sense compells a man to write not merely with

his own generation in his bones, but with a feeling that the whole of the literature of Europe from Homer and within it the whole of the literature of his own country has a simultaneous existence and composes a simultaneous order. This historical sense, which is a sense of the timeless as well as of the temporal and of the timeless and the temporal together, is what makes a writer traditional. And it is at the same time what makes a writer most acutely conscious of his place in time, of his own contemporaneity.[4]

The Eugene of Of Time and The River is as much the sum of all the moments he has not counted as was the Eugene of Look Homeward, Angel.

Wolfe often invokes the past through sound. In the paean that opens the seventh book, the thematic sentence that links the past to the present is, "Play us a tune on an unbroken spinet, and let the bells ring, let the bells ring!" (Of Time and The River, p.853) By means of sound, Eugene and the reader are transported to ancient Athens, Egypt, the Middle Ages, and early America. "By the waters of life, by time, by time, play us a tune on an unbroken spinet, and let us hear the actual voices of old fairs; let us move backward through our memories, and through the memory of the race, let us relive the million forgotten moments of our lives. . . ." (Of Time and The River, p.853) The actual sound of a bell in Europe often allows Eugene the instantaneous identification of moments of his past with moments of the present. "And now, with the sound of that old bell, everything around him burst into instant life. Although the structure of that life was foreign to

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[4]Selected Essays (New York, 1932), p.4.

him . . . everything instantly became incredibly living, near, and familiar, like something he had always known." (Of Time and The River, p.896)

Eugene's Faustian hunger involves a desire to understand the actions of the past in terms of the past. Not content merely to read about past events, he wants also to re-experience them as they were experienced; to have the knowledge of age while he is still young. Wolfe writes of Eugene and his Uncle Bascom,

> as the boy looked at the old man, he had a sense of union with the past. It seemed to him if he would only speak, the living past, the voices of lost men, the pain, the pride, the madness and despair, the million scenes and faces of the buried life -- all that an old man ever knew -- would be revealed to him, would be delivered to him like a priceless treasure, as an inheritance which old men owed to young, and which should be the end and effort of all living. His savage hunger was a kind of memory: he thought if he could speak, it would be fed. (Of Time and The River, p.146)

Uncle Bascom, like Eugene, is from the South, and the old man had lived through a period of turbulent change. Eugene's hunger for his uncle's experiences is the result of his desire to know both himself and his country. Eugene's memory is of his own personal history; he wants to possess the memories of other Americans in order to understand the meanings of his country's traditions.

For Wolfe, America was a land of dichotomy and change. In a letter to Maxwell Perkins, he expressed his belief that the earth of America affects its inhabitants, and therefore Americans are different from peoples of other lands. "300 years upon this earth, living alone minute by

minute in the wilderness, eating its food, growing its tobacco, being buried and mixed with it, gets into the blood, bone, marrow, sinew of the people. . . ." (The Letters of Thomas Wolfe, p.284) Although Americans have this heritage, they are for Wolfe, a nomadic and lonely race. The recurring theme that Wolfe uses to express wandering and loneliness is, "We are so lost, so lonely, so forsaken in America: immense and savage skies bend over us, and we have no door." (Of Time and The River, p.281) Wolfe reiterates the idea again and again, either in connection with specific characters, such as W.O. Gant, or in rhetorical passages. He asks,

> For what is it that we Americans are seeking always on this earth? Why is it we have crossed the stormy seas so many times alone, lain in a thousand alien rooms at night hearing the sounds of time, dark time, and thought until heart, brain, flesh and spirit were sick and weary with the thought of it; 'Where shall I go now? What shall I do?' (Of Time and The River, p.90)

He answers,

> it was just the cold and terrible loneliness of man, of every man, and of the lost American who has been brought forth naked under immense and lonely skies, to 'shift for himself;' to grope his way blindly through the confusion and brutal chaos of a life as naked and unsure as he, to wander blindly down across the continent, to hunt forever for a goal, a wall, a dwelling place of warmth and certitude, a light, a door. (Of Time and The River, p.254)

The dichotomy with which Americans are faced is the wide gap between the relatively uncivilised immensity and loneliness of the land, and the heritage of the struggles and strength of the early settlers. The significance of the land is too large to be grasped completely by one mind, and

Americans are confused and bewildered by the tiny pictures of life that their minds retain, as they search for certitude.

> But this was the reason why these things could never be forgotten -- because we are so lost, so naked and so lonely in America. Immense and cruel skies bend over us, and all of us are driven on forever and we have no home. Therefore, it is not the slow, the punctual sanded drip of the unnumbered days that we remember best, the ash of time; nor is it the huge monotone of the lost years, the unswerving schedules of the lost life and the well-known faces, that we remember best. It is a face seen once and lost forever in a crowd, an eye that looked, a face that smiled and vanished on a passing train, it is a prescience of snow upon a certain night, the laughter of a woman in a summer street long years ago, it is the memory of a single moon seen at the pine's dark edge in old October -- and all of our lives is written in the twisting of a leaf upon a bough, a door that opened, and a stone. For America has a thousand lights and weathers and we walk the streets, we walk the streets forever, we walk the streets of life alone. (Of Time and The River, p.155)

Wolfe finds the American's dislike of darkness and attraction to light significant. When Eugene and Luke are driving at night to Altamont, after Eugene has been in jail, Luke is drawn like a moth to the lights of the small towns, and Wolfe writes,

> For his spirit was afraid of solitude and darkness and, like all men in this land, his soul was drawn by the small hard blaze of incandescence -- even by those barren bulbous clusters of hard light upon the wintry midnight pavements of a little town -- which somehow pitifully and terribly suggest the fear and loneliness in men's souls, the small hard assurances of manufactured light which they have gathered as some beacon of comfort and security against a dark too vast and terrible, an earth too savage in its rudeness, space, and emptiness, for the spirit and the strength of men. (Of Time and The River, p.394)

From the American love of the "barren bulbous clusters of hard light" grows the immense mechanism of the city.

Wolfe says of Eugene in New York, "He hated it,

he loved it, he was instantly engulfed and overwhelmed by it." (Of Time and The River, p.412) Eugene finds the city both a golden legend and a brutal jungle. He comes to the city remembering his childhood dreams of success,

> And finally he brought to it the million memories of his fathers who were great men and knew the wilderness, but who had never lived in cities: three hundred of his blood and bone, who sowed their blood and sperm across the continent, walked beneath its broad and lonely lights, were frozen by its bitter cold, burned by the heat of its fierce suns, withered, gnarled, and broken by its savage weathers, and who fought like lions with its gigantic strength, its wildness, its limitless savagery and beauty, until with one stroke of its paw it broke their backs and killed them. (Of Time and The River, p.413)

Eugene's ancestors struggled with the earth, but left their mark upon it, and were able to go home to it when they died. The city-life, however, has all the frustrations of life upon the land, and none of its comforts. "Gigantic city, we have taken nothing -- not even a handful of your trampled dust -- we have made no image on your iron breast and left not even the print of a heel upon your stony-hearted pavements." (Of Time and The River, p.509) The youth of the city are deprived of individual growth; they all have gray faces, and wear machine-made clothes. The mass production inherent in civilization is opposed to the American Dream of the rights of the individual. In the section on the inhabitants of the Leopold Hotel, Wolfe ironically depicts the city as a home, and asks, "Why was no great vine growing from the hearts of all these old and dying people? Why were their flesh, their sagging, pouch-like jowls and faces, so dry, dead, and

juiceless, their weary old eyes so dull and lustreless, their tones so nasal, tedious and metallic?" (Of Time and The River, p.431) The people are rootless, thwarted, and frustrated.

Wolfe feels that although America cannot return to the past, she must grow from it, and his comments on the machine-age seem to indicate that a period of conscious adjustment and growth has been missed and that America has moved too quickly from the past to the present. Americans are cut off from Europe, yet originally came from Europe. They cannot accept the traditions of the old countries in their new and young land, but have not developed traditions of their own. When Eugene sees the workmen of Dijon peacefully going home to lunch, he is reminded of a kind of life in America that has gone.

> It was the life of twenty years ago in the quiet, leafy streets and little towns of lost America -- of an America that had been lost beneath the savage roar of its machinery, the brutal stupefaction of its days, the huge disease of its furious, ever-quickening and incurable unrest, its flood-tide horror of gray, driven faces, stolid eyes, starved, brutal nerves, and dull, dead flesh. The memory of the lost America -- the America of twenty years ago, of quiet streets, the time-enchanted spell and magic of full June, the solid, lonely, liquid shuffle of men in shirt-sleeves coming home, the leafy fragrance of the cooling turnip-greens, and screens that slammed, and sudden silence -- had long since died, had been drowned beneath the brutal flood-tide, the fierce stupefaction of that roaring surge and mechanic life which had succeeded it. (Of Time and The River, p.898)

Wolfe feels that the America of the past, which should have provided the roots for the present, has been allowed to wither away. The death of W.O. Gant from cancer is symbolic

of the death of past America. Gant, who had been vigorous and full of the joy of living, sinks into lassitude as the good cells of his body are slowly eaten away by the disease. In America, the influx of industry and mass-production has smothered the early ideals that were expressed in the constitution of the country.

The growth of America is, then, connected to the problem of tradition. Eugene in Europe is filled both with a continual longing for his own land and a desire to see if older countries have come to grips with their past more successfully. Life in England is "hauntingly familiar" to Eugene, through his reading of the great poets, but it is not his life, and as an American, he cannot feel at home among English traditions.

> Around Eugene was the whole structure of an enchanted life -- a life hauntingly familiar and just the way he had always known it would be -- and now that he was there, he had no way of getting into it. The inn itself was ancient, legendary, beautiful, elfin, like all the inns he had ever read about, and yet all of the cheer, the warmth, the joy and comfort he had dreamed of finding in an inn was lacking. (Of Time and The River, p.611)

Eugene feels that American tradition has not developed with America. The lawlessness and energies of the pioneers cannot be used as a basis for living in settled America, and the gap between the past and the present cannot be filled with a tradition borrowed from England or Europe.

Wolfe uses the Coulson episode to show many of the differences between the past and present of England and

America. The juxtaposition of Eugene and the Coulson family brings out a central paradox, in that Eugene as an American is searching for tradition, and Edith Coulson longs to escape from it. When Eugene is about to leave the family, Edith says,

> I hope you think of us sometime -- back here, buried, lost, in all the fog and rain and ruin of England. How good it must be to know that you are young in a young country -- where nothing that you did yesterday matters very much. How wonderful it must be to know that none of the failure of the past can pull you down -- that there will always be another day for you -- a new beginning. I wonder if you Americans will ever know how fortunate you are. . . . (Of Time and The River, p.650)

The pressures of English tradition have made the Coulson family resigned and fatalistic. They are not free to search for a meaning for their lives. Eugene does not understand why Edith cannot leave the past and begin again, and Edith is not aware of the problem of the traditionless American. The differences in the size, the structure and the past of the two countries, make communication impossible.

Wolfe often indicates that America's past is harder to grasp and understand than more remote eras.

> But there are times that are stranger yet, there are times that are stranger than the young knights and the horses, and the sounds of the eating taverns. The far time is the time of yesterday: it is the time of early America, it is the voices of the people on Broadway in 1841, it is the sounds of the streets in Des Moines in 1887, it is the engines of the early trains at Baltimore in 1853, it is the faces and voices of the early American people, who are lapped up in the wilderness who are hid from us, whose faces are in mystery, whose lives are more dark and strange than the lives of the Saxon thanes. (Of Time and The River, p.854)

There are many comments on the manners and mores

of Americans. The note-book section in "Jason's Voyage" examines various strands of the American way of life. Wolfe writes of New York,

> In New York books are plentiful and easy to get. The music and the theatre are the best in the world. The great trouble with New York is that one feels uncomfortable while enjoying these things -- In the daytime a man should be making money. The time to read is at night before one goes to bed. The time to hear music or go to the theatre is also at night. The time to look at a picture is on Sunday. (Of Time and The River, p.669)

These comments have a dual function. They express Eugene's opinions of life in America, and they also illustrate how Eugene prepared himself to write of America. The note-book section was apparently taken verbatim from Wolfe's own note-book, and so it also reflects Wolfe's preparations for writing.

Eugene makes many other comments and generalizations about America. In Europe, Eugene feels ashamed because he is spending money without having worked for it and extends his feeling of guilt to all Americans.

> It was something that went back almost past time and memory, that they had always had, that was distilled out of their blood, and drawn from the very air they breathed: -- a feeling that any life not based on gainful labour, any life devoted openly and nakedly to pleasure, idleness and leisure . . . was, somehow, an ignoble and shameful life. (Of Time and The River, pp.826-827)

The pressure on Americans to work is the result of their desire for a better life. When eating well-cooked French food, Eugene is "pierced again by the old hunger that haunts and hurts Americans -- the hunger for a better life -- an end of rawness, newness, sourness, distressful and exacerbated

misery. . . ." (Of Time and The River, p.894-895)

Wolfe also examines the role of the artist in America. Eugene as a writer-hero is the main illustration of the theme, and his changes and development carry it through the whole book. When Eugene is on the train going to Cambridge, he thinks of himself as a romantic outsider who must prove his worth to the Philistines of Altamont. "Thank God, I've got away at last. Now there's a new land, a new life, new people like myself who will see and know me as I am and value me -- and, by God, I'll show them! I'll show them, all right." (Of Time and The River, p.66)

At Harvard, he finds that he has escaped from provincialism only to be plunged into a group of super-aesthetes who are repelled by rather than attracted to America. Eugene is an idealist. He wants to know people who are attracted to America and to life in the same way that he is. Altamont was an isolated community, but Harvard, he finds, is equally isolated. Both communities are interested in their own little lives to the exclusion of the life of the country. The isolation of American communities is the result of the lack of tradition and direction in their lives. The artist, in trying to encompass the whole of America in his art, is filled with the same confusion. When Eugene has decided not to be a playwright, Wolfe assesses Eugene's early play Mannerhouse in terms of the artist in America.

Thus the play, with all its faults and limitations, really did illustrate, as few things else could do, the confused incertitude and the flashes of blind, but powerful intuition, which mark the artist's early life here in America, and for this reason chiefly the play was interesting. (Of Time and The River, p.549)

Wolfe said in The Story of a Novel, "I think I may say that I discovered America during these years abroad out of my very need of her. The huge gain of this discovery seemed to come directly from my sense of loss." (The Story of a Novel, pp.30-31) Once Eugene escapes from Altamont completely, and has turned away from the restrictions involved in the writing of plays, he is able to see how these ideas dominated him, even before going to Europe.

And as all the strength and passion of his life turned more and more away from its childhood thoughts of aerial flight and escape into some magic and unvisited domain, it seemed to him that the magic and unvisited domain was the earth itself, and all the life around him -- that he must escape not out of life, but into it, looking through walls he had never seen before. . . . (Of Time and The River, p.389)

In France, with the perspective of distance, Eugene becomes soberly aware of the difficulties involved in escaping into American life.

And far, far away from all this certain grace, this ease of form, this assured attaining of expression -- there lay America -- and all the dumb hunger of its hundred million tongues, its unfound forms, its unborn art. Far, far away from this enchanted legend of a city -- there lay America and the brutal stupefaction of its million streets, its unquiet heart, its vast incertitude, the huge sprawled welter of its life -- its formless and illimitable distances. (Of Time and The River, p.660)

America is far from Europe in time as well as distance. The river of time carries America further and further away from the traditions of Europe, and also from the beginnings of the country itself. Eugene is trying to capture the essence of America through creativity. He, as an American, wants to establish his roots both within the time and place of America, and also outside time and place in permanence. Eugene, then, is a symbol of America, because the nation needs to strike its roots and rediscover its ideals in the same way.

Wolfe himself describes in many letters the difficulties that he encountered in trying to encompass the whole of America in his art. Just after the publication of Of Time and The River, he wrote to Maxwell Perkins,

> Why should the artist -- who is life's strongest man, earth's greatest hero -- have to endure this in America of all the countries of the earth, when his task alone is so cruel hard there: the need for a new language, the creation of a new form so stern and formidable? Why should he have to do this great work, and at the same time withstand the murderous attack of death-in-life when in every country in Europe the artist is honoured, revered, and cherished as the proudest possession that a nation has? (The Letters of Thomas Wolfe, pp.448-449)

Eugene's conflict with the immensity of America, and his desire to digest it completely is, of course, part of his Faustian hunger. Although Esther provides an end to Eugene's search for his father or completeness, there is no indication in this book, that Eugene as an artist has stopped trying to write everything down, and has started being selective in his presentation.

The concept of "death-in-life" is an important one in Of Time and The River. Wolfe uses the term to describe people who lack the courage to search for a "father," or their own ideals, or who have not had the opportunity to develop individualism. Dr. McGuire defines the term "death-in-life" for Helen, when the death of Gant is imminent:

> it's not the death of the dying that is terrible, it is the death of the living. And we always die that death for the same reason: -- because our father dies, and takes from us his own life, his world, his time -- and we haven't courage enough to make a new life, a new world for ourselves. . . . When the father goes, the whole structure of the family life goes with him -- and unless his children have the will, the stuff, the courage to make something of their own, they die, too. (Of Time and The River, p,215)

The youth of the city have never known the meaning of youth. There is no hope or idealism in them.

> Where were the songs of youth upon those city streets? Where the laughter, the wild spontaneous mirth, the passion, warmth and golden poetry of youth? Where was the great boy Jason looking for brothers in the fellowship of that inspired adventure of man's youth -- the proud deathless image of what all of us desire when young, where was it? . . . It was not there. Poor, sallow, dark, swarthy creatures that they were, with rasping tongues, loose mouths and ugly jeering eyes, this infamous band of youth was death-in-life itself. (Of Time and The River, p.498)

Although the Coulson family are buried in the traditions of England, for Wolfe, they represent the opposite of the "death-in-life" people. Something in their past has ruined their present and future, and yet Eugene is drawn by the magnet of their vitality. Wolfe generalizes,

> The ruined people that we like are those who desperately have died, and lost their lives because they loved life

dearly, and had that grandeur that makes such people spend prodigally the thing they love the best, and risk and lose their lives because life is so precious to them. . . . It is only the people that love life who die in this way -- and these are the ruined people that we like. (Of Time and the River, p.623)

The "death-in-life" people do not use their lives at all; the Coulsons are ruined because they have used their lives too much.

As Malcolm Cowley points out in his article "Thomas Wolfe,"[5] Wolfe's unit of construction is the episode. Many of the episodes in Of Time and The River were published separately as short novels in Scribner's Magazine. The link that joins the episodes is Eugene Gant, and the only one in which he is neither the protagonist nor a spectator is that of the death of his father, W.O. Gant. Maxwell Perkins wrote of this episode,

The principle that I was working on was that this book . . . got its unity and its form through the senses of Eugene, and I remember how, if I had had my way, we should, by sticking to that principle, have lost one of the most wonderful episodes Wolfe ever wrote -- the death of Gant. One night we agreed that certain transitions should be written in, but instead of doing them Wolfe brought on the next night some five thousand words about Eugene's sister in Asheville when her father was ill, and a doctor there and a nurse. I said, 'Tom, this is all outside the story, and you know it. Eugene was not there, he was in Cambridge; all of this was outside his perception and knowledge at the time.' Tom agreed with me, but the next night, he brought me another five thousand words or so which got up into the death of Gant. And then I realised I was wrong, even if right in theory. What he was doing was too good to let any rule of form impede him.[6]

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[5]C. Hugh Holman, ed., The World of Thomas Wolfe (New York, 1962), p.170.

[6]"Thomas Wolfe," Look Homeward Angel (New York, 1929), p.xii.

The narrative of Wolfe's episodes is often broken by poetic chants which come from an impersonal voice, rather than directly from a character, or from the author. Wolfe said of Of Time and The River,

> Through it all is poetry -- the enormous rivers of the nation drinking the earth away at night, the vast rich stammer of night time in America, the lights, the smells, the thunder of the train -- the savage summers, the fierce winters, the floods, the blizzards -- all, all! And finally the great soft galloping of the horses of sleep! (The Letters of Thomas Wolfe, p.236)

Within the longer sections of the book, particularly in "Young Faustus" and "Proteus: The City," where a large number of characters are involved, Wolfe juxtaposes scenes without transition, using the Joycean technique of montage. In "Young Faustus," chapters nine to thirteen deal alternately with the suave Professor Hatcher and his playwriting course, and the history and descriptions of Uncle Bascom, and in "Proteus: The City," the differences among Robert Weaver, Abe Jones, and Joel Pierce are shown in the same way.

The characters themselves often illuminate each other. In the first section, Mr. Flood, the owner of an Altamont newspaper, reminisces about Ben, and then in the second section, when the image of Ben returns to Eugene in memory, Ben speaks of and to Mr. Flood. By weaving the past and the present together, Wolfe keeps his concepts of time continually in the foreground.

Wolfe employs another method of handling time in

the fourteenth chapter of "Young Faustus." The second half of the chapter consists of a poetic chant on time and America, which is sprinkled with italicised facts, memories, and expectations, recorded in the first person singular. Wolfe alternates the impersonal voice with the personal, and contrasts not only the past and the present but also the universal and the particular.

Wolfe often repeats lines and images from the great poets to describe events and themes in his own books. Sometimes the lines recur again and again in the same general situation. When old men die deaths accompanied by the loss of blood, Wolfe almost invariably includes a close paraphrase of Lady MacBeth's comment on the death of Duncan, "Yet who would have thought the old man to have had so much blood in him?"[7] Wolfe uses the image twice in Of Time and The River, and at least twice in his other writings. Each entrance carries with it not only the memory of the other places the sentence is found in Wolfe's works, but also an aura of the times and traditions of Shakespeare. When Gant dies, "it was unbelievable that an old cancer-riddled spectre of a man should have so much blood in him" (Of Time and The River, p.239) and when Mr. Upshaw collapses, "it was incredible that such fountains of bright blood should pour out of this withered squirrel of a man." (Of Time and The River, p.490)

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[7]MacBeth, V.i.41-42.

Wolfe insists that the traditions of Europe cannot be applied to America. He uses lines from the poets both to show that America is a young country, and must grow from her own roots, and also to point out that the basic adventures of life are universal. The differences in the size, character, and past of England and America are illustrated by a slightly changed version of the refrain found in Spenser's Prothalamion, and also in the third part of T.S. Eliot's The Waste Land.

> By the waters of life, by time, by time: the names of the mighty rivers, the alluvial gluts, the drains of the continent, the throats that drink America (Sweet Thames, flow gently till I end my song). . . . Where, sons of men, and in what other land will you find others like them, and where can you match the mighty music of their names? -- The Monongahela, the Colorado, the Rio Grande, the Columbia, the Tennessee, the Hudson (Sweet Thames!). . . . (Of Time and The River, p.868)

To describe the universality of death, Wolfe applies parts of Ariel's song from The Tempest to "old man Lype." "Delicately they dive for Greeks before the railway station: the canoe glides gently through the portals of the waiting room (for whites). Full fathom five the carcass of old man Lype is lying (of his bones is coral made) and delicately they dive for lunch-room Greeks before the railway station." (Of Time and The River, p.869)

As in Look Homeward, Angel, Wolfe often identifies characters by tags. Two of the most noticeable tags in Of Time and The River are those applied to Joel Pierce and Frank Starwick. When Joel Pierce speaks, he almost always

"whispers." Joel's art is not an outlet for the energy of his life, but merely a method of escape, without any real love of creativity. Joel realises that he can never be anything but a member of the Pierce family, and Wolfe shows that any struggle that he may make towards independence and individuality, is just a "whisper."

> Once in a field before them they saw a tree dense-leaved and burnished by hot light: the sun shone on its leaves with a naked and un-green opacity, and Joel, looking towards it, whispered thoughtfully: '. . . Hm . . . It's nice, that -- I mean the way the light falls on it -- It would be hard to paint: I'd like to come out here and try it.' (Of Time and The River, p.568)

In the same way, the phrase "in a womanish voice" characterizes Frank Starwick. Eugene's friendship with Starwick, particularly in Paris, is an aberration and the break between them is finally made because of Eugene's discovery of Starwick's homosexuality. Like Joel, but for different reasons, Starwick has the desire but not the ability to throw his life into creativity. Frank says to Eugene in Paris, "One does not come here because he wants to know the French: he comes because he can find here the most pleasant, graceful and civilized life on earth." Eugene answers, "Yes, but there are other things that may be more important than leading a graceful and pleasant life. . . . Getting your work done is one of them." (Of Time and The River, p.708) Eugene both likes and dislikes Starwick, and the dichotomy can be summarized by words in one of Wolfe's own letters. "Something in me wants to get

up and see places, the country is full of incredibly beautiful places, but also something says 'stay here and work.' That, in a way, is what my book is about." (The Letters of Thomas Wolfe, p.241)

Although Eugene in Paris unwillingly agrees with some of Starwick's estimates of America, when he has reached "Earth Again," he sees once more that because he is an American, his art must grow from America. In Paris, Starwick was fond of parodying American place-names. "'Ya-a-ancy County' -- with deliberate malice he brought the word out in a rasping countrified tone -- 'God!' he said frankly, turning to the other boy, 'isn't it awful! . . . How harsh! How stupid! How banal!'" (Of Time and The River, p.699) Over two hundred pages later in Of Time and The River, the name "Yancy County" appears in one of Wolfe's chants on America as part of, "the thunder of imperial names, the names of men and battles, the names of places and great rivers, the mighty names of the States." (Of Time and The River, p.866)

Wolfe often hints at things that are to come, both for Eugene and for other characters. The death of Starwick, which is briefly mentioned in You Can't Go Home Again, is hinted at early in Of Time and The River. In describing the coming of fury, Wolfe speaks from his own point of view, and looking back over his life, and that of Eugene says, "you came to us with music, poetry, and wild

joy when we were twenty, when we reeled home at night through the old moon-whitened streets of Boston and heard our friend, our comrade, and our dead companion, shout through the silence of the moonwhite square: 'You are a poet and the world is yours.'" (Of Time and The River, p.282) The words "our dead companion" refer to Starwick in terms of Eugene, and to Kenneth Raisbeck in terms of Wolfe's own life.

When Eugene is trying to express himself by writing plays at Harvard, Wolfe points out that the medium is not the right one for Eugene, and that every youth at first mistakes artificiality for reality.

> And the stuff of life was there in all its overwhelming richness, was right there in his grasp, but he could not see it, and would not use it. Instead he went snooping and prowling around the sterile old brothels of the stage, mistaking the glib concoctions of a counterfeit emotion for the very flesh and figure of reality. And this also has been true of every youth that ever walked the earth. (Of Time and The River, p.360)

Wolfe himself, in writing of the "stuff of life" at Harvard, is fulfilling the promise that he hints at for Eugene.

Many other images and phrases are repeated throughout the book. In at least four places, Wolfe associates the faces of a crowd with petals, or flowers, the most frequent wording being "the empetalled faces." (Of Time and The River, p.202) Another favourite image, often used in Wolfe's other books, is the following -- "now it is almost dawn, a horse has turned into a street and in America, there is the sound of wheels, the lonely clop-clop

of the hooves upon deserted pavements, silence, then the banging clatter of a can." (Of Time and The River, p.860) Connected with Eugene in this book, and with George Webber in The Web and The Rock, is the picture of "the mark of a young man's fist in crumbling plaster. . . ." (Of Time and The River, p.509) In Of Time and The River, the theme, "dark Helen in our hearts forever burning" (Of Time and The River, p.281) appears in connection with New England, whereas in You Can't Go Home Again, it represents Germany. In both uses, the theme is a poetic expression of the goal or spiritual home for which Eugene yearns.

Many of the important themes of Look Homeward, Angel appear in Of Time and The River, and are particularly noticeable in the scenes laid in Altamont. The theme of the buried life is most evident in chapters thirty-two and thirty-three, which deal with the death of Gant. In a dream, Gant goes back to the time and setting of his youth. He talks to the half-wit brother of a friend, and then goes on down a road. A child with golden hair is there, and Gant asks the way. The child does not reply, and Gant realises that, "someone was there in the wood before him. He heard footsteps on the path, and saw a footprint in the earth, and turning took the path where the footprint was, and where it seemed he could hear someone walking." (Of Time and The River, p.260) Wolfe seems to be following the Wordsworthian doctrine of "The Child is father of the Man"[7] but the child does not show Gant the

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[7]My Heart Leaps Up When I Behold.7.

way, and there is another "someone" in the wood.

In the next chapter, Gant is awake and retells the story by describing an incident in his childhood. He and his brother had been sent to bring their father home, but the father had been drinking, and lost the way. When Gant's mother scolded Gant he answered, "Well, Mother, I thought it would be all right. I kept steppin' where he stepped, I thought he knew the way." (Of Time and The River, p.264) For Wolfe, human fathers lose the way because they are so far from childhood, and as their children follow them in time, they too lose their way. Throughout this episode, mortal time is ticking past, and is constantly present in the shape of a clock, which the father is bringing home to pacify his wife.

Finally, when Gant is at the point of death but still conscious, the child of the dream reappears:

> the child -- or someone in the house was speaking, calling to him; he heard great footsteps, soft but thunderous, imminent, yet immensely far, a voice well-known, never heard before. He called to it, and then it seemed to answer him; he called to it with faith and joy to give him rescue, strength, and life, and it answered him and told him that all the error, old age, pain and grief of life was nothing but an evil dream; that he who had been lost was found again, that his youth would be restored to him and that he would never die, and that he would find again the path he had not taken long ago in a dark wood. (Of Time and The River, p.268)

Although there are overtones of Wordsworth all through these scenes, Wolfe does not explicitly commit himself to the doctrine of pre-existence any more than he does in Look Homeward, Angel. He mentions "someone," and Gant is

aware of "Something immensely bright and beautiful . . . converging in a flare of light" (Of Time and The River, p.267), but at the actual moment of death, although he has called, "'Here, Father, here!'" and heard a strong voice answer him, "'My son!'" (Of Time and The River, p.268) his brain fades into "night" rather than the light that one would expect. The whole episode of Gant's death seems to be a loose transposition of the fantasy with which Wolfe at first intended to end Of Time and The River. The proposed fantasy was described in a letter to Maxwell Perkins. Wolfe wrote,

> it is the only fabulous scene in the book. He [the hero] never sees his father but he hears the sound of his foot, the thunder of horses on a beach (Poseidon and his horses); the moon dives out of clouds; he sees a print of a foot that can belong only to his father since it is like his own; the sea surges across the beach and erases the print; he cries out 'Father' and from the sea far out, and faint upon the wind, a great voice answers 'My Son!' (The Letters of Thomas Wolfe, p.280)

Gant had been searching all his life for certitude, and his son searches for finality, or a father, in the same way. Eugene's other dominating characteristic is inherited from Eliza: "the reason he read all the books was not, as they all thought, because he was a bookish person, for he was not, but for the same reason that his mother was mad about property -- talked, thought, felt, and dreamed about real estate all the time, and wanted to own the earth just as he wanted to devour it." (Of Time and The River, p.359)

The longing of individuals for communication is present in Of Time and The River, as it was in Look Homeward, Angel. In Of Time and The River, Helen thinks to herself in bed, "why is it that all our efforts to know people in this world lead only to greater ignorance and confusion than before? We get together and talk, and say we think and feel and believe in such a way, and yet what we really think and feel and believe we never say at all." (Of Time and The River, p.228)

Wolfe himself tries to communicate to the reader by bringing as much as he can into his writing. In the first paragraph of chapter one hundred, voices from his past speak to Eugene -- a friend, his mother, his father, and Ben. They mention episodes that are found in Wolfe's other writings, and thus achieve a composite significance beyond the scope of one book.

The last phrase of Of Time and The River is "and the ship is given to darkness and the sea." (Of Time and The River, p.912) Eugene is returning to America, and the promise of the prose-poem opening the book has been fulfilled. "Immortal love, alone and aching in the wilderness, we cried to you: You were not absent from our loneliness."

CHAPTER III

THE WEB AND THE ROCK

The Web and The Rock is the first of Thomas Wolfe's two novels that were published posthumously. After Wolfe's death in 1938, Edward Aswell of Harper's, as his editor, put together from the great bulk of manuscript that remained, The Web and The Rock, You Can't Go Home Again, and The Hills Beyond, which contains short stories and part of an unfinished novel.

In "A Note on Thomas Wolfe," appended to The Hills Beyond, Aswell tells of his difficulties in producing the books from the manuscript. He says that Wolfe "spoke of the work he had most recently been doing, and referred throughout to 'the book,' by which he meant the whole manuscript from which the three posthumous volumes were later taken."[1] Aswell also states,

> Tom had thought and worked his way along to the end of You Can't Go Home Again. Whether he saw that as a separate volume I cannot say. He really thought of the entire George Webber story as 'The Web and The Rock,' with the different parts of it carrying their own subheadings. The first subheading was 'The Hills Beyond,' another repeated the general title, the last was 'You Can't Go Home Again.' How the manuscript would have to be divided for publishing convenience and necessity he did not know, nor greatly care. ("A Note on Thomas Wolfe," pp.374-375)

Wolfe had at first wanted the section called "The Hills Beyond" to provide George Webber with ancestral background. His interest in the tales of the ancient Joyners increased

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[1]Edward C. Aswell, "A Note on Thomas Wolfe," The Hills Beyond (New York, 1941), p.359. Subsequent references will be to this edition.

until he thought of the section as a book in itself, and although it was incomplete at the time of his death, it was published as a fragment in the volume of that name.

Aswell had not only to organize the material left by Wolfe into publishable form, but also to provide transitional sections in the text of the books.

> There were . . . large gaps here and there in the continuity of the text of both The Web and The Rock and You Can't Go Home Again. Some of the material that was meant to fill in these gaps had been partially written but left incomplete and unusable. Some of the gaps were bridged by sketchy notes. Others were not bridged at all and were just blanks. Tom had told me what was to go in most of these blanks. . . . But in both books the gaps remained and somehow had to be filled to provide continuity. So I wrote a few paragraphs as best I could to serve this purpose, drawing upon Tom's own words whenever they were available, and these passages were printed in italics and set on pages by themselves in order to distinguish them from Tom's own text. ("A Note on Thomas Wolfe," p.375)

The fundamental difficulty in treating The Web and The Rock as a unified work of art is the distinct separateness of its halves. As Aswell points out,

> Tom wanted another year to rewrite the second half of it -- the love story -- and it is a great pity that he was not able to do it. . . . It falls into two separate halves which do not join. Also the halves are written in different styles. The reason is that the two sections were written years apart. The first half, down to the point where the love story begins, is much more objective and restrained. It represents Wolfe's later writing, after his attitudes had changed. Having abandoned Eugene Gant, he went back and re-created a new childhood for George Webber, working in the things he had forgotten when he wrote Look Homeward, Angel, as well as a few of the things that had been cut from that book. ("A Note on Thomas Wolfe," p.374)

Wolfe describes the change in attitude evident in the first half of The Web and The Rock in many letters. He wrote to Aswell,

As you know, like many other young men, I began life as a lyric writer. I am no longer a very young man -- I am thirty-seven years old -- and I must tell you that my vision of life has changed since I began to write about ten years ago, and that I shall never again write the kind of book that I wrote then. Like other men, I began to write with an intense and passionate concern with the designs and purposes of my own youth; and like many other men, that preoccupation has now changed to an intense and passionate concern with the designs and purposes of life. (The Letters of Thomas Wolfe, p.700)

To Fred B. Millet he wrote, "as I have grown older and a little more experienced and, I hope, a great deal more aware of my purpose, of my materials and of the work I want to do, I think my interests have turned more and more from the person who is writing the book to the book the person is writing." (The Letters of Thomas Wolfe, p.630)

The whole of the second half of The Web and The Rock was first intended to form the final episode of Of Time and The River, and so was written before his attitudes changed. Wolfe tells in The Story of A Novel why this section was not included in Of Time and The River. He describes the cyclical movements of the story intended to form Of Time and The River as follows.

The first of these was a movement which described the period of wandering and hunger in man's youth. The second cycle described the period of greater certitude, and was dominated by the unity of a single passion. It was obvious, therefore, that what we had in the two cyclic movements of this book was really the material of two completely different chronicles, and although the second of the two was by far the more finished, the first cycle, of course, was the one which logically we ought to complete and publish first, and we decided on this course. (The Story of A Novel, p.77)

"We" refers to Maxwell Perkins and Wolfe. Perkins was much more responsible for the final form of Of Time and The River

than he was for that of Look Homeward, Angel, but it is difficult to assess the exact extent of his influence on Wolfe. If the love affair had been included in the chronicle of Of Time and The River, the length of the novel would probably have necessitated publication in separate volumes anyway.

Once the decision had been made not to include the love story in Of Time and The River, Wolfe then intended to publish it as a separate unit.

> It was then intended as the book to follow Of Time and The River and was so announced under the title of 'The October Fair.' When Eugene Gant was dropped, this plan had to be changed. Tom had never been satisfied with the love story anyhow and had long intended to rewrite it. He kept putting it off though, so in the end it was never redone. Tom did go through it and make certain changes in it, and some small portions of it were rewritten. ("A Note on Thomas Wolfe," p.374)

When Wolfe began to think in terms of George Webber rather than of Eugene Gant, the love story no longer seemed important enough to warrant separate publication.

> I no longer wish to write a whole book about a woman and a man in love, and about youth and the city, because it now seems to me that these things, while important, are subordinate to the whole plan of the book I have in mind. In other words, being young and in love and in the city now seem to me to be only a part of the whole experience of apprenticeship and discovery of which I am talking. They are also a part of the knowledge that you can't go home again. (The Letters of Thomas Wolfe, p.713)

The change from Eugene Gant to George Webber is very important in terms of Wolfe's artistic development. Maxwell Perkins felt that the character change was made partly because of criticisms that Wolfe could not function alone as a writer, and also because of his turning to

another publisher,

> No writer could possibly tolerate the assumption, which perhaps Tom almost himself did, that he was dependent as a writer upon anyone else. He had to prove to himself and to the world that this was not so. And that was the fundamental reason that he turned to another publisher. If he had not -- but by the time he did it was plain that he had to tell, in the medium of fiction and through the transmutation of his amazing imagination, the story of his own life -- he never would have broken his own great plan by distorting Eugene Gant into George Webber. That was a horrible mistake. ("Thomas Wolfe," pp.xii-xiii)

Although Perkins thought that it was "a horrible mistake" the alteration was made.

Edward Aswell gives three more reasons for the character change.

> First, as Wolfe said, he had . . . caused his family embarrassment and pain by identifying them too closely with the Gants, and he did not want to subject them to further embarrassment of the same kind. Second, there were many important things about his childhood that he had forgotten to say in Look Homeward, Angel, and the only way to say them was in terms of a new character. Finally, he had gradually evolved a more objective attitude toward himself and his work: as he put it, he had stopped being Eugene Gant. ("A Note on Thomas Wolfe," p.370)

Wolfe himself had definite reasons for the creation of George Webber. For Wolfe, the life of Eugene Gant had been one of self-justification in the face of the world, and he wanted George Webber to represent objective discovery of the world. He wrote,

> it is first of all vitally important to the success of this book that there be no trace of Eugene Gant-i-ness in the character of the protagonist; and since there is no longer a trace of Eugene Gant-i-ness in the mind and spirit of the creator, the problem should be a technical one rather than a spiritual or emotional one. In other words, this is a book about discovery, and not about self-justification; it hopes to describe the pattern that the life of Everyman must, in general, take in its process of discovery; and

although the protagonist should be, in his own right, an interesting person, his significance lies not in his personal uniqueness and differences, but in his personal identity to the life of every man. The book is a book of discovery, hence union with life; not a book of personal revolt, hence separation from life. (The Letters of Thomas Wolfe, p.714)

George Webber is similar to Eugene Gant for both are physically different from the rest of mankind. Wolfe wanted George, not to be the physical duplication of himself, as Eugene Gant had been, but to be different enough to enable Wolfe to recreate his own impressions of the world as an outsider. For Wolfe,

the really important thing -- the truly autobiographical thing -- was the fact of physical variation: to create a figure who would illustrate that variation and all the great human experience that attends it. . . . The figure may seem at first a little grotesque -- it will quickly become apparent he is not so at all, he is only a little off the usual scale. (The Letters of Thomas Wolfe, p.716)

As Aswell says,

Tom wanted George to have a certain spiritual affinity with himself without being exactly like him in physical characteristics. Tom was a six-foot-six man in a five-foot-eight world, and he always said that this fact not only created obvious difficulties of adjustment for him but also gave him a sharpened perception for viewing the so-called normal standards of the average man. He wanted to endow George Webber with the same qualities. Eugene Gant had been six feet six, so George had to be different. Tom therefore gave him a slightly misshapen body, just enough off scale to remove him from the normal and average without making him grotesque. ("A Note on Thomas Wolfe," pp.377-378)

The change in the physical characteristics of Wolfe's protagonist came about gradually, and his letters reveal that he was contemplating the change as early as 1930. The Eugene Gant of Of Time and The River was first called David Hawke, and David was the same shape as the

later hero, George Webber:

> in making the character of David, I have made him out of the inside of me, of what I have always believed the inside was like: he is about five feet nine, with the long arms and the prowl of an ape, and a little angel in his face. He is part beast, part spirit -- a mixture of the ape and the angel. (The Letters of Thomas Wolfe, p.245)

Wolfe wanted the life of his protagonist to represent that of an innocent man who is not prepared for realities. To emphasize this idea, George Webber was first called Joe Doaks. Wolfe wrote, "it is a kind of modern fable or legend, and . . . it sets forth the chronicle of a kind of modern Gulliver -- an American Gulliver -- someone, let us say, that in our own special time and phrase we might call Joe Doaks." (The Letters of Thomas Wolfe, p.630) The name is retained in The Web and The Rock in the chapter "The Philanthropists," which tells the story of the machinations of the publishing firm of "Wright and Rawng."

In a letter to Heinz Ledig, Wolfe gave the purpose and summarized the basic ideas of The Web and The Rock:

> it is by far the most objective book I have ever written, although of course, like anything that is any good, it comes right out of my own experience, from everything I may have learned or found out during the course of my life. If I succeed in it, I want it to be a kind of tremendous fable, a kind of legend composed of all the materials of experience. The general idea . . . is the idea that so many of the great men of the past, each in his own way, has used as the fundamental idea of his book. That idea as I conceive it is the story of a good man abroad in the world -- shall we say the naturally innocent man, the man who sets out in life with his own vision of what life is going to be like, what men and women are going to be like, what he is going to find, and then the story of what he really finds. (The Letters of Thomas Wolfe, p.526)

Wolfe also wanted the book to contain, "from first to last,

a strong element of satiric exaggeration: not only because it belongs to the nature of the story -- 'the innocent man' discovering life -- but because satiric exaggeration also belongs to the nature of life, and particularly American life." (Author's introductory note to The Web and The Rock)

Wolfe uses many symbols to suggest George's discovery of life. In Of Time and The River such symbols as "the river" were explained and re-explained by lengthy rhetorical passages. There is much less rhetoric in The Web and The Rock, and its absence is particularly noticeable in the first half of the book. Wolfe's symbols now stand alone, without rhetorical interpretation. The words of the title provide the two fundamental symbols of the book, and their contrast underlines all the contrasts developed from them.

The "web," in general, is a symbol of life and change. It amplifies both George's life, and also the life that he sees around him. George's last name is "Webber"; he, being alive, is caught in the web of life. In the chapter "Three O'Clock," George, aged twelve, rejoices in "the way things are."

> George Webber had good eyes, a sound body, he was twelve years old. He had a wonderful nose, a marvellous sense of smell, nothing fooled him. He lay there in the grass before his uncle's house, thinking: 'This is the way things are. Here is the grass, so green and coarse, so sweet and delicate, but with some brown rubble in it. There are the houses along the street, the concrete blocks of walls, somehow so dreary, ugly, yet familiar, the slate roofs and the shingles, the lawns, the hedges and the gables, the

> backyards with their accidental structures of so many little and familiar things as hen houses, barns. All common and familiar as my breath, all accidental as the strings of blind chance, yet all somehow fore-ordered as a destiny: the way they are, because they are the way they are![2]

George at this point is young, has good eyes, and is not confused by the many facets of life that he sees around him. Violence and bloodshed may erupt suddenly, but they also disappear quickly. The people and parts of the town are for George either good or bad. The people he likes are the strong and simple people who are full of the earth and the sun, such as Nebraska Crane and Randy Shepperton. Those he dislikes come from the west side of the town. "They were unwholesome roisterers, they did not move ahead in comradeship, but scampered lewdly, raggedly around, as raucous, hoarse, and mirthless as a gob of phlegm. . . ." (The Web and The Rock, p.34) He also dislikes the whole world of the poor. George, at twelve years, can fit life into neat compartments, but when he is older, he becomes aware that loved and familiar things or faces can be neither neatly defined nor captured "as they are." "And then he saw that this was true of all the people he had known best and loved the most: when he tried to remember how they looked he could see not one look but a thousand looks, not one face but a swarming web of faces." (The Web and The Rock, p.624) The web of life grows with the

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[2]Thomas Wolfe, The Web and The Rock (New York, 1939), p.18. Subsequent references will be to this edition.

passing of time, and as George approaches maturity, he becomes more and more aware both of passing time and the ever-growing complexity of experience.

Other webs are superimposed on the fundamental web of life. Wolfe says of an Italian proprietor of a speakeasy during Prohibition,

> It was all so different from the way he thought it would turn out -- so different from the life he had thought he would have. It was, in some ways, so much better; it was, wearily and sadly, so much worse -- the dense enmeshment of that tangled scheme, the dark, unhappy weavings of the ugly web, the complications of this world of crime. . . . (The Web and The Rock, p.353)

The Italian, who appears only for a few pages, underlines the story of George, because he too finds in life not what he expected or wanted to find. The Italian has come to the city from another country; George has come to it from the South. The Italian has found himself enmeshed in a web that he did not foresee - that of crime; George will find himself caught in the toils of the city and of love. The Italian is now "a sad and gentle man with weary eyes" (The Web and The Rock, p.353), while George will manage to escape.

Esther is also caught in a web. George muses, "And the truth was simply that she was a woman, and that her way, like everyone's, had been a vexed and most uncertain one, and that, like everyone in that great homeycomb, she, too, was caught up in a web. . . ." (The Web and The Rock, p.403) This web is composed of the infinite variety of the city itself.

The webs of crime and of the city were there to be found when George arrived, but the web of love is stronger because both George and Esther are involved in its manufacture. "He wove the web like a terrific spider until two earths, two lives, two destinies as far and separate as any under sun [sic] could be, were woven to their jointure by the dark miracle of chance." (The Web and The Rock, p.583) This web is then proportionally harder to escape than the others.

The rock symbol is not connected to the "stone" of Look Homeward, Angel and Of Time and The River. In The Web and The Rock, if the web is life and change, the rock is the city and permanence. As in Of Time and The River, the city is permanent only in that it is always changing, and so in a sense is beyond change. In the chapter entitled "The Rock,"

> George Webber was not long in finding out that perhaps it is just here, in the iron-breasted city, that one comes closest to the enigme that haunts and curses the whole land. The city is the place where men are constantly seeking to find their door and where they are doomed to wandering forever. Of no place is this more true than of New York. Hideously ugly for the most part, one yet remembers it as a place of proud and passionate beauty; the place of everlasting hunger, it is also the place where men feel their lives will gloriously be fulfilled and their hunger fed. (The Web and The Rock, p.229)

Esther symbolizes the rock of the city that George had dreamed of and hoped to find, and his affair with Esther, with its series of attractions and repulsions, can be seen as a microcosm of his battle with the city. Esther, like the city, has many facets. The city is the dwelling place

of rich and poor, workers and idlers, honest men and thieves. George finds that Esther, also, can live with opposites.

> The truth was . . . that the better part of her was loyal to the better part of life, but her loyalties, like everyone's, were mixed, and in this twin allegiance was the wrong. On one side was the worldly society and the duty it imposed, the responsibility it demanded, the obligations it entailed. And on the other side there was the world of work, and of creating, the world of friendship, aspirations, and the heart's true faith. (The Web and The Rock, p.403)

In the first half of The Web and The Rock, George grows up, goes to college, and finally to New York, where at first he lives with other young men and then alone. Wolfe shows the multiplicity of what George sees as he grows by a series of contrasts and symbols developed, for the most part, from those of the title.

In Book One, "The Web and The Root," the principal contrast is between the respective backgrounds of George's mother and father. The name "Joyner," like "Webber," is symbolic. George Webber weaves a web around himself, but the Joyners, being joined to the earth, are never conscious of webs. As Wolfe wrote to Aswell, Aunt Maw Joyner, who brings George up, "is pretty much what the name . . . signifies." (The Letters of Thomas Wolfe, p.712) The Joyners produce "a slow, dark horror in the blooded memory of the boy he could not utter." (The Web and The Rock, p.8) and his mental picture of his father's world is in direct contrast to that of the Joyners: "the image of his father's world was pleasant and good, and full of secret warmth and

joy to him. All of the parts of the town, all of the places, lands, and things his father's life had touched seemed full of happiness and joy to him." (The Web and The Rock, p.9)

George's roots consist then of two distinct elements, on which the web of life is superimposed. This contrast is a reflection of that found between W.O. Gant and Eliza in Look Homeward, Angel. As the Joyners are connected to the Catawba mountains, so George connects his father to "the shining city."

> And he belonged to that fatal, mad, devouring world from whose prison there was no escape. He belonged to it, even as three hundred of his blood and bone had belonged to it, and must unweave it from his brain, distill it from his blood, unspin it from his entrails, and escape with demonic and exultant joy into his father's world, new lands and mornings and the shining city -- or drown like a mad dog, die! (The Web and The Rock, p.83)

Chapter Three of Book One is called "Two Worlds Discrete," and this phrase becomes a recurring theme. In the chapter of that name, the two worlds or powers are those of the Joyners and George's father. In later entrances the phrase implies the basic dichotomy in the life of every man, often coupled with the theme "wandering forever and the earth again," which Wolfe used frequently in Of Time and The River. When George walks with his uncle on the mountain, "Then as never before, he saw the great world beyond the wintry hills of home, and felt the huge, bitter conflict of those twin antagonists, those powers discrete that wage perpetual warfare in the lives of all

men living -- wandering forever and the earth again. (The Web and The Rock, p.157)

In Book One, the split in George's childhood is described, and Book Two provides a background of elemental passion to the Joyner world. In Book Two, there are many descriptions of physical violence; the web of life that springs from the Joyner root. Many of the episodes are separate short stories, and were published as such before the manuscript of The Web and The Rock was put together. Although the stories all deal with violence, there is contrast in the use of terms and phrases within them.

In "Child By Tiger" the phrase "two worlds discrete" has moral overtones. The two worlds are those of goodness and evil which are found in every man, and Wolfe represents them by lightness and darkness. Both goodness and evil exist in the negro Dick Prosset. He is an excellent servant, and a companion to the young boys, but suddenly evil dominates his character, and he murders every person he sees. His physical darkness is juxtaposed with the whiteness of the family for whom he works, and even the natural elements are described in terms of darkness and lightness. The shooting takes place against the background of white snow, in the middle of a winter's night. Wolfe writes,

> In every man there are two hemispheres of light and dark, two world's [sic] discrete, two countries of his soul's adventure. . . . He came from darkness. He came out of the heart of darkness, from the dark heart of the secret and

undiscovered South. He came by night, just as he passed by night. He was night's child and partner, a token of the wonder and the mystery, the other side of man's dark soul, his nighttime partner, and his nighttime foal, a symbol of those things that pass by darkness and that still remain, of something still and waiting in the night that comes and passes and that will abide, a symbol of man's evil innocence, and the token of his mystery, a projection of his own unfathomed quality, a friend, a brother, and a mortal enemy, an unknown demon -- our loving friend, our mortal enemy, two worlds together -- a tiger and a child. (The Web and The Rock, pp.140,156)

As Wolfe developed George Webber in place of Eugene Gant, his consciousness of the various societies in America was also growing. Of Time and The River and The Web and The Rock both describe a young boy who moves from the South to the North, hoping to find in reality the world he has imagined. In Of Time and The River, Eugene Gant is first a young American fulfilling his wandering instinct, and second, a Southerner venturing into the North. In Book Three of The Web and The Rock, "The Web and The World," George Webber is first a Southerner, and second, an American. Eugene Gant was a symbol of the homeless American; George, as a Southerner, represents other Southerners in their struggles with the North.

When George and his friends go to a football game in Richmond,

They felt in touch with wonder and with life, they felt in touch with magic and with history. They saw the state house and they heard the guns. They knew that Grant was pounding at the gates of Richmond. They knew that Lee was digging in some twenty miles away at Petersburg. They knew that Lincoln had come down from Washington and was waiting for the news at City Point. They knew that Jubal Early was swinging in his saddle at the suburbs of Washington. They felt, they knew, they had their living hands and hearts

upon the living presence of these things, and upon a thousand other things as well. (The Web and The Rock, p.183)

Eugene Gant was also aware of the boundaries and separate histories of the North and South, but not to the same extent. For George, the trip to Richmond is a trip back in history to the days of the Civil War. The atmosphere of the old town brings a distinct personal challenge to each of the young men. The old South may have been defeated, but they, as the new South, have the power to forage in the North, taking what they will. "They knew that they were at the very gateways of the fabulous and unknown North, that great trains were here to do their bidding, that they could rocket in an hour or two into the citadels of gigantic cities." (The Web and The Rock, p.183)

Wolfe, however, fully realises what the defeat meant to the South. In an expository passage he says,

> The cleavage of ideas, the division of interests, of social customs and traditional beliefs, which were developing with a tremendous gathering velocity in American life during the first half of the nineteenth century, and which were more and more separating the life of an agrarian South from the life of the industrial North, were consummated by the bloody action of the Civil War, and were confirmed and sealed by the dark and tragic act of reconstruction. (The Web and The Rock, p.245)

Every time that George rides the train between the South and the North, "There was a certain tightening in the throat, a kind of dry, hard beating of the pulse, as they came up in the morning towards Virginia; a kind of pressure at the lips, a hot, hard burning in the eye, a wire-taut tension of the nerves. . . ." (The Web and The Rock, p.246) And later Wolfe asks,

why this tension of the nerves, why this gritting of the teeth and hardening of the jaws, this sense of desperate anticipation as they crossed the Potomac River? Did it mean that they felt they were invading a foreign country? Did it mean they were steeling themselves for conflict? Did it mean that they were looking forward with an almost desperate apprehension to their encounter with the city? Yes, it meant all of this. It meant other things as well. It meant that they were also looking forward to that encounter with exultancy and hope, with fervour, passion, and high aspiration. (The Web and The Rock, p.246)

Wolfe heavily satirizes the professional Southerners who go to the North. When George is in New York, in the chapter "The City Patriots," Wolfe says,

George Webber had observed that there is no one on earth who is more patriotically devoted -- verbally, at least -- to the region from which he came than the American from the Southern portion of the United States. Once he leaves it to take up his living in other, less fair and fortunate, sections of the country, he is willing to fight for the honor of the Southland at the drop of a hat, to assert her supremacy over all the other habitable parts of the globe on every occasion . . . to do almost everything, in fact, for dear old Dixie except to return permanently to her to live. (The Web and The Rock, p.239)

Although George Webber is able to see the South and the North in the perspective of America, one of his college heroes, Jim Randolph, another Southerner, cannot grow and live with his own times, once his glory as a football player is over.

The period of his fame was past. The brightness of his star had waned. He had become only a memory to those for whom he had once been the embodiment of heroic action. His contemporaries had entered life, had taken it and used it, had gone past him, had forgotten him. And Jim could not forget. He lived now in a world of bitter memory. (The Web and The Rock, p.268)

Jim, in his last incoherent and drunken outcries is a symbol of all the defeated Southerners, of whom Wolfe makes the following general statement:

> The fundamental characteristic of this whole defeated and retreated kind -- whether intellectual or creative, professional or of the working group -- was the familiar rationalizing self-defence of Southern fear and Southern failure: its fear of conflict and of competition in the greater world; its inability to meet or to adjust itself to the conditions, strifes, and ardours of a modern life; its old, sick, Appomattoxlike retreat into the shades of folly and delusion, of prejudice and bigotry, of florid legend and defensive casuistry, of haughty and ironic detachment from a life with which it was too obviously concerned, to which it wished too obviously to belong. (The Web and The Rock, p.243)

Jerry Alsop is another example of Southern failure. Like "Joyner" and "Webber," the name "Alsop" is symbolical. As Jim Randolph masks his inner insecurity by a stalwart man-of-the-world attitude, so Jerry protects himself with insatiable romanticism.

> He was a creature who, first and foremost, above all other things, hated trouble and abhorred pain -- as what decent man does not? -- except that here, in this great belly of a man, his hatred and abhorrence were so great that he would never face the things he hated. Thus, from an early age, he had learned to wear rose-coloured blinders against life, and it was only natural that his own stubborn and unyielding hostility should be turned against anything -- any person, any conflict, any situation, any evidence, or any idea -- that would tend to take those blinders off. (The Web and The Rock, p.192)

Both Jim and Jerry are unable to join their contemporaries in competition; they enjoy being worshipped, and rely on the companionship and adulation of younger men. They provide George Webber with the impetus that Frank Starwick and Joel Pierce gave Eugene Gant in Of Time and The River. George, like Eugene, is drawn to them, becomes a friend for a time, and then leaves them behind. Starwick and Joel Pierce represent in general terms, the difficulties and pitfalls that await a traditionless American whereas Jim

Randolph and Jerry Alsop symbolize the problems facing a localised American society -- the South.

Instead of making his characters represent the whole of America, Wolfe now uses, as a principle of selection, the areas with which he was most familiar. As he wrote to Mrs. Roberts, "I think that one of the things that is likely to happen to the artist when he gets a little older, is that he may tend to become cautious and conservative and to stick to the thing which he has learned or is learning to do." (The Letters of Thomas Wolfe, p.518)

In the opening chapter of the second half of The Web and The Rock, called "The Ship," George is returning from Europe on the ship which Eugene had boarded at the end of Of Time and The River, and the chapter marks the beginning of the love affair that was first written for Eugene Gant. Wolfe had written that "it is . . . vitally important to the success of this book that there be no trace of Eugene Gant-i-ness in the character of the protagonist" (The Letters of Thomas Wolfe, p.714), but because he did not live to rewrite the love story completely, there are both direct and indirect references to the life and character of Eugene Gant.

Eugene went to Europe as a wanderer searching for certitude, or as Jason, looking for the Golden Fleece. George Webber is not identified with Jason in the first half of The Web and The Rock, but when he is returning on

the ship, Wolfe both equates him with Jason, and gives him the Gantian label of "a homesick wanderer."

> Here, too, he was a familiar symptom of the period -- a desperately homesick wanderer returning desperately to the home he did not have, a shorn Jason, still seeking and still unassuaged, returning empty-handed with no Golden Fleece. Reviewed with the superior knowledge of a later time, it is easy to deride the folly of that pilgrimage, easy to forget the merit of the quest. For the quest was really livened with the Jason touch, blazoned with the Jason fire. (The Web and The Rock, p.304)

George's first trip to Europe is not described in The Web and The Rock, but is mentioned in one of the italicised transitional sections that it was necessary for Aswell to insert. When George is in Europe for the second time, after the break up of the affair with Esther Jack, he catches a glimpse in a mirror of his earlier self, or of Eugene Gant.

> Then suddenly he sees his face reflected in the mirrored window of a woman's glove-shop, and in a second, as if a lock were shot back in his memory, a door is opened and three years of living drop away from him and he is a youth, amorous of the earth and full of wonder and exultancy, who is in a strange land for the first time and who passed this way once and looked into this window. And the features of that youth stare back at him now . . . and he sees the lost youth staring through the coarsened mask, and he sees what time has done. (The Web and The Rock, pp.648-649)

There are other ways in which George Webber resembles Eugene Gant. The Esther that George meets on the ship is the same Esther that Eugene saw boarding it at the end of Of Time and The River. Both George and Eugene are teachers and writers, and each worked on his novel in Europe. Both have encyclopaedic memories and both want to recapture the past on paper. Wolfe slowly developed the

fact that Eugene was a writer, but in The Web and The Rock, the first indication that George is interested in writing is the sentence, "The year before he had grown sick and weary in his heart of his clumsy attempts to write." (The Web and The Rock, p.263)

George, unlike Eugene, adopts a principle of selection in his writing of the past:

> now, for the first time, he tried to set down a fractional part of his vision of the earth. For some time, a vague but powerful unrest had urged him on to the attempt, and now, without knowledge or experience, but with some uneasy premonition of the terrific labour he was attempting to accomplish, he began -- deliberately choosing a subject that seemed so modest and limited in its proportions that he thought he could complete it with the greatest ease. The subject he chose for his first effort was a boy's vision of life over a ten-month period between his twelfth and thirteenth year, and the title was, 'The End of the Golden Weather.' (The Web and The Rock, p.263)

What George is trying to do is what Wolfe himself did in parts of the first half of The Web and The Rock.

Although George tries to be selective in his writing, he is unable, until the very end of The Web and The Rock, to apply the same principle of his life. In the second half of the book, George is possessed by the same Faustian hunger that was a part of Eugene. When George nervously tears up a theatre program, Wolfe says, "The incident was symbolic. The truth was, once a thing had touched his interest he fastened to it like a hound, his hunger for it insatiable, voracious, devouring, and consuming, and it drove him on until he reached the end. It had always been that way with him." (The Web and The

Rock, p.405) George's interest is now directed to Esther, as a woman, as a symbol of the brilliant life of the city he had dreamed of, and as a living source of the past. Esther provides George with a place to work, cooks meals for him, and tries to look after him. She is able to introduce him to the notable figures of the time, and unlike Uncle Bascom in Of Time and The River, she can communicate the past to him in all the detail that he desires.

Wolfe wanted to describe the process of an innocent man discovering life. Early in The Web and The Rock, Wolfe places George Webber, an American provincial, among other literary provincials who have moved from the country to the city, or from innocence to experience.

> There is no truer legend in the world than the one about the country boy, the provincial innocent, in his first contact with the city. Hackneyed by repetition, parodied and burlesqued by the devices of cheap fiction, and the slapstick of vaudeville humor, it is nevertheless one of the most tremendous and vital experiences in the life of a man, and in the life of the nation. It has found inspired and glorious tongues in Tolstoy and in Goethe, in Balzac and in Dickens, in Fielding and Mark Twain. It has found splendid examples in every artery of life, as well in Shakespeare as in the young Napoleon. And day after day the great cities of the world are being fed, enriched, and replenished ceaselessly with the life-blood of the nation. . . . (The Web and The Rock, p.222)

The conflict in the second half of The Web and The Rock is basically that of the provincial innocent and his contact with the city, and Wolfe examines the conflict in terms of George Webber and Esther Jack. George enters the conflict truculently determined to keep and develop his own identity. Although when young, he had hated the poor

because of the lack of dignity in their lives, as he goes to meet Esther or the world of the rich for the first time, he grasps at the warmth and humanity of the East Side.

> Suddenly he understood that this, of all the sections of the city, was the only one where the people seemed to belong, where they were 'at home.' Or, if it was not the only one, it was preëminently and dominantly the first. The great salmon-hued apartment houses of the fashionable uptown districts lacked humanity. One look at them -- the clifflike walls of Park Avenue, the ceaseless flight of motor cars, the cheaper bourgeois gaudiness of the great facades along the Drive -- brought a sense of desolation. (The Web and The Rock, p.323)

The chapter called "The Theatre," which introduces George to Esther's world, also introduces many of the elements of the conflict between them. George is bewildered by what he calls, "the enigma of that flower face." (The Web and The Rock, p.333) Esther is completely at home in her city world, but George is continually baffled by her presence there. It is incredible to him that Esther has escaped the markings of the city so evident to him in her friends, and also incredible that she does not see them as he does:

> she seemed almost to belong to another world, a world of simple joy, of childlike faith, of sweetness and of naturalness, of innocence and morning. . . . How could it be believed that the legend written on these faces -- the fine etching of the soul's disease, the sickness of the nerves, the bloodless subtlety of the polished words, the painful complication of these lives . . . which was so plain to him, could yet be a total mystery to her who was a part of it. (The Web and The Rock, pp.331,333)

The theatre contains sophisticates who make casual and knowing remarks on plays and playwrights, and to George the remarks seem exhibitionistic and self-conscious.

All these remarks with their assumption of assured authority, annoyed him past a reasonable degree. It seemed to him that such talk was false and dishonest, and against the true spirit of what the theatre should try to be; and because he had no words to answer to such cold smart talk as this, he again felt baffled and infuriated. (The Web and The Rock, p.328)

George meets many intellectual and aesthetic sophisticates through Esther, and although it is clear in this chapter that he is hostile principally because of his insecurity, in later chapters, Wolfe allows George's early estimate to stand, in that such sophisticates are heavily satirised.

The chapter discloses, too, George's attitude both towards Esther's work in the theatre, and the difference in each of their approaches to work. Like Eugene in Of Time and The River, George does not enjoy realism in the theatre.

The truth of the matter was, 'the illusion of the stage' did not elude him. It never had. He had never been able to fool himself into believing that the raised platform before him, with one side open, was really Mrs. Cartwright's drawing room, or that the season, as the program stated, was September. In short, 'realism' in the theatre had never seemed very real to him, and it got less real all the time. (The Web and The Rock, p.336)

Esther's life is strictly divided into work and play. George notices when he and Esther go backstage that,

she had dropped off just that veil of 'party manner' which people inevitably assume in more formal social relations. Her manner now was more accustomed: this whole world back here fitted her like an old shoe. She stepped right into it, and for the first time now he noticed a quality in her that he was to discover came from the truest and finest source of her whole character. It was evident that she had now left the world of play and entered the world of work, and that it was the world of work that meant most to her. (The Web and The Rock, p.335)

George does not have separate worlds, and finds

it more and more difficult to accept Esther's ability both to work with all her creative force and to receive happily what seem to him to be meaningless compliments in her world of play. For him, everything in life is measured against an ideal concept in his imagination, and he is always hoping to discover a reality that equals his ideal.

> He no longer wanted to 'get away from it all,' but rather to try 'to get into it all' -- and he felt now powerfully, as he stood there in the wings, that here again he was in contact with the incredible, the palpable, the real, the undiscovered world -- which was as near to every man alive as a touch of his hand, the beat of his heart, and further away from most men's finding than the rivers of the moon. (The Web and The Rock, p.337)

These differences in attitude emphasize both George's insecurity and his relative immaturity. Esther is seventeen years older and has learned to conserve her energy for her work, while George, unable to profit from her example and counselling, expends his energy on everything around him.

All of the elements outlined in the chapter "The Theatre," develop in intensity as the love affair progresses. The web that he and Esther weave finally so ensnares him that he feels he has lost his purpose in living and the roots from which he came. The first of these climaxes, the loss of purpose in living, is reached after George meets some of the literati at Mrs. Jack's. In an italicised passage, Aswell summarizes the effect of the party.

> There in the luxury of her home he had rubbed elbows with the great ones of the earth whose rare and glorious lot had been the object of his distant envy and ambition. And now that he had moved among them, seen and talked to them, what he observed had filled him with dismay, a cold

constriction of the heart. Still too close to the event to sort out and make clear just what it was that so affected him, yet he knew, with an instant, certain, deadly knowledge, that a dear illusion had been shattered. And so strong had been the pull of this illusion, so central since his childhood to all his hopes, that now he had the sense that he himself -- all his directing energies, his work, his very life -- was broken, shattered, torn asunder, and destroyed, inescapably laid low in the wreckage of his golden dream. (The Web and The Rock, p.538)

Wolfe makes the coming of spring a symbol of the contrast between the promise of life and life itself. The living green of the spring seems a promise of imaginative fulfillment, but George now sees the green as a brief covering of the "hues of death."

Thus over his whole mind that Spring there hung the sorcery of this enchanted green, and for this reason his life that Spring attained the focal intensity of a vision. And it was a vision of death and dissolution, ever present in a thousand images that swarmed incredibly in his brain. He saw the world in the hues of death, not because he was trying to fly from reality, but because he was trying to embrace it, not because he wanted to escape out of a life that he had found unendurable into some pleasing fable of his own devising, but because for years the hunger that had driven him with a desire for knowledge so insatiate that he wanted to pluck the final core and essense out of every object still moved him forward towards an escape into life. But now it seemed to him that life itself had played him false. (The Web and The Rock, p.541)

The second climax, George's loss of his roots or personality, is reached when he is unable to make what he calls his "squeal." The squeal is first represented as "simply a cry of animal exuberance" (The Web and The Rock, p.605), but then Wolfe says of George, "he had always known that it was something more than the animal vitality of a boy" (The Web and The Rock, p.610), in that the cry had joined George to the earth, the past, and humanity.

The cry had welled up from the earth with a relentless certitude, and all the gold and glory of the earth was in

it. It had been for him a kind of touchstone to reality, for it had never played him false. It had always come as a response to an actual and indupitable glory, and to a reality as tangible as minted gold. Knowledge, power, and truth had been in that wild cry. It had united him to the whole family of the earth, for he had always known that men in every age and history had felt the same wild cry of triumph, pain, and passion on their lips, and that it had come to them from the same movements, seasons, and unchanging certitudes of joy as it had come to him. (The Web and The Rock, pp.610-611)

George feels that Esther, as the city's representative, and the city itself are responsible for his losses, and that to regain purposeful self-assurance, he must escape. This escape is a fore-runner of the more powerful one described in You Can't Go Home Again. In The Web and The Rock, George leaves because of his failure as a writer and his insecurity in the city, whereas in the sequel, he leaves after achieving both success and fame.

Part of George's resentment is the result of his ever-present sense of the passing of time and of the influence of chance in men's lives. Although love was promised as the end of Eugene's search in Of Time and The River, George's and Esther's love is not beyond time, but waxes and wanes with it. When George is in Europe, he sees how chance and time pervert the finding of permanent love. Every person has a separate time, and even the collective times of continents are different:

our cry wells out on darkness; and all the earth is peopled by these dupes of time, by these lost cries, by these unmeted, lost, and lonely moments of myriad mocking, and unmindful time. There is a moment when our prayers are heard, there is a moment when our lives may meet, there is a moment when our wandering might end, and all our hunger

be appeased, and we could walk into love's heart and core forever. But what man knows that moment when it comes? (The Web and The Rock, pp.626-627)

While George struggles with the influence of time on his life, Esther, in New York, understands that the only permanence in life is change, and the symbols and themes that she expresses are those often found in Of Time and The River.

Strange time, forever lost, forever flowing like the river! Lost time, lost people, and lost love -- forever lost! There's nothing you can hold there in the river! There's nothing you can keep there in the river! It takes your love, it takes your life, it takes the great ships going out to sea, and it takes time, dark, delicate time, the little ticking moments of strange time that count us into death. Now in the dark I hear the passing of dark time, and all the sad and secret flowing of my life. All of my thoughts are flowing like the river, all of my life is passing like the river, I dream and talk and feel just like the river, as it flows by me, by me, by me, to the sea. (The Web and The Rock, p.682)

George resolves his conflicts in Europe. In France, he is again able to make his cry, and in Germany his knowledge of himself and of his position in the world grows until, in the final chapter of the book, he is able to accept mortal limitations. Before the "Body and Man" dialogue, George recognises the contrasting and inescapable elements of his own nature. The "two worlds discrete" that divided him at the age of twelve are still and inevitably part of him, and added to them is the weight of all the other contrasts that developed from them.

He hated the family of the earth to which he himself belonged because he himself belonged to it, because its blood was in him, his in it, because twin demons of his soul divided him

in unending warfare. . . . There were in him two powers discrete, two forces of the soul and of inheritance, and now they waged contention daily in his life upon a battlefield where there could never be a victor, where he was caught in his own trap, imprisoned by his own forces, held captive by the very powers that were himself. He understood it all so well, because he had himself created it. He understood it all so well, because it had itself created him. He hated it so much because he had such deep and everlasting love for it. He fled from it and knew he could never escape. (The Web and The Rock, p.661)

George had always been resentfully aware of his ape-like body, and its effect upon those who saw him; "he had cursed and hated his body because he thought it was ugly and absurd and unworthy of him, because he thought it was a cause of all his trouble and grief, because he felt it had betrayed him and shut him away from the life he loved so well and wanted to belong to." (The Web and The Rock, p.691) He also resented the very physical envelope that enclosed him and so kept him from fulfilling his Faustian hungers:

he had been impatient and angry, and he hated his body because he knew that it came between him and his most deep desires. He despised it because its powers of smell, taste, sight, sound, and touch let slip forever, as all flesh must, the final, potent, and completest distillation of life, the matchless ecstasy of living. . . . He had cursed it because it could not do the inhuman task he set for it, hated it because its hunger could not match his hunger, which was for the earth and all things living in it. (The Web and The Rock, p.692)

After George's confusions erupt in physical violence at the Munich Beer Hall, he is able to see objectively that the spirit of man must "find itself by losing self in something larger than itself, and thus . . . find its place and do a man's work in the world. . . ." (The Web and The Rock, p.692) He also realises that his body has been a friend and not an enemy.

> This flesh had not betrayed him. It had been strong, enduring, and enormously sensitive within the limitations of its senses. The arms were too long, the legs too short, the hands and feet a little closer to the simian than most men's are, but they belonged to the family of the earth, they were not deformed. The only deformity had been in the madness and bitterness of his heart. (The Web and The Rock, p.692)

The sudden objectivity with which George is able to view the interaction of his various parts comes when he sees his battered body in a mirror. The self that the mirror shows is not the whole self that was reflected in childhood, but merely the inescapable condition of mortality.

> He looked at it now, and it at him, with a quizzical, detached objectiveness, not as a child looks in a mirror, at the silent eloquence of his pooled self, unspeaking, saying 'I,' but outside of it, and opposite, regardant, thinking, 'Well, by God, you are a pretty sight!' -- and meaning, not Himself, but It. (The Web and The Rock, p.689)

The Body and the Man discuss how and when their jointure which was present in childhood went awry, and they decide that discordance was introduced when the child became actively aware of more than the body could communicate. The discordant element is called the Worm, which is regret and anxiety, and its growth is a part of the growth of the Man rather than of the Body. Both the Body and Man agree that the best time was that of childhood, when the turnings of the Worm were least felt. The last line of the book hints at the conflicts to come in Wolfe's last novel, as the Body reminds the Man, "But -- you can't go home again."

CHAPTER IV

YOU CAN'T GO HOME AGAIN

Wolfe wanted the events of George Webber's life to be representative of the

> essential elements of any man's progress and discovery of life . . . not in terms of personal and self-centred conflict with the world, but in terms of ever-increasing discovery of life and the world, with a constant diminution of the more personal and self-centred vision of the world which a young man has. (The Letters of Thomas Wolfe, p.713)

You Can't Go Home Again opens in 1929, when George Webber is twenty-eight years old, and closes in 1938 when he is thirty-seven. At the end of The Web and The Rock, George had attained manhood, and in You Can't Go Home Again, he becomes more and more conscious of his own being in relationship to both America and mankind.

Edward Aswell wrote of Wolfe's last novel,

> On the whole, You Can't Go Home Again was a more satisfying book than its predecessor. It was much more complete, more nearly finished. It contained more of his latest writing, and even those parts of it that had been written earlier had in many instances been revised and recast in his more objective style. ("A Note on Thomas Wolfe," p.375)

George Webber, as the protagonist, has three main functions. His personal life consists mainly of a search for permanence in love and fame and of his struggles as an artist to realize his self-imposed standards. As a member of American society he examines what he sees in Libya Hill and New York, and as a human being, he becomes aware of the dangers that are a part of human inheritance.

In the last two of these functions, he can be either participant, or onlooker.

In the beginning of You Can't Go Home Again, George has returned from Europe and is again involved with Esther and love. Esther, as before, surrounds him with her world, and George finally realizes that the world of love and Esther's friends is not enough, because for him as an artist, they make necessary a compromise with truth. The realization comes to George during the party at the Jacks.

> For he had learned tonight that love was not enough. There had to be a higher devotion than all the devotions of this fond imprisonment. . . . It would be surer, swifter, kinder, not to tell her that he loved her still, that he would always love her, that no one else could ever take her place. Not by so much as a glance, a single word, the merest pressure of the hand, must he let her know that this was the hardest thing he would ever have to do.[1]

After the publication of his novel Home To Our Mountains, George meets the lion hunters. "They are a peculiar race of people who inhabit the upper jungles of Cosmopolis and subsist entirely on some rarefied and ambrosial ectoplasm that seems to emanate from the arts. They love art dearly -- in fact, they dote on it -- and they love the artists even more." (You Can't Go Home Again, p.343) George concludes that the attentions of these people do not constitute fame and keeps on searching and hoping for it, while working on his second book in Brooklyn.

> Those were the years of his concentrated quest of that fair Medusa. He had had his little taste of glory, and it was bitter in his mouth. He thought the reason was that he had not been good enough -- and he had not been good

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[1]Thomas Wolfe, You Can't Go Home Again (New York, 1940), pp.320-322). Subsequent references will be to this edition.

enough. Therefore he thought that what he had had was not Fame at all, but only a moment's notoriety. He had been a seven-day wonder -- that was all. (You Can't Go Home Again, p.397)

To finish his second book, George goes to England, and there sees, in the person of Lloyd McHarg, the transience and meaninglessness of fame.

McHarg had accepted his success and his triumph with the exultant elation of a boy. He had received the award of his honorary degree, symbolizing the consummation of his glory, with blazing images of impossible desire. And then, almost before he knew it, it was over. The thing was his, it had been given to him, he had it, he had stood before the great ones of the earth, he had been acclaimed and lauded, all had happened -- and yet, nothing had happened. (You Can't Go Home Again, p.561)

In Germany, after the publication of his second book, George experiences fame for himself.

His name flashed and shone. He was a famous man. Fame shed a portion of her loveliness on everything about him. Life took on an added radiance. The look, feel, taste, smell, and sound of everything had gained a tremendous and exciting enhancement, and all because Fame was at his side. He saw the world with a sharper relish of perception than he had ever known before. All the confusion, fatigue, dark doubt, and bitter hopelessness that had afflicted him in times past had gone, and no shadow of any kind remained. (You Can't Go Home Again, p.623)

McHarg had found that fame was not enough because it did meet his expectations.

With a mind surcharged with fire, with a heart thirsting for some impossible fulfillment, he took his award, and copies of all the speeches, programs, and tributes, sailed for Europe, and began to go from place to place, looking for something that he had no name for, something that existed somewhere, perhaps -- but where he did not know. (You Can't Go Home Again, p.561)

George also finds that fame is not enough, but for a different reason. He begins to see "a picture of a great people who had been psychically wounded and were now desperately ill with some dread malady of the soul. Here

was an entire nation, he now realized, that was infested with the contagion of an ever-present fear." (You Can't Go Home Again, p.631) In order to keep his fame in Germany, as was the case with love, George must compromise with truth, and once again, as an artist, he cannot. Franz Heilig begs George not to cast off his fame in Germany by writing truthfully about the Nazi regime.

'Here, wiz many people you haf zis great name,' he said earnestly, 'and it vould be too dret-full -- it vould be such a pity -- if you spoil it now. You vill not?' he said, and . . . looked anxiously and earnestly at George. George looked off in space and did not answer right away; then he said:
'A man must write what he must write. A man must do what he must do.' (You Can't Go Home Again, p.648)

Neither love nor fame can constitute the whole world for the artist because they suggest permanence, and the artist's business, like any man's, is to grow and change as life does. Once George realizes this, his youthful dreams are thoroughly shattered, and the search for permanence and stability, which was so large a part of Wolfe's earlier novels, is over. In a long letter to Foxhall Edwards at the end of the book, George writes of love and fame, "I wanted them desperately before I had them, but once they were mine I found that they were not enough. And, I think, if we speak truth, the same thing holds for every man who ever lived and had the spark of growth in him." (You Can't Go Home Again, p.723)

George had hoped to find a place in the world as both a man and an artist. Wolfe says of the artist,

> His nature is often torn between opposing poles of loneliness and gregariousness. Isolation he must have to do his work. But fellowship is also a necessity without which he is lost, since the lack of it removes him from all the naturalness of life which he demands more than any other man alive, and which he must share in if he is to grow and prosper in his art. (You Can't Go Home Again, p.560)

George had loved Esther not only for herself, but also for the "fabulous and enchanting world of hers." Part of his childhood aspiration had been the longing "to dream great dreams and think great thoughts in the company of the world's most honored great." (You Can't Go Home Again, p.263) At the Jack's party George realizes that both Esther's world and her love, limit him artistically, because he wants to encompass not just a part, but the whole of America in his art.

> Could he as a novelist, as an artist, belong to this high world of privilege without taking upon himself the stultifying burden of that privilege? Could he write truthfully of life as he saw it, could he say the things he must, and at the same time belong to this world of which he would have to write? . . . Think of all the young writers, among them some of the best, who had won acclaim for the promise of their genius, and then had left their promise unfulfilled because they had traded their birthright for just such a mess of the world's pottage. . . . If that happened to him, how, then, could he sing America? (You Can't Go Home Again, pp.261,263)

After the publication of his first book, George moves to Brooklyn. There, he sees the world of the poor. "All about him were the poor, the outcast, the neglected and forsaken people of America, and he was one of them." (You Can't Go Home Again, p.397) The world of Brooklyn, however, is also only a part of the whole, and, after four years there, he leaves for England. George's struggle with

his art during these years is made more difficult by adverse criticism and loneliness.

In England, he begins to reap the benefits from his detached investigations of segments of life.

> He was growing up, and out of the very accumulation of experience he was gaining an essential perspective and detachment. Each new sensation and impression was no longer a single, unrelated thing: it took its place in a pattern and sifted down to form certain observable cycles of experience. Thus his incessantly active mind was free to a much greater degree than ever before to remember, digest, meditate, and compare, and to seek relations between all the phenomena of living. The result was an astonishing series of discoveries as his mind noted associations and resemblances, and made recognitions not only of surface similarities but of identities of concept and of essence. (You Can't Go Home Again, p.555)

The artist can be limited by identifying himself with a segment of society, and he can also withdraw from society completely. George's first book had been centered on the life he had known in Libya Hill, and after its publication, he received many threatening letters from the townspeople. In the chapter "The Wounded Faun," George sinks into a "morass of self-pity." (You Can't Go Home Again, p.383)

> George began to talk now about 'the artist,' spouting all the intellectual and aesthetic small change of the period. The artist, it seemed, was a kind of fabulous, rare, and special creature who lived on 'beauty' and 'truth' and had thoughts so subtle that the average man could comprehend them no more than a mongrel could understand the moon he bayed at. The artist, therefore, could achieve his 'art' only through a constant state of flight into some magic wood, some province of enchantment. The phrases were so spurious that Randy felt like shaking him. (You Can't Go Home Again, p.383)

That George does not belong to this group of "artists" is made clear by both his immediate reversal of this attitude,

and the satirical comments found throughout You Can't Go Home Again on "the pallid half-men of the arts." (You Can't Go Home Again, p.611)

George believes, as Wolfe believed, that the artist should find and keep to the mean between these two extremes. In his letter to Fox at the end of the book, he asks, "And if the artist is not first and foremost a living man -- and by this I mean a man of life, a man who belongs to life, who is connected with it so intimately that he draws his strength from it -- then what manner of man is he?" (You Can't Go Home Again, p.721)

Unlike his younger self in The Web and The Rock, George is now more of an American than a Southerner. Eugene Gant also represented America, but in a different way. Eugene was a lonely wanderer, whereas George and America both discover the ties of brotherhood in You Can't Go Home Again. During the time span covered in this book, America is seen before the crash, during the depression, and post-depression, in relation to Nazi Germany. George, broadly speaking, can be identified with all three of these phases. Before the crash he is involved with Esther and the world of privilege, during the depression he is living in Brooklyn, and after the depression he witnesses the growth of military strength and the resultant fear in Germany.

George Webber is the link between Libya Hill and New York which form the basis of Wolfe's presentation of

America before the crash. Many characters are introduced in each of the settings, and it is made clear that each one represents other Americans of the same type. Wolfe wanted to show that the standards and beliefs existing in America were false, and that they conflicted with what he called "the promise of America." "So, then, to every man his chance -- to every man, regardless of his birth, his shining, golden opportunity -- to every man the right to live, to work, to be himself, and to become whatever thing his manhood and his vision can combine to make him -- this, seeker, is the promise of America." (You Can't Go Home Again, p.508) The basic conflict, then, in both the Libya Hill and the New York sections is the difference between the promise of America and the actuality.

Aside from the onlooker George Webber, there are six main characters in the Libya Hill chapters. Jarvis Riggs, the president of the Citizens Trust Company, "was a living vindication of an American legend -- that of the poor boy who profits from the hardships of his early life and 'makes good.'" (You Can't Go Home Again, p.361) But the pre-crash American standards lead the representative of an American legend to concentrate on making good to the extent that every investor in his bank is ruined during the crash.

> There was thrilling and rapid expansion in all directions, and it seemed that there were possibilities of wealth, luxury, and economic power hitherto undreamed of just

lying around waiting for anyone who was bold enough to seize them. Jarvis Riggs was no more insensible to these beckoning opportunities than the next man. The time had come, he decided, to step out and show the world what he could do. The Citizens Trust began to advertise itself as 'the fastest-growing bank in the state.' But it did not advertise what it was growing on. (You Can't Go Home Again, pp.362-363)

Contrasted to Riggs is Mayor Baxter Kennedy, the pleasant political figure-head of Libya Hill, who becomes aware of the perilous position of the bank too late to be able to save the town. When the bank fails, Kennedy commits suicide, the first of many men in the town to do so. He had identified himself with the values prevalent in Libya Hill to the extent of entrusting six million dollars of public money to Jarvis' bank. Kennedy represents the many thousands of Americans who could not accept the knowledge that the faiths on which they had built their lives, were false, and that the crash was thus their own responsibility. The crash was

the ruin of men who found out, as soon as these symbols of their outward success had been destroyed, that they had nothing left -- no inner equivalent from which they might now draw new strength. It was the ruin of men who, discovering not only that their values were false but that they had never had any substance whatsoever, now saw at last the emptiness and hollowness of their lives. Therefore they killed themselves; and those who did not die by their own hands died by the knowledge that they were already dead. (You Can't Go Home Again, p.369)

One of the more important characters is Judge Rumford Bland. He is unable to accept the standards of the other men of the town who are able to say one thing and do another. Wolfe wrote to Margaret Roberts,

looking back over my childhood and early youth in Asheville, it often seems to me now that the people who went down, who became . . . shipwrecks, were not the worthless litter of humanity, but often the best, the brightest, and the most intelligent we had. It occurred to me that if such things happen to such people there must be something wrong with the background that produced them, something in the life around them that did not give them enough to employ their talents or awaken the deepest interest in their lives. (The Letters of Thomas Wolfe, p.728)

Rumford Bland is an example of this kind of shipwreck. In his youth he showed that he had great legal ability, but he then used that ability against the laws of society, by making his living through usury practised on the negroes, knowing that society did not care enough to stop him. He prefers to be criminal rather than hypocritical. Wolfe points out that,

The practice, criminal though it was, was a common one, winked at by the local authorities, and but one of many similar practices by which unscrupulous white men all over the South feathered their own nests at the expense of an oppressed and ignorant people. The fact that such usury was practiced chiefly against 'a bunch of niggers' to a large degree condoned and pardoned it in the eyes of the law. (You Can't Go Home Again, p.75)

Bland, like the negro Dick Prosset in "Child by Tiger," is a mixture of good and evil:

people who met him were instantly, even if they fought against it, captivated, drawn close to him, somehow made to like him. At the very moment that they met him, and felt the force of death and evil working in him, they also felt -- oh, call it the phantom, the radiance, the lost soul, of an enormous virtue. And with the recognition of that quality came the sudden stab of overwhelming regret, the feeling of 'What a loss! What a shame!' And yet no one could say why. (You Can't Go Home Again, p.78)

As with Dick Prosset, Wolfe uses the symbolism of the colors black and white to illustrate the mixture of

qualities in Bland. Bland always dresses the same way: "he had always dressed, in loose-fitting garments of plain and heavy black, a starched white shirt, a low collar and a black string neck tie. . . ." (You Can't Go Home Again, p.79)

Bland is blind, yet he is the only person in Libya Hill who really sees. "'Now, Jarvis!' he suddenly cried out in a chiding voice in the direction of the unfortunate Riggs, who had loudly resumed his discussion of property values -- 'you know that's not true! Why, man, I can tell by the look in your eyes that you're lying!'" (You Can't Go Home Again, p.82)

Nebraska Crane represents Americans who are able to find and fulfill their potential in accordance with, rather than by rebelling against, the laws of society. Edward Aswell says of Wolfe,

> He wrote first the chapters in You Can't Go Home Again which describe the home-run king who is past his prime but still hoping to stay in the game another season or two. Afterwards he went back and wrote the earlier chapters in The Web and The Rock, building up out of his imagination the kind of childhood which might have produced Nebraska, and then making him George Webber's best friend -- precisely because that was the kind of friend the youthful Tom Wolfe always wanted and never had. ("A Note on Thomas Wolfe," p.358)

For Wolfe, baseball was important because it was something uniquely American: "one reason I have always loved baseball so much is that it has been not merely 'the great national game,' but really a part of the whole weather of our lives, of the thing that is our own, of the

whole fabric, the million memories of America." (The Letters of Thomas Wolfe, p.722) Nebraska, as something good in American life, is shown against the corruption and degredation of such men as Jarvis Riggs and Rumford Bland. Wolfe wrote, "it is of this kind of man -- strong, simple, full of earth and sun, and his life in relation to other lives that I want to write. . . ." (The Letters of Thomas Wolfe, p.722) The two contrasting elements stand out against the background of the boom. The frenzied boom and its aftermath are the result of the plotting of such men as Jarvis Riggs. Nebraska, as a baseball player, is beyond the influence of the boom and so is able to maintain his own standards.

> As Nebraska talked to them in his simple, homely way, he spoke as a man of the earth for whom the future opened up serenely, an independent, stubborn man who knew what he wanted, a man who was firmly rooted, established, secure against calamity and want. He was completely detached from the fever of the times -- from the fever of the boom-mad town as well as from the larger fever of the nation. (You Can't Go Home Again, p.80)

Randy Shepperton is not so fortunate. He, representing many others, was not able to make his living in work uncontrolled by the standards of the boom. When George meets Randy at the Libya Hill station,

> the thing he noticed most was the expression in Randy's eyes. Where they had once been clear and had looked out on the world with a sharp and level gaze, they were now troubled, and haunted by some deep preoccupation which he could not quite shake off even in the manifest joy he felt at seeing his old friend again. (You Can't Go Home Again, p.92)

Randy, as district agent, fills one of the lower positions in the hierarchy of "The Federal Weight, Scales, and

Computing Company." Periodically he is visited by his supervisor, Dave Merrit, who can change, chameleon-like, from a benevolent and friendly visitor into a razor-tongued dictator. George overhears Merrit fulfilling his duty to the company, and

> as he listened to that voice he began to tremble and grow white about the lips. For its very tone was a foul insult to human life, an ugly sneer whipped across the face of decent humanity, and as he realized that that voice, these words, were being used against his friend, he had a sudden blind feeling of murder in his heart. (You Can't Go Home Again, p.137)

Some of the names of these six characters: Riggs, Kennedy, Bland, Crane, Shepperton, and Merrit, are symbolically significant. Jarvis Riggs has rigged the finances of the bank, Bland is smoothly unperturbed about his position in the town, and Dave Merrit's interest in life is money, not merit. The occupations of the six men cover most of the important facets of a town's life. Jarvis Riggs and Mayor Kennedy represent banking and politics, Bland is both a lawyer and a criminal, Nebraska, as a truly successful man, is a standard by which to measure the others, and the interaction of Randy and Merrit illustrates the world of business.

Wolfe makes it clear in his letters that, "the little world of Asheville . . . in its turn is the whole world of America." (The Letters of Thomas Wolfe, p.760) While working on the Libya Hill sections of You Can't Go Home Again, he wrote to Margaret Roberts,

> the book is not about a town, nor about any certain group of people, but it is about America and what happened here

between 1929 and 1937. I think you will agree with me and see what I am driving at when I tell you that what happened in Asheville in that period seems pretty important and significant in the light it throws on what happened to the whole country. (The Letters of Thomas Wolfe, p.708)

The section on the Jacks and their world in New York balances the chapters on Libya Hill, and explores a different sphere of American life. In the city scenes of The Web and The Rock, the basic conflict was the struggle between the provincial innocent and the city sophisticate, or, George and Esther. In You Can't Go Home Again, George is not only a young artist rejecting love, but also a representative of the people rejecting a decadent wealthy class. Esther now represents a segment of the city, rather than the city itself. The world of the Jacks is a world of luxury and sterility, and their very name signifies money. The whole of Book Two describes a single day, which culminates in a party. Wolfe shows that the Jacks and the people of their world represent many thousands of others as did the characters of the Libya Hill scenes.

Mr. Jack is a thorough materialist who believes in the order and permanence of which he is a part.

He was a man who liked order in everything. . . . Even in the thrust and jostle of the crowd his soul rejoiced, for he saw order everywhere. It was order that made the millions swarm at morning to their work in little cells, and swarm again at evening from their work to other little cells. It was an order as inevitable as the seasons, and in it Mr. Jack read the same harmony and permanence which he saw in the entire visible universe around him. (You Can't Go Home Again, p.151)

For Wolfe, the progress of the seasons is the only inevitable order to be found in a world otherwise characterized by

change. Mr. Jack's apartment house rumbles beneath him as trains pass through the tunnels below. "All at once a trembling, faint and instant, [sic] passed in the earth below him. He paused, frowning, and an old unquiet feeling to which he could not give a name stirred in his heart. He did not like things to shake and tremble." (You Can't Go Home Again, p.152) Wolfe goes on to say,

> The building was so grand, so huge, so solid-seeming, that it gave the impression of having been hewn from the everlasting rock itself. Yet this was not true at all. The mighty edifice was really tubed and hollowed like a giant honeycomb. It was set on monstrous steel stilts, pillared below on vacancy, and sustained on curving arches. Its nerves, bones, and sinews went down below the level of the street to an underworld of storied basements, and below all these, far in the tortured rock, there was the tunnel's depth. (You Can't Go Home Again, pp.196-197)

For Mr. Jack it was, "not only entirely reasonable but even natural that the whole structure of society from top to bottom should be honeycombed with privilege and dishonesty." (You Can't Go Home Again, p.189) The structure of the symbolic apartment house is now made doubly weak. Not only is it "pillared below on vacancy, and sustained on curving arches," but the pillars and arches themselves are made of "privilege and dishonesty." Mr. Jack is a speculator in the stock market. Wolfe states,

> Mr. Frederick Jack was not essentially different from ten thousand other men of his class and position. . . . For these men were all the victims of an occupational disease -- a kind of mass hypnosis that denied to them the evidence of their senses. It was a monstrous and ironic fact that the very men who had created this world in which every value was false and theatrical saw themselves, not as creatures tranced by fatal illusions, but rather as the most knowing,

practical, and hard-headed men alive. . . . So when they looked about them and saw everywhere nothing but the myriad shapes of privilege, dishonesty, and self-interest, they were convinced that this was inevitably 'the way things are.' (You Can't Go Home Again, p.191)

The Mr. Jacks of America, after the crash, are driven into suicide or senility.

When the bubble of their unreal world suddenly exploded before their eyes, many of them were so little capable of facing harsh reality and truth that they blew their brains out or threw themselves from the high windows of their offices into the streets below. And of those who faced it and saw it through, many a one who had been plump, immaculate, and assured now shrank and withered into premature and palsied senility. (You Can't Go Home Again, p.192)

Both Mr. Jack and Esther are shown in relation to their servants. Mr. Jack's chauffeur is as much a part of the energy of the city as is his master.

As the driver prowled above his wheel, his dark and sallow face twisted bitterly by the sneer of his thin mouth, his dark eyes shining with an unnatural lustre like those of a man who is under the stimulation of a powerful drug, he seemed to be -- and was -- a creature which this furious city had created for its special uses. His tallowy flesh seemed to have been compacted, like that of millions of other men who wore grey hats and had faces of the same lifeless hue, out of a common city-substance -- the universal grey stuff of pavements, buildings, towers, tunnels, and bridges. (You Can't Go Home Again, p.188)

The relationship between Esther and her maid Nora is quite different. Esther has found success and fulfillment in theatrical designing, and radiates achievement and satisfaction. Nora is unable to find fulfillment in anything, because she feels it beneath her dignity to try, and so remains baffled and confused. Wolfe believed that happiness and contentment were connected with work. He wrote to Margaret Roberts,

as for this thing I used to call happiness, I am not so sure but that it . . . is a very hard and thorny thing, and not the smooth and palatable thing I thought it was. And I am perfectly sure that whatever it is, if it exists at all, it cannot exist without work. . . . As far as I am concerned, there is no life without work -- at least, looking back over my own, everything I can remember of any value is somehow tied up with work. (The Letters of Thomas Wolfe, p.737)

Nora is aware that she has neither the talent nor the energy of her mistress.

And this awareness, so far from arousing any feeling of inferiority in her, only contributed to her self-satisfaction, making her feel that it was Mrs. Jack, not herself, who was really the working woman, and that she -- enjoying the same food, the same drink, the same shelter, even the same clothing -- would not swap places with her for anything on earth. (You Can't Go Home Again, p.168)

As in Look Homeward, Angel, Wolfe develops the theme that human beings are unable to communicate fully with one another. The idea, however, is expressed in terms of the two women, rather than by apostrophe or rhetoric. Nora feels that the years have taken no toll of Esther, but is unable to understand why. "No -- no escape, except for her, the maid was thinking bitterly, with a dull feeling of inarticulate outrage, and for her, for her, there was never anything but triumph. For her the years brought nothing but a constantly growing success. And why? Why?" (You Can't Go Home Again, p.169)

Esther, however, is equally unable to communicate with Nora:

she felt momentarily the detached curiosity that a powerful, rich, and decisive character may feel when he pauses for a moment from the brilliant exercise of a talent that has crowned his life with triumphant ease and success almost every step of the way, and notes suddenly, and with surprise,

> that most of the other people in the world are fumbling blindly and wretchedly about, eking out from day to day the flabby substance of grey lives. She realized with regret that such people are so utterly lacking in any individual distinction that each seems to be a small particle of some immense and vicious life-stuff rather than a living creature who is able to feel and to inspire love, beauty, joy, passion, pain, and death. (You Can't Go Home Again, pp.170-171)

Both Mr. Jack's chauffeur and Nora, then, are shown as the same general type -- people compacted out of "a common city-substance," or "some immense and vicious life-stuff."

Wolfe makes it clear during the description of the party and its aftermath, that, aside from the inherent differences of potential in human beings, the arbitrary division of people into compartments of single or mass production is the decision of the extant social order. The two separate elements -- masters and servants -- are compared and contrasted throughout the party scenes. On one side are the Jacks, their friends, and all the people who live in the apartment house, and on the other are the maids and the elevator men.

Esther's friends, of whom George Webber is one, include mistresses, lovers, nymphomaniacs and homosexuals. Their world is amoral and decadent. George muses,

> It was not so much what they did, for in this there was no appreciable difference between themselves and him. It was their attitude of acceptance, the things they thought and felt about what they did, their complaisance about themselves and about their life, their loss of faith in anything better. . . . Still, there could be no question that these people were an honored group. . . . Their gifts were valuable and many, and had won for them the world's

grateful applause. . . . When the oppressed, the weak, the stricken and betrayed of men had been falsely accused and put to death, these tongues had been lifted in indignant protest -- if only the issue had been fashionable! (You Can't Go Home Again, pp.260-261)

George cannot escape the truth that although the people of the Jacks' world protest against false judgments, they are indirectly responsible for the position of those they help:

such as these might lift their voices and parade their placards till the crack of doom, but . . . in the secret and entrenched resources of their lives they had all battened on the blood of common man, and wrung their profits from the sweat of slaves, like any common overseer of money and of privilege that ever lived. (You Can't Go Home Again, p.261)

This idea is exemplified in the description of Piggy Logan's circus. The performance is the highlight of the evening, and the sword-swallowing act is the climax of the circus.

Mr. Logan . . . picked up a small rag doll, stuffed with wadding and with crudely painted features, and with the other hand he took a long hairpin, bent it more or less straight, forced one end through the fabric of the doll's mouth, and then began patiently and methodically to work it down the rag throat. . . . Halfway down he struck an obstacle that threatened to stop him from going any farther. But he persisted -- persisted horribly. . . . As Mr. Logan kept working and pressing with his hairpin, suddenly the side of the bulging doll was torn open and some of the stuffing began to ooze out. (You Can't Go Home Again, pp.280-281)

The people at the party are able to see exactly what happens when the doll is torn open, and are horrified and repelled by the spectacle. They are not, however, able to see the relationship between Mr. Logan and his doll, and themselves and 'the blood of common man.' The fact that they are not

is one of George Webber's and Wolfe's chief indictments against the society to which they belong.

If the people of Esther's world are unknowing and unseeing, Wolfe shows that the same can be true of others less privileged. One of the elevator men, John Enborg, is quite prepared to accept the difference between his economic position and that of the Jacks' and does all he can to protect them. He complains about the number of panhandlers in the neighbourhood. "'It's got so it ain't safe for a woman in the house to take the dog around the block. Some greasy bum will be after her before she gets back. If I was the management I'd put a stop to it. A house like this can't afford it. The kind of people we got here don't have to stand for it.'" (You Can't Go Home Again, p.198)

John Enborg's attitude is opposed by that of Henry, another elevator man. Henry belongs to a union, and bitterly resents the position of those he serves. He tells John,

> 'You're goin' to get hit, Pop. And it ain't goin' to be by nothin' small or cheap. . . . You're goin' to get hit by somethin' big and shiny that cost a lot of dough. You'll get hit by at least a Rolls Royce. And I hope it belongs to one of the people in this house. You'll die like any other worm, but I want you to push off knowin' that it was done expensive -- by a big Rolls Royce -- by one of the people in this house. I just want you to be happy, Pop.' (You Can't Go Home Again, pp.209-210)

Herbert, the third elevator man, represents the mean between the two extremes of the others. He is not as satisfied with the existing order as John is, but he wants changes to be

made peacefully. Herbert belongs to the union, but unlike Henry, has not whole-heartedly embraced the cause of the workers.

Wolfe identifies himself with the "promise of America" rather than with any specific segment of society. By juxtaposing characters from different social groups, he makes clear that the promise has been betrayed. He examines the relationships between such people as Esther and Nora, Mr. Jack and his chauffeur, the Jacks' guests and Piggy Logan, and the hotel residents and employees, in order to discover what the relationships between these people are, and why and how they developed. Mrs. Jack and the people of her world, with a few exceptions, have found occupations that suit their individual needs and desires. They have been able to do so because of economic freedom, inherent ability, and education. The characters against whom they are shown -- the maid, the chauffeur, the entertainer, and the employees -- have few of these advantages. The result is that the members of the second group are unable to refuse either the values or the positions offered to them, and any potential within them remains unfilfilled. Nora, believing that an idle life is more desirable than a productive one, cannot explain her sense of inadequacy when faced with Mrs. Jack's joyful use of her talent. Mr. Jack's chauffeur has renounced his individuality so completely that his existence is registered only on the speedometer of the car he drives. Piggy Logan

caters to the fashions of those who watch him, and two of the elevator men give their lives to the residents of the house. These people are unaware that America originally promised "to every man his chance -- to every man, regardless of his birth, his shining, golden opportunity -- to every man the right to live, to work, to be himself, and to become whatever thing his manhood and his vision can combine to make him. . . ." (You Can't Go Home Again, p.508) The people of the Jack's world have betrayed the original promise of America by adopting false standards and imposing them on the less privileged strata of society.

When the fire breaks out, everyone in the apartment house is affected. Because of their privileged position, the Jacks and their friends are able to escape the fire. The servants also leave the building safely because the Jacks assume responsibility for their welfare. Mrs. Jack's maids have so little interest in their personal safety that they have to be shepherded out of the building: "the smell of smoke seemed much stronger, more acrid and biting, and it was beginning to make their eyes smart. Nora moaned a little, and all the servants started to mill around like stricken cattle. . . . Mrs. Jack and George herded the servants before them. . . ." (You Can't Go Home Again, pp.289,292)

Herbert and John also have no interest in their personal safety, but for a different reason. They try to

evacuate the building by means of the elevators, instead of abandoning their posts and letting the people use the stairs. No one is concerned with the welfare and safety of the elevator men, and as a result, both of them are smothered by smoke, Herbert in the regular elevator, and John in the service one. Their deaths are accidental; "'some excited fool fumbled for the light switches and grabbed the wrong one and shut the current off on 'em.'" (You Can't Go Home Again, p.311)

When the fire is over, and Mr. and Mrs. Jack return to their apartment, the elevator is operated by Henry. Mrs. Jack, not knowing about the deaths of John and Herbert, asks, "'Hasn't it been a thrilling evening?'" (You Can't Go Home Again, p.313) She goes on to say, "'I suppose Herbert had a harder time of it tonight than any of you, getting all these people out.'" (You Can't Go Home Again, p.314) When Henry does not reply, Mrs. Jack becomes annoyed.

'Honestly, that fellow makes me tired! He's such a grouch! And he's getting worse every day! It's got so now he won't even answer when you speak to him!'
'Well, Esther, maybe he's tired out tonight,' suggested Mr. Jack pacifically. 'They've all been under a pretty severe strain, you know.'
'So I suppose that's our fault?' said Mrs. Jack ironically. (You Can't Go Home Again, p.314)

During the fire, the people who have escaped assemble outside the building, and Wolfe gives a picture of democracy in action. The usual barriers between the inhabitants have broken down in the common escape from

danger:

> the people shifted and moved about, taking curious side looks at one another out of the corners of their eyes. Most of them had never even seen their neighbors before, and now for the first time they had an opportunity to appraise one another. And in a little while, as the excitement and their need for communication broke through the walls of their reserve, they began to show a spirit of fellowship such as that enormous beehive of life had never seen before. People who, at other times, had never deigned so much as to nod at each other were soon laughing and talking together with the familiarity of long acquaintance. (You Can't Go Home Again, p.297)

When the danger is over, however, the barriers immediately reappear.

> The spirit of the crowd was altogether different now from what it had been a few hours earlier. All these people had recaptured their customary assurance and poise. The informality and friendliness that they had shown to one another during the excitement had vanished. It was almost as if they were now a little ashamed of the emotions which had betrayed them into injudicious cordialities and unwonted neighborliness. Each little family group had withdrawn frigidly into its own separate entity, and was filing back into its own snug cell. (You Can't Go Home Again, p.313)

The fire affects all levels of the building. It starts in the basement, is carried through air vents to the top floor, and the water used to put out the fire floods two levels of railroad tracks beneath the building. The apartment house and its inhabitants is a microcosm of society, and the fire itself is a symbol of the disaster threatening all of America. The residents take it for granted that the standards applying before the outbreak of fire also apply after it, but Wolfe, by comparing the fire to the stock market crash which takes place a week later, emphasizes that Americans must not try to go home again to the pre-crash standards.

By the end of Book Two, Wolfe has shown two groups of people living in different parts of America, both of whom have mistaken their own section for the whole. The people of Libya Hill could not see that their town was merely one of thousands, and that their dreams of prosperity were completely unreasonable. The Jacks, living in their snug little world, also cannot see the effect of their domination on all the Randys, Johns, and Herberts of the country. Throughout both books Wolfe continually points out that both the isolated sections and the people described are typical of the other comparable sections and people of America.

In the italicised opening to Book Three, Wolfe says,

> America, in the fall of 1929, was like a cicada. It had come to an end and a beginning. On October 24th, in New York, in a marble-fronted building down in Wall Street, there was a sudden crash that was heard throughout the land. The dead and outworn husk of the America that had been had cracked and split right down the back, and the living, changing, suffering thing within -- the real America, the America that had always been, the America that was yet to be -- began now slowly to emerge. It came forth into the light of day, stunned, cramped, crippled by the bonds of its imprisonment, and for a long time it remained in a state of suspended animation, full of latent vitality, waiting, waiting patiently, for the next stage of its metamorphosis. (<u>You Can't Go Home Again</u>, pp.323-324)

When George moves to Brooklyn, and becomes an observer of yet another stratum of life, America also slowly becomes aware of the sum of her parts. The "fire" of the crash has now spread all over America, and the people are united in fear and incertitude:

the suddenness of it sent waves of desperate fear moving in ever-widening circles throughout America. Millions of people in the far-off hamlets, towns, and cities did not know what to make of it . . . the waves of fear . . . touched them, and life was not quite the same. Security was gone, and there was a sense of dread and ominous foreboding in the air. (You Can't Go Home Again, pp.325-326)

George expresses this sense of fear and incertitude to Randy.

Sometimes it seems to me . . . that America went off the track somewhere -- back around the time of the Civil War, or pretty soon afterwards. Instead of going ahead and developing along the line in which the country started out, it got shunted off in another direction -- and now we look around and see we've gone places we didn't mean to go. Suddenly we realize that America has turned into something ugly -- and vicious -- and corroded at the heart of its power with easy wealth and graft and special privilege. . . . And the worst of it is the intellectual dishonesty which all this corruption has bred. People are afraid to think straight -- afraid to face themselves -- afraid to look at things and see them as they are. (You Can't Go Home Again, p.393)

George goes to England to finish his second book, and also, "to get away from America for a while. Too much was happening here -- it was too exciting and disturbing. The whole thing was in such a state of flux, in such a prophetic condition of becoming, that the sheer exhilaration of watching it made it hard to concentrate upon the immediate job he had to do." (You Can't Go Home Again, p.509) In England, George obtains a char-woman -- Daisy Purvis -- with his rented flat, and experiences directly the same kind of attitude that was described by Wolfe in the person of John Enborg. Daisy sympathizes with the hard lot that causes noblemen to sell one of their six estates, is quite content with her own position, and has no sympathy whatever for those beneath her in the social scale. In the same way,

John Enborg had the Jacks' security at heart, and was not interested in the fate of the panhandlers.

George tries to make Daisy aware of the insecurity of her own position, in relation to that of the Dukes and Earls. "'You're the one who will have to go on the dole if you get out of work. Those people are not going to suffer, not really, not the way you'll have to.'" Daisy, however, does not consider her own life important. She replies, "'Ah-h yes . . . but then, we're used to it, aren't we? And they, poor things, they're not.'" (You Can't Go Home Again, p.523) George, with his belief in the rights of individuals, cannot understand Daisy's attitude.

> It was appalling. He couldn't fathom it. He just felt as if he'd come up smack against an impregnable wall. You could call it what you liked -- servile snobbishness, blind ignorance, imbecilic stupidity -- but there it was. You couldn't shatter it, you couldn't even shake it. It was the most formidable example of devotion and loyalty he had ever known. (You Can't Go Home Again, p.523)

Daisy will not waste herself on the poor because she feels their presence is inevitable. For Daisy, the social divisions of England are static and unchangeable, whereas George, having just witnessed the stock market crash which was the result of such belief in America, feels, not only that every individual must see society as a whole, but also that the structure of society must be fluid and adaptable. Daisy, instead of being interested in suffering people, is very much concerned with suffering animals.

> In the complete and unquestioning loyalty of her character, Mrs. Purvis was like a large and gentle dog. Indeed, her whole relation to life was curiously animal-like. She had

an intense concern for every member of brute creation, and when she saw dogs or horses in the streets she always seemed to notice first the animal and then the human being that it belonged to. . . . There was something disturbing and unwholesome about the extravagance of this feeling for animals. . . . Her attitude toward the poor, of whom she was one, was remarkable for its philosophic acceptance. (You Can't Go Home Again, pp.527,529)

George sees the standards of England, and later of Germany, in relation to the values and trends in America. Fresh from his American experiences, George is suddenly able to see England as a whole.

George discovered that there are really two different orders of humanity in England, and they are so far apart that they hardly seem to belong to the same species. They are the Big People and the Little People. . . . It was like a kind of terrible magic to realize suddenly that he had been living in this English world and seeing only one part of it, thinking it was the whole. (You Can't Go Home Again, pp.530-531)

Daisy revers one part of English society -- the aristocracy -- and considers it the only important part. In America Daisy's attitude had been widespread, in that each segment of society had been unable to understand its relationship to the whole, and the result had been the crash.

In Germany, George becomes permanently aware of the fate of the downtrodden everywhere. The country, under the domination of the Nazis, has a spiritual disease. When George and his companions are on a train leaving Germany, a Jew is caught trying to cross the frontier. The Jew on the station watches the train ride by him to freedom.

He looked once, directly and steadfastly, at his former companions, and they at him. And in that gaze there was all the unmeasured weight of man's mortal anguish. George and the others felt somehow naked and ashamed, and somehow

guilty. They all felt that they were saying farewell, not to a man but to humanity; not to some pathetic stranger, some chance acquaintance of the voyage, but to mankind; not to some nameless cipher out of life, but to the fading image of a brother's face. (You Can't Go Home Again, p.699)

Daisy's attitude, adopted by Americans, had resulted in the crash; if the thinking prevalent in Nazi Germany became widespread in America, the promise of the country would be completely shattered. George, witnessing the growth and force of barbaric atavism in Germany, recognizes the symptoms of the disease in America: "in this far place and under these profoundly moving and disturbing alien circumstances . . . I realized fully, for the first time, how sick America was, and saw, too, that the ailment was akin to Germany's -- a dread world sickness of the soul." (You Can't Go Home Again, pp.729-730)

George sees the sickness in America as the great difference between the conditions of groups of Americans. There are "the haggard faces of the homeless men, the wanderers, the disinherited of America," and in contrast is the "upper world of night, glittering with its riches, and its soft, sophisticated pleasures, and its cold indifference to the misery and injustice on which its very life was founded." (You Can't Go Home Again, p.729) If the promise of America is not heeded, democracy will degenerate still further into dictatorship. George feels that America can be cured if the people are willing to see and act upon the truth; if the conditions of the country as a whole can be changed.

America was young, America was still the New World of mankind's hope, America was not like this old and worn-out Europe which seethed and festered with a thousand deep and uncorrected ancient maladies. America was still resiliant, still responsive to a cure -- if only -- if only -- men could somehow cease to be afraid of truth. For the plain and searching light of truth, which had here, in Germany, been darkened to extinction, was the remedy, the only one, that could cleanse and heal the suffering soul of man. (You Can't Go Home Again, p.730)

In the chapters containing the Green episode, and also in short scenes throughout the book, Wolfe's concern for society and mankind as a whole is related in terms of America. The chapters "The Hollow Men" and "The Anodyne" are also connected with the meanings of the title of the book, and with George's manifesto, as presented in the long closing letter.

Foxhall Edwards is much more than an editor to George. Early in the book Wolfe writes, "Little by little it seemed to George that he had found in Fox the father he had lost and had long been looking for. And so it was that Fox became a second father to him -- the father of his spirit." (You Can't Go Home Again, p.27) The finding of Foxhall Edwards, then, is the end of the search for a father that was a part of all Wolfe's earlier books.

As early as 1929, Wolfe wrote to Maxwell Perkins,

Young men sometimes believe in the existence of heroic figures, stronger and wiser than themselves, to whom they can turn for an answer to all their vexation and grief. Later, they must discover that such answers have to come out of their own hearts; but the powerful desire to believe in such figures persists. You are for me such a figure: you are one of the rocks to which my life is anchored. (The Letters of Thomas Wolfe, p.213)

To John Wheelock he wrote, "I cling to the old child's belief -- that there are older people who are wiser and stronger, and who can help me." (The Letters of Thomas Wolfe, p.183) Wolfe eventually broke with Maxwell Perkins, and as You Can't Go Home Again progresses George becomes aware that he must leave Foxhall Edwards. The reason for George's departure from Edwards is the difference in their attitudes to life. There is no mention in You Can't Go Home Again of the publishing and legal worries that haunted Wolfe.

The Green episode can be seen as a prelude to the manifesto. It describes specifically what Wolfe expresses generally at the end of the book. Foxhall Edwards, while reading a morning newspaper, comes across a small news item.

> An unidentified man fell or jumped yesterday at noon from the twelfth story of the Admiral Francis Drake Hotel, corner of Hay and Apple Streets, in Brooklyn. The man, who was about thirty-five years old, registered at the hotel about a week ago, according to the police, as C. Green. Police are of the opinion that this was an assumed name. Pending identification, the body is being held at the King's County Morgue. (You Can't Go Home Again, p.461)

The chapter then develops as an address from the author to the wraith of Admiral Francis Drake.

Wolfe wanted to show that mankind and human nature have not changed since the time of the Admiral, but that the times themselves have changed. The conditions in America no longer allow "to every man the right to live, to work, to be himself, and to become whatever thing his manhood and his vision can combine to make him. . . ."

(You Can't Go Home Again, p.508) Randy, having been let go by "The Federal Weight, Scales, and Computing Company," is unable to find another job. "Randy -- he of the clear eyes and the quick intelligence -- he who was nobody's fool -- he who thought he loved the truth and had always been able to see straight to the heart of most things -- Randy went on relief." (You Can't Go Home Again, p.395)

Wolfe writes,

> Melville, at the beginning of his great fable, Moby Dick, tells how the city people of his time would, on every occasion that was afforded them, go down to the dock, to the very edges of the wharf, and stand there looking out to sea. In the great city of today, however, there is no sea to look out to, or, if there is, it is so far away, so inaccessible, walled in behind such infinite ramifications of stone and steel, that the effort to get to it is disheartening. So now, when the city man looks out, he looks out at nothing but crowded vacancy. (You Can't Go Home Again, pp.427-428)

In the chapter "The Hollow Men," Wolfe uses Green as an example of modern city man, and compares his daily activities with those of Drake.

> Drake was self-contained: the world his oyster, seas his pastures, mighty distances his wings. His eyes were sea-pale (like the eyes of Fox); his ship was England. Green had no ship, he had a motor car, and tore down concrete roads on Sunday, and halted with the lights against him with the million other cinders hurtling through hot space. Green walked on level concrete sidewalks and on pavements grey, through hot and grimy streets past rusty tenements. Drake set his sails against the west, he strode the buoyant, sea-washed decks, he took the Spaniard and his gold, and at the end he stood in to the sweet enfoldments of the spire, the clustered town, the emerald fields that slope to Plymouth harbor -- then Green came! (You Can't Go Home Again, pp.469-470)

The truck drivers, whom Wolfe describes early in the book, are another example of modern city man.

> The city was their stony-hearted mother, and from her breast they had drawn a bitter nurture. . . . They lived

like creatures born full-grown into present time, shedding the whole accumulation of the past with every breath, and all their lives were written in the passing of each actual moment. . . . Each day, with minds untroubled, they embarked upon adventures from which the bravest men bred in the wilderness would have recoiled in terror and desolation. (You Can't Go Home Again, p.38)

Their lives seem glorious to George; they, like Nebraska Crane, have found a work that they are able to do, and they do it completely.

Oh, he was with them, of them, for them, blood brother of their joy and hunger. . . . They swept cleanly through the night into the first light and birdsong of the morning, into the morning of new joy upon the earth; and as he thought of this it seemed to him that the secret, wild, and lonely heart of man was young and living in the darkness, and could never die. (You Can't Go Home Again, p.40)

George feels unable to direct his life with the certitude of the truck drivers, and later, the author identifies himself with Green, who is unable to use his strength and talents. Wolfe writes of the truck drivers,

The power and precision with which they worked stirred in George a deep emotion of respect, and also touched him with humility. For whenever he saw it, his own life, with its conflicting desires, its uncertain projects and designs, its labors begun in hope and so often ended in incompletion, by comparison with the lives of these men who had learned to use their strength and talents perfectly, seemed faltering, blind, and baffled. (You Can't Go Home Again, p.39)

In the chapter "The Anodyne," Wolfe writes, "Fox knew Green all right -- knew him better than we, the Concentrated Blotters of Green's ilk. For, being of the ilk, we grow confused, struggle with Green (so with ourselves), argue, debate, deny, are tarred with the same brush, and so lose judgment." (You Can't Go Home Again, pp.483-484)

Wolfe negates T.S. Eliot's claim that in this

mechanized age, we are "the hollow men." Eliot says that the world ends, "not with a bang but a whimper."[2] Green, however, ends his life with a bang; he explodes into life.

> Green has wilfully and deliberately violated every Standard Concentrated Principle of Blotterdom. He has not only gone and dashed his brains out, but he has done it in a public place -- upon a piece of Standard Concentrated Mobway. . . . And, to make his crime unpardonable, C. Green has -- Come to Life! . . . No longer is he just 'another guy' -- already he has become a 'special guy' -- he has become 'The Guy.' C. Green at last has turned into a -- Man! (You Can't Go Home Again, pp.478-479)

Green's reason for jumping from the building is his refusal to remain a Concentrated Blotter. "If he, in the midst of his always-driven life, could at last be driven to this final and defiant gesture of refusal to remain a Concentrated Blotter, then we, too, might be driven to a point of equal desperation!" (You Can't Go Home Again, p.479)

Wolfe makes it clear that Green was not such a man as Drake.

> No Drake was he, no Spaniard, no coon-skin cap, no strong face burning West. Yet, in some remote and protoplasmic portion, he was a little of each of these. A little Scotch, perhaps, was Green, a little Irish, English, Spanish even, and some German -- a little of each part, all compacted and exploded into nameless atom of America! (You Can't Go Home Again, p.469)

What Green and Drake have in common with every other man, is blood and life. Wolfe contrasts the greyness and monotony of the mass-produced sidewalks, streets, and lamp posts from the "Standard Production Units of America, No.1" (You Can't Go Home Again, p.476), with the brightness of Green's blood.

> Admiral Drake, if we had seen you lying on your deck . . . imbrued in your own blood . . . we could have understood

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[2]The Hollow Men. V.31.

that, for there was blood in you. But Green -- this Concentrated Blotter of ten minutes since -- made in our own image, shaped in our own dust, compacted of the same grey stuff of which our own lives are compacted, and filled, we thought, with the same Standard Concentration of embalming fluid that fills our veins -- oh, Drake, we did not know the fellow had such blood in him! We could not have thought it was so red, so rich, and so abundant! (You Can't Go Home Again, p.479)

Life is important for Wolfe, and so the reason for Green's leap into death, and paradoxically into life, is important. In the Preface to You Can't Go Home Again, which was taken from The Web and The Rock, Wolfe writes,

There came to him an image of man's whole life upon the earth. It seemed to him that all man's life was like a tiny spurt of flame that blazed out briefly in an illimitable and terrifying darkness, and that all man's grandeur, tragic dignity, his heroic glory, came from the brevity and smallness of this flame. He knew his life was little and would be extinguished, and that only darkness was immense and everlasting. And he knew that he would die with defiance on his lips, and that the shout of his denial would ring with the last pulsing of his heart into the maw of all-engulfing night. (Preface of You Can't Go Home Again)

Green's life was so negative and so empty, that the only affirmation possible for him was his leap into death. Wolfe wants life to be affirmative and death to be negative. Society must be changed to enable people to find joy and fulfillment in their lives. Wolfe never actually defines the social changes he considers necessary. At the end of the chapter "The Wounded Faun," when Randy has left, after helping George to see his purpose as an artist, George muses,

What Randy didn't know was that business also had its wounded fauns. And they, it seemed were a species that you could not kill so lightly. For business was the most precious form of egotism -- self-interest at its dollar value. Kill that with truth, and what would be left? A better way of life, perhaps, but it would not be built on business as we know it. (You Can't Go Home Again, p.396)

Wolfe bases his arguments on the faith and hope that life

can and will improve.

Wolfe spends over twenty pages describing the life and death of Green; Fox absorbs it quickly and moves on to other things.

> Fox read it instantly, the proud nose sniffing upward sharply -- 'man fell or jumped . . . Admiral Francis Drake Hotel . . . Brooklyn.' The sea-pale eyes took it in at once, and went on to more important things. Fox was cold, then? Hard? Selfish? Lacking in understanding? Unsympathetic? Unimaginative? By no means. . . . Not of Green's ilk, yet was he still of the whole family of earth. Fox knew at once that Green had blood in him. (You Can't Go Home Again, pp.483-484)

Fox does not believe that life can and will improve; he will do his utmost to avert an avoidable disaster, but will not spend himself on problems that he considers inevitable.

> So, then, unhoping hopefulness, and resigned acceptance; patient fatality, and unflagging effort and unflinching will. Has no hope, really, for the end, the whole amount of things; has hope incessant for the individual things themselves. . . . But for other things foreordained and inevitable, not saveable by any means, then a little sadness -- 'Too bad' -- but in the end a tranquil fatality of calm acceptance: the thing had to be, it couldn't be helped. (You Can't Go Home Again, pp.492-493)

The whole of You Can't Go Home Again exemplifies Wolfe's view that life cannot be allowed to retrogress or to remain static, but that it must always be made to grow and develop. Aswell, in the opening to Book Seven, included a slightly changed passage from one of Wolfe's letters to him, that explains the meanings of the title.

> You can't go back home to your family, back home to your childhood, back home to romantic love, back home to a young man's dreams of glory and of fame, back home to exile, to escape to Europe and some foreign land, back home to lyricism, to singing just for singing's sake, back home to aestheticism, to one's youthful idea of 'the artist' and the all-sufficiency of 'art' and 'beauty' and 'love,' back home to the ivory tower, back home to places in the

country, to the cottage in Bermuda, away from all the strife and conflict of the world, back home to the father you have lost and have been looking for, back home to someone who can help you, save you, ease the burden for you, back home to the old forms and systems of things which once seemed everlasting but which are changing all the time -- back home to the escapes of Time and Memory. (You Can't Go Home Again, p.706)

In the letter to Aswell Wolfe also wrote,

Each of these discoveries, sad and hard as they are to make and accept, are described in the book almost in the order in which they are named here. But the conclusion is not sad: this is a hopeful book -- the conclusion is that although you can't go home again, the home of every one of us is in the future: there is no other way. (The Letters of Thomas Wolfe, p.712)

Most of these discoveries are made in terms of George Webber, but some are illustrated both by other characters and by the whole conglomerate of America. The book opens with an immediate contradiction of the title. George reminds himself, "as he had done a hundred times in the last few weeks, that he had really come home again -- home to America, home to Manhattan's swarming rock, and home again to love. . . ." (You Can't Go Home Again, p.4)

When George returns to Libya Hill during the boom, Rumford Bland poses one of the meanings of the title by asking him, "And do you think you can go home again?" (You Can't Go Home Again, p.83) Even before Bland asks the question, George is bewildered by the conversation of the local politicians on the train.

He was going back home for the first time in several years, and he wanted to see the town as he remembered it. Evidently he would find it considerably changed. But what was this that was happening to it? He couldn't make it out. It disturbed him vaguely, as one is always disturbed and shaken by the sudden realization of Time's changes in

something that one has known all one's life. (You Can't Go Home Again, p.54)

Rickenbach Reade, who lives in Surrey illustrates the escape "back home to places in the country."

> Rickenbach Reade, George began to see after a while, was one of those men who are unequal to the conditions of modern life, and who have accordingly retreated from the tough realities which they could not face. The phenomenon was not a new one to George. He had met and observed a number of people like this. And it was now evident to him that they formed another group or family or race, another of those little worlds which have no boundary lines of country or of place. (You Can't Go Home Again, p.605)

America herself cannot go home again after the crash.

> The leaders of the nation had fixed their gaze so long upon the illusions of a false prosperity that they had forgotten what America looked like. Now they saw it -- saw its newness, its raw crudeness, and its strength -- and turned their shuddering eyes away, 'Give us back our well-worn husk,' they said, 'where we were so snug and comfortable.' . . . They did not know that you can't go home again. America had come to the end of something, and to the beginning of something else. (You Can't Go Home Again, p.324)

The phrase "you can't go home again" has other implications. Man cannot allow himself to be governed by barbaric urges. In Germany under Hitler, George sees how the atavistic traits of "greed and lust and force" (You Can't Go Home Again, p.705), can dominate and ruin a country. He realizes that,

> this spirit was not confined to Germany. It belonged to no one race. It was a terrible part of the universal heritage of man. One saw traces of it everywhere. . . . America had it, too, in various forms. For wherever ruthless men conspired together for their own ends, wherever the rule of dog-eat-dog was dominant, there it bred. And wherever one found it, one also found that its roots sank down into something primitive in man's ugly past. And these roots would somehow have to be eradicated, George felt, if man

was to win his ultimate freedom and not be plunged back into savagery and perish utterly from the earth. (You Can't Go Home Again, p.706)

Wolfe wrote to Elizabeth Nowell in May, 1938,

For months now, it has occurred to me that I would conclude the tremendously long book on which I am working with a kind of epilogue that takes the form of personal address -- to be called, 'You Can't Go Home Again' or 'A Farewell to the Fox,' or perhaps by still another title. That epilogue, as I have conceived it, would be a kind of impassioned summing up of the whole book, of everything that has gone before, and a final statement of what is now. (The Letters of Thomas Wolfe, p.751)

Book Seven was finally called "A Wind is Rising and the Rivers Flow." Wolfe originally wrote this phrase -- which is the last sentence of You Can't Go Home Again -- as a part of a short novel, "I have a Thing to Tell You," which was published in The New Republic in 1937. In that context the phrase had political overtones. It referred to the coming of revolutions in the world, and the dangers inherent in atavism. As Fox reads about the state of the world in the newspaper in the chapter "The Anodyne," he worries about the fate of his five daughters. Fox wants to surround them with permanence, to find them all good and ever-protecting husbands, and Wolfe answers him by developing the phrase "a wind is rising and the rivers flow."

The day of wrath, the huge storm howling through the earth again -- again the Terror and Jemappes! -- again November and Moscow! -- the whole flood broke through the mighty river re-arisen, the dark tide flowing in the hearts of men, and a great wind howling through the earth, good Fox, that tears off rooftops like a sheet of paper, bends the strongest oak trees to the ground, knocks down the walls, and levels the warmest, strongest, and most solid folds that ever sheltered fleecelings in security -- leaving fleecelings where? (You Can't Go Home Again, p.495)

Change is inevitable. The phrase "a wind is rising and the rivers flow" as the last line of the book, shows that change can also be for the better.

In the first chapter of the seventh book, "Young Icarus," George describes part of his youth to Fox. He includes the description of a tragedy in which he, with four other boys, had been involved at college:

> five of us . . . had taken our classmate Bell out to the playing field one night, blindfolded him, and compelled him to dance upon a barrel . . . he stumbled and toppled from the barrel, fell on a broken bottle neck, severed his jugular, and bled to death within five minutes. . . . the five of us -- myself and Randy Shepperton, John Brackett, Stowall Anderson, and Dick Carr -- were expelled, brought up for trial, released in the custody of our parents or nearest relatives, and deprived of the rights of citizenship by legislative act. (You Can't Go Home Again, p.712)

George ostensibly brings the matter up to tell Fox the truth, lest he hear a false version of the story, and to state that,

> I am not the victim or the embittered martyr of anything that ever happened in the past. Oh, yes, there was a time, as you well know, when I was full of bitterness. There was a time when I felt that life had betrayed me. But that preciousness is gone now, and with it has gone my bitterness. This is the simple truth. (You Can't Go Home Again, p.712)

George then goes on to state emphatically that he is not a member of the Lost Generation. "If I have been elected, it was against my knowledge and my will -- and I resign. I do not feel that I belong to a Lost Generation, and I have never felt so. Indeed, I doubt very much the existence of a Lost Generation, except in so far as every generation, groping, must be lost." (You Can't Go Home

Again, p.715) He agrees, however, that he, personally, was lost:

> as an individual, I was lost. Perhaps that is one reason, Fox, why for so long I needed you so desperately. For I was lost, and was looking for someone older and wiser to show me the way, and I found you, and you took the place of my father who had died. In our nine years together you did help me find the way, though you could hardly have been aware just how you did it, and the road now leads off in a direction contrary to your intent. For the fact is that now I no longer feel lost, and I want to tell you why. (You Can't Go Home Again, p.716)

The other members of the hazing disaster were not "lost." They all attain some measure of respectability in their communities. Stowall Anderson tells George, "'People . . . are willing to forget a past mistake if they see you're regular. They're not only willing to forgive -- on the whole, I think they're even glad to give a helping hand.'" (You Can't Go Home Again, p.714) George, however, is not a "regular" person as far as Libya Hill is concerned. He is far removed from the interests of the community, and the townspeople resented the picture he drew of them in his first book. George, having been outlawed, even though only for a short time, from the rights of citizenship, and lacking the "helping hand" of the people of Libya Hill, was indeed lost, and much more completely than the members of the Lost Generation.

By describing the hazing episode and its aftermath to Fox, George is really giving him a brief summary of the reasons both for his dependence, and for the necessity of breaking away from that dependence. Having been lost, he found a father, but because Fox was a father, George must

leave him to follow his own ideals. George cannot keep on going home again.

George tells Fox,

> And yet, to me you are inevitable, so that, having known you, I cannot imagine what life would have been for me without you. You were a polestar in my destiny. You were the magic thread in the great web, which, being woven now, is finished and complete: the circle of our lives rounds out, full swing, and each of us in his own way now has rounded it: there is no further circle we can make. This, too -- the end as the beginning -- was inevitable: therefore, dear friend and parent of my youth, farewell. (You Can't Go Home Again, p.707)

George refers to his past life as a circle, and he often compares the circle or cycle to that of the life of a plant. In the last chapter of the letter, he writes:

> Just as you are the rock of life, I am the web; just as you are Time's granite, so, I think, am I Time's plant. My life, more than that of anyone I know, has taken on the form of growth. No man that I have known was ever more deeply rooted in the soil of Time and Memory, the weather of his individual universe, than was I. (You Can't Go Home Again, p.739)

George, as a young man, was a plant growing from and returning to "the soil of Time and Memory." As he became older and more experienced, he also became more and more interested in his past, the principle of growth, and the changes and developments of the past that had determined his life. He thanks Fox for helping him during the long process of excavation. "You stayed beside me like the rock you are until I unearthed the plant, followed it back through every fiber of its pattern to its last and tiniest enrootment in the blind, dumb earth. And now . . . it is finished, and the circle come full swing. . . ." (You Can't Go Home Again, p.741) The cyclical part of his life is finished; he has

discovered his roots.

One of the most important meanings of the title now becomes clear. George, having completed the plant-like cycle, realizes that he cannot go home again; that the cycle is not an end in itself, but only a means to an end. He sees now that he must cease to investigate his own past and must concern himself with the future of all of humanity.

> He saw now that you can't go home again -- not ever. There was no road back. Ended now for him, with the sharp and clean finality of the closing of a door, was the time when his dark roots, like those of a pot-bound plant, could be left to feed upon their own substance and nourish their own little self-absorbed designs. Henceforth they must spread outward -- away from the hidden, secret, and unfathomed past that holds man's spirit prisoner -- outward, outward toward the rich and life-giving soil of a new freedom in the wide world of all humanity. And there came to him a vision of man's true home, beyond the ominous and cloud-engulfed horizon of the here and now, in the green and hopeful and still-virgin meadows of the future. (<u>You Can't Go Home Again</u>, p.704)

George's comparison of his life to the life of a plant seems to indicate that you <u>can</u> go home again. The plant comes from the earth and returns to the earth, and George, having grown from the earth, turns back to it to find his roots. The earth, however, is a permanent element in a world otherwise characterized by continual change and so is beyond time. The earth exists in the past, present, and future, and the discovery or rediscovery of the earth is not necessarily a retreat into the past.

Early in <u>You Can't Go Home Again</u>, the face of a man in a window opposite him, becomes for George a symbol of the permanence of the earth; a symbol of the things that never change. The face never speaks and yet it has a voice.

> All things belonging to the earth will never change -- the leaf, the blade, the flower, the wind that cries and sleeps and wakes again, the trees whose stiff arms clash and tremble in the dark, and the dust of lovers long since buried in the earth -- all things proceeding from the earth to seasons, all things that lapse and change and come again upon the earth -- these things will always be the same, for they come up from the earth that never changes, they go back into the earth that lasts forever. Only the earth endures, but it endures forever. (You Can't Go Home Again, p.44)

Wolfe outlined three concepts of time in The Story of a Novel. The first was present time, the second past time, and the third "time immutable."

> The second time element was of past time, one which represented . . . characters as acting and as being acted upon by all the accumulated impact of man's experience so that each moment of their lives was conditioned not only by what they experienced in that moment, but by all they had experienced up to that moment. In addition to these two time elements, there was a third which I conceived as being time immutable, the time of rivers, mountains, oceans, and the earth; a kind of eternal and unchanging universe of time against which would be projected the transience of man's life, the bitter briefness of his day. (The Story of a Novel, pp.51-52)

George, in his obsession with his past, has concentrated on the first two elements of time, to the exclusion of the third. Having traced the roots of his life back to the earth, he now sees that the third time element is the fundamental and important one. Time, instead of being cyclical, becomes linear, as George, relying only on the things that never change, moves into the future.

For America, the timeless and permanent element that must be rediscovered in order to determine the future, is the original "promise" of the country. That promise, like the earth, can be found in the past, present, and future. It exists outside of time because it is an ideal.

Americans must stop being "pot-bound plants." They cannot return to the standards of the twenties; they cannot go home again. George writes,

> I believe that we are lost here in America, but I believe we shall be found. And this belief, which mounts now to the catharsis of knowledge and conviction, is for me -- and I think for all of us -- not only our own hope, but America's everlasting, living dream. . . . I think the true discovery of America is before us. I think the true fulfillment of our spirit, of our people, of our mighty and immortal land, is yet to come. I think the true discovery of our own democracy is still before us. And I think that all these things are certain as the morning, as inevitable as noon. I think I speak for most men living when I say that our America is Here, is Now, and beckons on before us, and that this glorious assurance is not only our living hope, but our dream to be accomplished. (You Can't Go Home Again, p.741)

America, like George, has come full-circle. To find the home that is in the future, Americans must rely on the permanent and timeless ideal that has always been a part of their country.

This vision of the future is the basis of the disagreement between George and Fox. In the first chapter of the book, George muses,

> great Goethe, accepting the inevitable truth that human growth does not proceed in a straight line to its goal, had compared the development and progress of mankind to the reelings of a drunken beggar on horseback. What was important, perhaps, was not that the beggar was drunk and reeling, but that he was mounted on his horse, and however unsteadily, was going somewhere. (You Can't Go Home Again, p.7)

George then asks himself, "Must the beggar on horseback forever reel?" (You Can't Go Home Again, p.8) Fox's answer to this question would be in the affirmative; George will not answer it either in the affirmative or the negative.

Fox, like Ecclesiastes, is a fatalist: he believes

that the evils besetting mankind are ever-present and inevitable. George, while admitting that the attitude of Fox and Ecclesiastes may be valid in terms of eternity, stresses that if any real progress is to be made, each man, and each generation of men, must see the evils around them as curable, and must strive against them. If the evils are inevitable, each man will then still be able to hope that he can remove them. If the evils are not permanent, man will have the satisfaction of conquering them, even if other evils fill the vacancy.

> In everlasting terms -- those of eternity -- you and the Preacher may be right: for there is no greater wisdom than the wisdom of Ecclesiastes, no acceptance finally so true as the stern fatalism of the rock. Man was born to live, to suffer, and to die, and what befalls him is a tragic lot. There is no denying this in the final end. But we must, dear Fox, deny it all along the way. Mankind was fashioned for eternity, but Man-Alive was fashioned for a day. New evils will come after him, but it is with the present evils that he is now concerned. (You Can't Go Home Again, pp.737-738)

George's faith (and also Wolfe's) is centred firmly on the human present. George writes,

> the essence of all faith . . . for such a man as I, the essence of religion for people of my belief, is that man's life can be, and will be, better; that man's greatest enemies, in the forms in which they now exist -- the forms we see on every hand of fear, hatred, slavery, cruelty, poverty, and need -- can be conquered and destroyed. . . . And if, once having conquered them, new enemies approach, we shall meet them from that point, from there proceed. In the affirmation of that fact, the continuance of that unceasing war, is man's religion and his living faith. (You Can't Go Home Again, p.738)

This affirmation of faith in the future completes both the story of George Webber, and the entire history of life as it is shown in Wolfe's four novels.

CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION

Wolfe's four novels describe the growth of a young man from childhood to mature responsibility, and Wolfe himself always thought of his published work as a single unit. As Aswell writes,

> Anyone who reads all the books will see that they are not separate entities, not 'books' in the usual sense. Tom really wrote only one book, and that runs to some 4,000 printed pages comprising the total number of his works. The individual titles that bear his name are only so many numbered volumes of this master book. The parts should be thought of as having been brought out separately merely for convenience. ("A Note on Thomas Wolfe," p.364)

The four novels also trace the growth of an artistic sensibility, and until the end of You Can't Go Home Again, the hero illustrates the predicament of man caught in mortality.

Each novel examines different ideas, in terms of either Eugene Gant or George Webber. In Look Homeward, Angel, as Wolfe wrote to Mrs. Roberts, "the idea that broods over it, and in it, and behind it is that we are all strangers upon this earth we walk on -- that naked and alone do we come into life, and alone, a stranger, each to each, we live upon it." (The Letters of Thomas Wolfe, p.122) This idea in Look Homeward, Angel is combined with the pre-existence-and-return myth, or, the search for the buried life.

At the end of Look Homeward, Angel, Ben tells Eugene, "You are your world" (Look Homeward, Angel, p.661),

but in Of Time and The River Eugene's dominant characteristic is the desire to encompass all the knowledge and experience of the world within himself. Eugene's fury or Faustian hunger is coupled with his search for a father; an image of permanent strength and wisdom who will help him control and direct his life. The search for a father is the continuance of Eugene's search for "a stone, a leaf, a door" in Look Homeward, Angel. Also continued in the second book is the theme of the buried life. In Of Time and The River, however, the buried life does not so much represent the experiences of childhood that are past and gone forever, as it does "the fundamental structure of the great family of earth to which all men belong." (Of Time and The River, p.755) Eugene is unable to equate the "great family of earth" with the father for whom he has been searching, and the book ends with the deflection of both his Faustian hunger and his search for a father, into love for Esther.

George Webber now replaces Eugene Gant. The first half of The Web and The Rock roughly parallels Look Homeward, Angel, in that George grows up in a small town and then goes to college, but George unlike Eugene, also lives in New York. The second half of The Web and The Rock consists of the story of George's love for Esther followed by an account of his travels in Europe. This sequence is the reverse of that found in Of Time and The

River, in which Eugene first travelled and then loved. Eugene and George's trips to Europe are similar, however, in that both are flights from America. Eugene goes to Europe to escape from aestheticism, and George leaves to escape from Esther and the city. At the end of The Web and The Rock, George is mature enough to accept the limitations imposed on him by mortality. Like Eugene, George had wanted to devour the earth, but George recognizes the impossibility of fulfilling his desires, whereas Eugene's desires were turned aside by love. The fury and Faustian hunger that possessed Eugene are, then, resolved in terms of George Webber.

The final stage in the evolution of mature responsibility appears in You Can't Go Home Again. When George leaves New York for England on the first trip described in You Can't Go Home Again, he leaves not because he is repelled by the life around him, but because he finds it so fascinating that he is unable to concentrate on his writing. What George finds repellent in America is not the life of the country, but the directions in which America has been growing. Instead of searching for a father, George, in the last novel, clings to the ideals that are a part of the American Dream, and assesses the life around him in terms of those ideals. He is no longer solely interested in the schism between his body and spirit, as at the end of The Web and The Rock. He is now

concerned with the difference between the actuality and the potential of America.

On his second trip to Europe, George visits Germany. He had been there before in The Web and The Rock. On that trip, his enthusiasm for the energy displayed in a Munich beer hall had resulted in the accident that brought about his self-discovery in the Body and Man dialogue. During the visit in You Can't Go Home Again, George sees that Germany's enthusiasm for domination in the form of Nazism has brought about the spiritual downfall of the country. The propriety of the Faustian way of life is now completely dispelled. George, having divorced himself from the Faustian life, sees that the principles on which it is founded are those which have been allowed to grow up in America, and he stresses in the letter to Fox that America, with the example of Germany before her, must re-discover and grow from the ideals that were a part of the country in the beginning.

Wolfe's purpose in writing was the recapture and interpretation of life as he had seen and lived it. By telling his story chronologically (with the exception of the first half of The Web and The Rock) he could describe the growth of his vision of life in terms of the growth of his heroes. Eugene's perception in Look Homeward, Angel is limited to his own life; he seldom relates himself to society. In Of Time and The River he is aware of life

around him, but is still more interested in his personal concerns. George Webber, in most of The Web and The Rock, is equally unconcerned with society. Not until You Can't Go Home Again does George recognize the force of the principles governing his own life, the nation, and all humanity.

Much of the effectiveness of Wolfe's presentation of life results from his style. Wolfe's prose can be realistic, poetic, and rhetorical. His realism is usually found in the episodes which are his basic units of construction. These episodes are present in each book, and many were published separately as short stories. In Look Homeward, Angel the four chapters covering Ben's illness and death form a sustained prose narrative. In Of Time and The River there are the stories of Bascom Pentland, Professor Hatcher's playwriting course at Harvard, Eugene's adventures with Starwick in Paris, the old Countess in Orleans, and W.O. Gant's death, as well as many others.

The Web and The Rock and You Can't Go Home Again both consist almost entirely of realistic prose. In The Web and The Rock the self-contained episodes include "The Butcher," "The Child by Tiger," "The Priestly One," "Stein and Rosen's," and "The Philanthropists," while the last novel contains the story of Mr. Katamoto, the long description of the boom in Libya Hill, the still longer

account of the party at the Jacks, and the tale of the house party at Richenbach Reade's. These episodes are not necessarily centered around the hero; Wolfe wanted his protagonist to be both individualistic and representative. In a letter to Maxwell Perkins, Wolfe speaks of "David Hawke" in Of Time and The River, whose name was later changed back to Eugene Gant, as "a window, an eye, a wandering seer," (The Letters of Thomas Wolfe, p.242) and George Webber, in the last two books, represents "a good man abroad in the world." (The Letters of Thomas Wolfe, p.526)

Wolfe has many ways of varying his prose narratives. The dialogue can be indirect, direct, and even like the script of a play, as in the chapter "Waiting for Glory" in The Web and The Rock. He makes use of the Joycean techniques of montage, the stream of consciousness, and paralleling. One of Wolfe's favourite parallels is that between different people getting up in the morning. In Look Homeward, Angel, three people are described awakening at the same time on the same morning in Chapter Fourteen, and in You Can't Go Home Again, Mr. Jack, Esther, and Foxhall Edwards are also shown in the early morning, although their awakenings are not simultaneous. Edward Aswell writes that these scenes illustrate "Tom's belief that you can tell best what a person is like by watching him get up in the morning and prepare to go about his day's

work." ("A Note on Thomas Wolfe," p.380)

There are many elements that are similar in the various episodes of the four novels. Wolfe often enters a narrative as the author, and also frequently repeats images and lines from his favourite writers. In all the books there are lists of foods, sounds, and smells, or of people in a crowd. Often Wolfe draws on something described in an earlier book to help enrich an episode of a later book, and conversely, frequently hints at an occurrence that will take place in the future. These similarities give continuity and unity to the life described in the four books as a whole.

Wolfe places the history of the growth of Eugene or George firmly in the twentieth century. Aside from the story itself, there are many references to the names of prominent people of the times, which are either not at all, or only slightly, disguised. Each of the first three books contains at least two titles of songs popular in the years described. In Look Homeward, Angel, Helen Gant and Pearl Hines sing The Rosary on their tour, and Ben dies humming Just a Baby's Prayer at Twilight. Starwick, in Of Time and The River, is fascinated by the song Chile Bon Bon, and Paris is evoked by the melody Ca C'est Paris. When George, in Europe, thinks of the America of twenty years before, he remembers the song titles Love Me and the World is Mine, and The Good Old Summer Time. Wolfe's vision of life is bound

by the framework of twentieth century America, but is not limited by it. He wanted to describe the strangeness and mystery of life itself, and not just the manifestation of life in a particular time and place.

Wolfe's other two styles of writing further this aim. To combine the effect of poetry with that of prose, he often uses and repeats oxymora. Look Homeward, Angel and Of Time and The River contain more than do the last two books, and most of them are concerned with time. In Of Time and The River, Eugene is "suspended and detached from the world of measurable event, fixed in unmoving moment, unsilent silence, changeless change." (Of Time and The River, p.856)

In longer descriptive passages, particularly in the dawn scenes in Look Homeward, Angel, Wolfe repeats certain key words which develop the meaning of the passage in the same way as chords in a crescendo. In the following passage words connoting lightness and darkness are at first juxtaposed, and then as the dawn breaks, the words representing lightness become more frequent.

> Light broke against the east, in a murky rim. The far dark was eaten cleanly away. The horizon sky was barred with hard fierce strips of light. Still buried in night, they looked across at the unimpinging sheet of day. They looked under the lifted curtain at brightness. They were knifed sharply away from it. Then, gently, light melted across the land like dew. The world was gray. The east broke out in ragged flame. (Look Homeward, Angel, p.382)

Wolfe's poetic rhetoric, which is usually made up of iambics, serves many purposes in his writing. As Maurice

Natanson points out, "traditionally, by the rhetoric of Thomas Wolfe has been meant his charged language, those extensive passages throughout his works which are stylistically reminiscent of Whitman and Melville and which bear the fiery and solemn cadences of the Old Testament."[1] Each novel is prefaced by a passage of rhetorical prose-poetry. In the first two books, each sentence of the passages represents a major theme and recurs throughout the text of the books. Sentences from the passages prefacing the last two novels are also found in the main body of the books, but the primary purpose of the passages is that of general summary and explanation. Within the first two novels, the rhetorical passages are usually used as transitions from one section to another, and as choruses which expand particular meanings into general ones. There are many fewer passages of this kind in The Web and The Rock and You Can't Go Home Again. When Wolfe changed his attitude towards writing, he tried to express himself in terms of the characters and situations described, thus eliminating the need for more general explanations. Many of the italicised transitory sections in both these books are rhetorical in style, but they were added by Aswell in order to complete the work left by Wolfe when he died.

Wolfe's treatment of the characters in his four novels varies in some ways and is similar in others. In

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[1]"The Privileged Moment: A Study in the Rhetoric of Thomas Wolfe," The World of Thomas Wolfe, ed. C. Hugh Holman (New York, 1962), pp.78-84.

Look Homeward, Angel and Of Time and The River, many of the male characters are identified by a tag. W.O. Gant has a thin twisted mouth, Will Pentland always pares his nails, Starwick has a womanish voice, and Joel Pierce always whispers. In the last two novels, the tags, although sometimes present, are much less noticeable. Jerry Alsop, Jim Randolph, Nebraska Crane, and Randy Shepperton exist as complex personalities, and have a number of distinctive characteristics.

The female personalities in the novels are handled quite differently. Some, like Eliza in Look Homeward, Angel, are labelled by personal idiosyncracy, but most of them are tagged more generally, in that they represent the areas of America in which the novels are placed. Eliza and Aunt Maw, with their endless talk and their unconsciousness of the passing of time, represent the mountainous and rural areas of North Carolina. Esther is the city. She is brisk, colourful, worldly, and moves as quickly as time itself.

Wolfe's women also have many characteristics in common. They all have dark hair which is streaked with gray, and usually coarse in texture. In Look Homeward, Angel, Eliza's hair is still black, but Mrs. Leonard's hair "was coarse and dull-brown, fairly abundant, tinged lightly with gray: it was combed evenly in the middle and bound tightly in a knot behind." (Look Homeward, Angel, p.225)

Esther's hair is similar: "her hair, which was lustrous, dark, and of a rather indefinite quality, was parted on the side, and he George noticed a few coarse strands of grey in it." (The Web and The Rock, p.327)

These women who are, in a sense, mother-substitutes, provide food for Eugene or George. Mrs. Leonard feeds Eugene with poetry, and Esther cooks for George for years. The women are older than the hero, and none of them can satisfy him for long.

George's letter to Fox, in which he states his belief in the guidance provided by the timeless qualities of the earth and of ideals, is a conscious affirmation of ideas that he has been aware of unconsciously for some time. In all four novels, the unending and thus permanent cycle of the seasons is opposed to the chance-dominated and brief life of humanity. The Pentland and Joyner tribes are described in natural terms because their lives are rooted in the earth; their thinking is dominated by the changing permanence of the seasons. Eugene-George wants his life to prevail, time-circumscribed though it is, and so rejects the fatalism of his family, and later the more thoughtful fatalism of Foxhall Edwards.

Wolfe makes it clear early in The Web and The Rock that George's ability to make his life prevail through creativity comes from the earth. "His was increasingly the type of imagination which gains in strength as it

grows older because it is rooted to the earth." (The Web and The Rock, p.336) In The Story of a Novel, Wolfe often compares his own creative processes to phenomena of nature. He says that he had within him "swelling and gathering all the time, a huge black cloud, and . . . this cloud was loaded with electricity, pregnant, crested, with a kind of hurricane violence. . . ." When he started writing, "it was exactly as if this great black storm cloud I have spoken of had opened up and, mid flashes of lightening, was pouring from its depth a torrential and ungovernable flood." (The Story of a Novel, p.37) Later in the book, he says that work had "poured from him for almost five years like burning lava from a volcano." (The Story of a Novel, pp.78-79)

Until the final resolution in You Can't Go Home Again, Eugene's and George's lives are expressed in pairs of opposites. They come from, and are rooted to the earth, but try to find permanence in human relationships. They search for stability in time and place through memory and tradition, and seem to feel that although man's actions are governed by chance, his life is also determined by all the experiences and actions of the past. Life is opposed to death, mortality to immortality, and the personal history of the protagonist to the general or racial history of the country. The fundamental contrast is that between time and eternity.

In Look Homeward, Angel, Of Time and The River, and The Web and The Rock, Eugene and George continually battle time, and their only escape from time is through creativity or the workings of memory. When they are not involved in the timelessness of creation, the mystery of the inexorable flow of the river of time is ever-present, until George, by thinking of the future instead of the past and present, finds hope and strength in the very flow that had obstructed him before. George summarizes the differences between his past and present positions in the letter to Fox.

> The essence of Time is Flow, not Fix. The essence of faith is the knowledge that all flows and everything must change. The growing man is Man-Alive, and his 'philosophy' must grow, must flow, with him. When it does not, we have -- do we not? -- the Unfixed Man . . . the man too fixed today, unfixed tomorrow -- and his body of beliefs is nothing but a series of fixations. (You Can't Go Home Again, p.732)

The ending of each of the four novels reflects the stage of development reached by the hero. In the first three novels, the hero is baffled or confused by time. Wolfe resolved the problems of Look Homeward, Angel through time-suspension or fantasy. Of Time and The River was also intended to close with a fantasy. The ending of the third novel is not suspended above time, but transcends the usual human limitations. The fourth novel, You Can't Go Home Again, closes with a clear and straightforward statement of belief. It is "a kind of impassioned summing up of the whole book, of everything that has gone before, and

a final statement of what is now." (The Letters of Thomas Wolfe, p.751) Having conquered time, Wolfe no longer had need of fantasy.

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