

GOTHIC AND GROTESQUE ELEMENTS IN THE FICTION
OF THOMAS WOLFE

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Stephen M. Holt
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Charles J. Palfrey
Director of Monograph

Master's Committee Charles J. Palfrey, Chairman

James A. Galt
Joseph E. Pice

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(Date)

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INTRODUCTION

Although a Southerner by birth, Thomas Wolfe is not ordinarily considered a member of the Southern school of twentieth century writers. The evidence presented in this paper can assist in relating him more closely to that school than is usually done, although the intent is not to establish the relationship but to identify certain elements in his writing which are prevalent in the work of his regional contemporaries.

Specifically, this paper will isolate and reveal elements of the Gothic and grotesque in Thomas Wolfe's novels. Certainly, scholarship in Wolfe has not dwelled upon the macabre aspects in his work. Instead, he is generally recognized as a romantic, optimistic writer whose work is characterized by his striving to retain his own innocence while experiencing life and telling the story of America. It is not intended here to dispute the critics' evaluations. Still, the Old World literary tradition of the Gothic and the related strain of the grotesque seem quite worthy of attention as they appear in Wolfe.

The following novels of Wolfe are to be cited: Look Homeward, Angel; Of Time and the River; The Web and the Rock; and You Can't Go Home Again. They will be quoted from interchangeably throughout this paper.

My intent is to first center on the Gothic, with its related motifs. That is, Wolfe's use of magic, monsters, ghosts and Gothic landscapes and structures will be shown. Then I will examine the grotesque elements in Wolfe's work.

Chapter I

WOLFE AND THE GOTHIC

INTRODUCTION

There occur in Thomas Wolfe's writing elements which are characteristically Gothic. In this chapter such elements are identified and illustrated from the novels of Wolfe. First, these distinguishing characteristics of the literature of the Gothic Revival of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries need to be recognized.

The Gothic novel, influenced by the spirit of Gothic art, was characterized by Ruskin in The Stones of Venice, who mentioned among others the following traits: Savageness, Naturalism, and Grotesqueness. Applied to fiction, these three operate thusly: 'savageness' is manifest in Horace Walpole's Castle of Otranto, which will be referred to later; 'naturalism' is seen in the pastoral settings of Mrs. Ann Radcliffe; and 'grotesqueness', or the tendency to delight in the fantastic or morbid, was a feature of successors of the above two pioneers of the Gothic style.¹

A major reason for the onset of Gothic writing is a disgust with and a reaction against the unpleasantries of industrial civilization. The result was a consistent contrast between peasant simplicity and

¹Devendra Varma, The Gothic Flame (New York: Russell & Russell, 1966), p. 207.

aristocratic decadence. The Gothic romance emerged with no traces of oppressive materialism. Instead, it offers "ruined abbeys, frowning castles, haunted galleries, feudal halls, pathless forests, and lofty, lonely hills,"² all as antidotes to crowded cities with darkening smoke.

At this point, a brief recount of the development of the Gothic novel is pertinent. Walpole's Otranto (1775) is called by its author an 'old Gothic (medieval) romance'. Miss Clara Reeve refers to her The Old English Baron as 'a Gothic story, being a picture of Gothic times and manners'. These early novels aimed specifically at creating a medieval atmosphere. Hence appear haunted castles, dungeons, and lonely towers, knights in armor, and magic. Still, the outstanding feature of these tales was not the Gothic setting but the supernatural occurrences. In later works such as Lewis's The Monk (1796) and Godwin's Caleb Williams (1794), the medieval tone and setting give way in favor of the more spectral side of the genre. Yet the name 'Gothic' remained even when the original occasion for its use had disappeared. Rather than connoting the 'mediæval', it became a synonym for the grotesque, ghastly, and violently supernatural or superhuman in fiction. In other words, as a by-product of 'barbarous' and 'mediæval' came a new meaning for the Gothic--'supernatural'.³

The above aspects of the Gothic will be gleaned from the works of Wolfe, taking into account that Wolfe was a twentieth-century American rather than an eighteenth-century Englishman. Even so,

²Ibid., p. 218.

³Ibid., p. 13.

certain parallels in the social environment of the two periods indicate that Wolfe may have been prompted to use Gothic techniques by the same reasons that prompted those English writers. That is, Wolfe was living and writing in a time of materialism and industrialization to which he strongly reacted. Throughout You Can't Go Home Again he disgustedly observes the changes taking place in his friends' lives as they strive for capital gain on their way to the Great Depression. His Gothic machinery was one means of escape from his society.

Of course there are other reasons why Wolfe might have been attracted to the Gothic. As an illustration of one such influence, a look at the Gothic influence in Germany is in order. The German writers of 'Sturm und Drang' were imitators of Horace Walpole. Besides, their country had always been a land of superstitions and fairy legends. German literature has always been characterized by a fascination for dreadful events and awful spectacles. Bloody scenes, secret tribunals, feudal tyrants, mystical jargon, and necromantic imagery are almost commonplace in German tales. One need only to observe the depiction of the Rhine as the haunted river of the world to see banks lined with romantic castles surrounded by forests inhabited by Demon-Huntsmen, witches, and werewolves. Mrs. Barbauld, in On the Origin and Progress of Novel-Writing, noted that "the Germans abound in materials for works of the imagination; for they are rich in tales and legends of an impressive kind, which have perhaps amused generation after generation

Eugene Gant represent, for all practical purposes, Thomas Wolfe himself, then the following passage becomes quite significant:

And now he meant to get to know this land, its forests and its cities, which stood already in his heart, not as a foreign country, but as a kind of second homeland of his spirit.⁷

Wolfe's real vision of Germany is a Gothic vision, akin to an element of savageness inherent in the Gothic spirit. According to Devendra Varma:

The Savageness of Gothic stands for wildness of thought and roughness of work, and impresses upon us the image of a race full of wolfish life and an imagination as wild and wayward as the northern seas. The darkened air, the pile of buttresses and rugged walls uncouthly hewn out of rocks over wild moors, speak of the savageness of their massy architecture, which was rude, ponderous, stiff, sombre and depressing... The Gothicness, so to speak, of the romances consisted in gloom, wildness, and fear.⁸

Keeping Varma's statement in mind, one is not surprised to find in The Web and the Rock the following description of George Webber's night at a drunken party in a Munich beer hall. As the people dance around in large circular patterns, Webber notes:

The effect of these human rings all over that vast and murky hall had in it something that was almost supernatural and ritualistic: Something that belonged to the essence of a race was enclosed in those rings, something dark and strange as Asia, something older than the old barbaric forests, something that had swayed around an altar, and had made a human sacrifice, and had devoured burnt flesh....The hall was roaring with their powerful voices, it shook to their powerful bodies, and as they swung back and forth it seemed to George that nothing on earth could resist them--that they must smash whatever they came against. He understood now why other nations feared them so; suddenly he was himself seized with a terrible and deadly fear of them that froze his heart. He felt as if he had dreamed and awakened in a strange, barbaric

⁷Ibid.

⁸Varma, op. cit., p. 14.

as nursery stories, and lain like ore in the mine, ready for the hand of taste to separate the dross and polish the material."⁴

In The Web and the Rock, one is reminded of Wolfe's thoughts concerning the term Gothic as it applies to Munich and the rest of Germany:

Munich is not, in the same way as many other German towns, a Gothic fairyland. There are many cities, towns, and villages throughout the country that have, in a much greater sense, the enchanted qualities of the Gothic world, the magic of the Gothic architecture, the romance of the Gothic landscape. Nuremberg is such a city, Rothenberg, in a smaller but more perfect sense, is another, the old, central part of Frankfort is another, the ancient town of Hanover has a Gothic wonder of old streets and houses that Munich cannot equal. So, too, with Eisenbach, in Thuringia. So, too, with Bremen; so with many towns along the Rhine and along the Mosel, with Coblenz and with Hildesheim, with Strasbourg in Alsace, with countless tiny villages and towns in the Black Forest and in Harz, in Saxony and in Franconia, in the Hanseatic north, and in the Alpine valleys of Vavaria and Tyrol....There are no ancient castles built upon a sheer romantic rock in Munich, no ancient houses clinging to the rock. There is no sudden elfin loveliness of hills, no dark mystery of forests, no romantic loveliness of landscape. The thing is felt in Munich more than it is seen, and for this reason the seduction and the mystery are greater. Munich itself is built upon a kind of plain, and yet somehow one knows that the enchanted peaks are there.⁵

For Wolfe, Germany had an intense appeal and he speculated as to the true nature of that appeal. While telling of George Webber's visit there, he says "the country had an instant, haunting fascination for him. Was it his father's German blood in his own veins that worked this magic? So it seemed to him."⁶ When one considers that Wolfe's novels are autobiographical and that George Webber and

⁴Ibid., pp. 31-32.

⁵Thomas Wolfe, The Web and the Rock (Garden City, New York: Sun Dial, 1939), p. 651.

⁶Ibid., p. 622.

forest to find a ring of savage, barbaric faces bent down above him: blond-haired, blond-mustached, they leaned upon their mighty spear staves, rested on their shields of toughened hide, as they looked down. And he was surrounded by them, there was no escape. He thought of all that was familiar to him and it seemed far away, not only in another world but in another time, seasunken in eternity ages hence from the old, dark forest of barbaric time.⁹

Wolfe's mention of dreaming suggests another facet of the Gothic genre, one that is popular even in current literature. The studies of Freud and the works of the Surrealists have shown that dreams definitely constitute a source of the macabre and they likewise inspired a number of Gothic tales. Walpole insists that The Castle of Otranto resulted from a kind of architectural nightmare. Mary Shelley was able to write Frankenstein only after she had dreamed the tale. Lafcadio Hearn, in his Interpretations of Literature, has asserted that all the best plots of supernatural tales originate in dreams, and he advises writers to pay close attention to dream life. He writes: "All the great effects produced by poets and story-writers and even by religious teachers, in treatment of the supernatural, fear or mystery have been obtained directly or indirectly from dreams."¹⁰

Undoubtedly there exists a strong resemblance between supernatural impressions and dreams. Traditionally, mystical presences have been depicted as haunting one in nocturnal hours as one arises from slumber. Guilt-laden individuals starting from sleep are seen imagining themselves confronted with the phantoms of those they

⁹The Web and the Rock, p. 699.

¹⁰Varma, op. cit., p. 222.

wronged. Or, commonly the lover beholds the spirit of his dead beloved, since in dreams his soul has gone in quest of her.

Wolfe often makes use of the dreams of the supernatural. For example, in Of Time and the River the sleeping W. O. Gant has a macabre vision of his own death:

...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...And then, with the bridgeless instancy of dreams, it seemed to him that all of the bright green-gold around him in the wood grew dark and sombre, the path grew darker, and suddenly he was walking in a strange and gloomy forest, haunted by the brown and tragic light of dreams. The forest shapes of great trees rose around him, he could hear no bird-song now, even his feet on the path were soundless, but he always thought he heard the sound of some one walking in the wood before him. He stopped and listened: the steps were muffled, softly thunderous, they seemed so near that he thought that he must catch up with the one he followed in another second, and then they seemed immensely far away, receding in the dark mystery of that gloomy wood. And again he stopped and listened, the footsteps faded, vanished, he shouted, no one answered. And suddenly he knew that he had taken the wrong path, that he was lost.¹¹

The dream culminates in the death of Gant.

As has been shown, the Gothic mode of English writing in the 1800's was influenced by the Medieval period, by the German people, and by dreams of the supernatural. These same influences act upon Wolfe and cause him to produce certain obvious Gothic effects. That is, he creates scenes reminiscent of such major Gothic motifs as magic, giants, monsters, and ghosts; also, his use of Gothic landscapes and structures is very frequent.

¹¹Thomas Wolfe, Of Time and the River (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1965), p. 175.

RELATED GOTHIC MOTIFS: MAGIC, MONSTERS, GHOSTS

First, it should be noted that Wolfe gives treatment to the practice of rites and rituals, but in no sense can it be understood that he dealt with any kind of black magic. Instead he chose to dwell upon the innocent and delightful incantations of the ordinary man. Yet it cannot be denied that the practices he describes are the progeny of earlier occult performances. In The Web and the Rock, instead of giving the reader a witch he presents a friendly policeman, John Crane, whose specialty is foreseeing natural phenomena rather than doom and disaster:

If the sun came out the fourteenth day of March, he could tell you what it meant, and whether the sun would shine in April. If it rained or snowed or hailed or stormed three weeks before Easter, he could prophesy the weather Easter Sunday. He could look at the sky and tell you what was coming; if an early frost was on its way to kill the peach trees, he could tell you it was on its way and when it would arrive; there was no storm, no sudden shift in weather that he could not "feel in his bones" before it came. He had a thousand signs and symptoms for foretelling things like these...It all amounted to a kind of great sixth sense out of nature, an almost supernatural intuition.¹²

Greatly influenced by such marvellous characters as Mr. Crane, the boy George Webber created his own supernatural world:

These spells and incantations, chants and compulsions grew, interwove, and constantly increased in their complexity and denseness until they governed everything he did--not only the way he touched a wall, or held his breath while pounding a hill from school...but even the way he went along a street, the side he took, the place he had to stop and look.¹³

Eugene felt that practicing rites of superstition was necessary; he continued his magical habits into adolescence:

¹²The Web and the Rock, pp. 47-48.

¹³Ibid., p. 84.

He had spells and rhymes of magic numbers which would enable him, he thought, to read all of the million books in the great library...And there were other spells and rhymes which would enable him to know the lives of 50,000,000 people, to visit every country in the world, to know a hundred languages, possess 10,000,000 lovely women.¹⁴

As the above passage indicates, Wolfe's characters are seen as they become involved in life and attempt to embrace meanings and essences. In fact, these people often seem to change into beings of extraordinary longings and superhuman desires. Wolfe, of course, is preoccupied with arriving at the core of all types of experience; as a result, his sensuous, hungry characters can become creature-like rather than merely mortal. Hence, Wolfe creates veritable giants and monsters, and the element of madness also occurs at times.

In imitation of Eastern tales, Walpole raised the apparition of Alfonso in The Castle of Otranto to gigantic proportions. Walpole was influenced by the various forms of Oriental fiction which infiltrated England during the first half of the eighteenth century. In those tales, enormous size not only suggests embodiment of power, but also strikes and evokes a feeling of terror.¹⁵ In Otranto one brief and sublime description has the distended figure of Alfonso standing in the moonlight and gazing at an astonished group of spectators who are fronting the shattered ruins of the castle. Miss Dorothy Scarborough has asserted that "the genealogical founder of the family of Gothic ghosts is the giant apparition in The Castle of Otranto."¹⁶ One of Alfonso's most famous gigantic descendants is Mary Shelley's

¹⁴Of Time and the River, p. 641.

¹⁵Varma, op. cit., p. 51.

¹⁶Ibid., p. 65.

monster, who roams the wild countryside and laments his tragic isolation from mankind because of his horrid appearance.

In a similar vein, Wolfe depicts George Webber in The Web and the Rock as a lonely, unsatisfied monster. For instance, by leaving the South and going into Europe and by searching for his own identity, George Webber becomes possessed by a form of madness and his rages border on the actions of a monster:

A madness which was compounded of many elements took possession of him and began to exert completely its mastery of death, damnation, and horror over the whole domain of his body, mind, and spirit.¹⁷...At night he walked the streets. He went into the crowded places...He swung and swayed and roared and sang and shouted in the swaying mass, felt a terrible jubilation, a mad lust, the unsated hunger filling him, and still could find no end and seek no rest.¹⁸

The enormous drive and propensity for life and real experience seem to transfigure Wolfe's hero. Granted he does not become the fiendish, ghoulish being of the pure horror tale, but he seems to project himself and overpower his surroundings in much the same way a fiend might do:

When he would think of home, the whole terrific sight of Manhattan, the cratered landscape of its soaring towers, it seemed to be a kind of great, fantastic toy, constructed by ingenious children; just as children might build little cities out of cardboard shapes, and stamp, neatly and evenly, millions of little window holes in them, and then light candles back behind to give the illusion of a lighted city.¹⁹

Further, Wolfe proclaims that Webber:

...wanted to eat up everything, to drink up everything, to read up everything, to remember and look up everything, to

¹⁷The Web and the Rock, p. 530.

¹⁸Ibid., p. 661.

¹⁹Ibid., p. 654.

get his hands upon the palpable and impossible body, the magnificent plenitude, of a whole groaning earth, to devour it, to consume it, to have and hold it for his own forever. It was madness, it was agony, it was a cureless, quenchless, hopeless disease of mind and flesh and spirit.²⁰

Wolfe points out that even as a child Eugene Gant in Look Homeward, Angel had an unnatural desire to project himself into essences:

...holding in fief the storm and the dark and all the black powers of wizardry, to gaze, ghoul-visaged through a storm-lashed windowpane, briefly planting unutterable horror in grouped and sheltered life; or no more than a man, but holding, in your more than mortal heart, demoniac ecstasy, to crouch against a lonely storm-swept house, to gaze obliquely through the streaming glass upon a woman, or your enemy, and while still exulting in your victorious dark all-seeing isolation, to feel a touch upon your shoulder, and to look, haunter-haunted, pursuer-pursued, into the green corrupted hell-face of malignant death.²¹

In fact the whole Gant family seems bigger-than-life, monstrous, gargantuan. Madness characterizes much of their actions in Look Homeward, Angel:

They were a life unto themselves--how lonely they were they did not know, but they were known to everyone and friended by almost no one. Their status was singular...and they had twisted the design of all orderly life, because there was in them a mad, original, disturbing quality which they did not suspect.²²

To produce fear or wonder, then, the writer of the Gothic tale can describe the results of magic, or he can enumerate the deeds of giants and monsters. However, a common and equally effective method of exciting the emotions is the mere presentation of a ghost. In fact,

²⁰Ibid., p. 660.

²¹Thomas Wolfe, Look Homeward, Angel (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1957), pp. 74-75.

²²Ibid., p. 52.

ghosts have been popular in fiction for centuries. According to Varma, supernatural manifestations are appealing because they are simultaneously appalling and fascinating. They excite our mortal apprehension which connects our earthly with our spiritual being. Of these supernatural manifestations the appearance of the dead among the living is perhaps the most touching. Ghosts are mute witnesses of an alliance with unearthly powers and they make one aware of his fleshly infirmity and his mysterious destiny. Echoes from beyond the grave excite our curiosity to the point of passion. As Schopenhauer said, men are mere phantoms and dream pictures; "golden dreams hover over our cradle, and shadows thicken round the natural descent of the aged into the grave." All that appears real about us is but the thinnest shadow of a dream, then. In Nietzsche's words, "underneath this reality in which we live and have our being, another and altogether different reality lies concealed."²³

To enhance the atmosphere of his narrative, Thomas Wolfe often deals with terms suggestive of the supernatural. Most often he relies upon the term "ghost". For example, he tells of George Webber's inclination toward becoming an artist in this way:

He was a hater of living men who saw nothing but death and cold corruption in everything and everyone around him, and who yet loved life with so furious and intolerable a desire that each night he seemed to revisit the shores of this great earth like a ghost, an alien, and a stranger..."²⁴

²³Varma, op. cit., pp. 211-212.

²⁴The Web and the Rock, p. 555.

This same Webber sees the "ghost-wise Alps" in Munich, when the "ghost of Autumn (is) in the air."²⁵ Hospitalized in Germany, he had a nurse who "came and went so softly in that somber light of the shaded lamp that it was as if he had been visited by a ghost, and somehow he felt afraid of her."²⁶

Wolfe also uses the term "ghost" in Look Homeward, Angel when the hometown of W. O. Gant is visited years after his death by his daughter and her husband: "Their father's great ghost haunted them: it brooded over the town, above the scouring oblivion of the years that wipe all trace of us away."²⁷

The theme of the supernatural is even more evident in the descriptions of Ben Gant, Eugene's dead brother. In a graveyard scene Eugene is confronted by the wandering spectre of Ben:

"You are dead, Ben," Eugene muttered. "You must be dead. I saw you die, Ben. I tell you, I saw you die."
"Fool," said Ben fiercely. "I am not dead."²⁸

Following shortly after this conversation is a classic description of an overwrought phantom:

And through the square, unwoven from lost time, the fierce bright horde of Ben spun in and out its deathless loom. Ben, in a thousand moments, walked the square: Ben of the lost years, the forgotten days, the unremembered hours; prowled by the moonlight facades; vanished, returned, left and rejoined himself, was one and many--deathless Ben in search of the lost dead lusts, the finished enterprise,

²⁵Ibid., pp. 652-653.

²⁶Ibid., p. 674.

²⁷Look Homeward, Angel, p. 349.

²⁸Ibid., p. 516.

the unfound door--unchanging Ben multiplying himself in form, by all the brick facades entering and coming out.²⁹

In Of Time and the River, Eugene is often haunted by this apparition of his dead brother, even years after Ben's death:

He would hear again the voice of his dead brother, and remember with a sense of black horror, dream-like disbelief, that Ben was dead, and yet could not believe that Ben had ever died... Ben would come back to him in these moments with a blazing and intolerable reality, until he heard his quiet living voice again, saw his fierce scowling eyes of bitter gray, his scornful, proud and lively face...³⁰

Returning home after a lengthy absence, Eugene is approached by a spirit of the night which whispers:

"Child, child--come with me--come with me to your brother's grave tonight. Come with me to the places where the young men lie whose bodies have long since been buried in the earth. Come with me where they walk and move tonight, and you shall see your brother's face again, and hear his voice, and see again, as they march toward you from their graves the company of the young men who died..."³¹

In a moment of jest, Eugene's sister asks a question which for him is very poignant after he has remained at home awhile: "Does he ever bother you at night?--When the wind begins to howl around the house, do you ever hear him walking up there? Has he been in to see you yet?"³²

²⁹Ibid., p. 518.

³⁰Of Time and the River, p. 114.

³¹Ibid., p. 243.

³²Ibid., p. 261.

GOTHIC LANDSCAPES AND STRUCTURES

As has been observed, the whole Gothic movement was a reaction against the world of factories and materialism. Such a reaction asserted itself most positively in the pastoral settings created by the authors of the Gothic. The most common spots for the unfolding of horror tales were the mountains. The hero of Godwin's book indulges his melancholy among the mountains of Wales; Ann Radcliffe prefers scenes of rustic simplicity in the depths of the Alps and Pyrenees, and of course the Frankenstein monster takes refuge in the lonely mountains. The justification for the trend toward the heights was well stated by Elizabeth Cullen Brown, who, in The Sisters of St. Gothard (1819), says, "A short reflection seems to convince me that virtue, benevolence, and all social and moral good, have fled the higher orders of society, and taken refuge in these happy mountains."³³ A. O. Lovejoy, considering the architectural and structural aspect of Gothicism, wrote in The First Gothic Revival and Return to Nature: "The earliest Gothic Revival...had for its herald and precursor the new fashion in the designing of artificial landscapes and the new liking for wildness, boldness, broken contours, and boundless prospects in natural landscape."³⁴

The best example of a writer who creates true Gothic scenery is Ann Radcliffe, whose descriptions deserve some mention. Her characters are very sensitive to their surroundings. An imprisoned earl is daily soothed by the view of the distant hills. Other people dwell in

³³Varma, pp. 218-219.

³⁴Ibid., p. 31.

landscapes swept by great gusts of wind or bathed in faint moonlight. A shipwreck takes place on a coast covered with white foam and surrounded by an atmosphere of stormy blasts, jagged clouds, and deep roars of distant surges of waves. Often the reader is given a picture of the evening sun as it shimmers on the tops of a mountain, or of softer shades landing upon the distant countryside, or the tranquil, melancholy hush of coming night.³⁵

She can also create a kind of dreadful silence to heighten the horrors of darkness and loneliness, all the while prolonging a character's fear of death or showing his harrowing, hairbreadth escapes from some awful evil. In order to maintain an atmosphere of sublimated fear, she uses several obvious devices: obstacles are multiplied so that the intervals of despair are also multiplied, along with additional thrills of hope. Along with the oncoming shades of night are bleak, howling winds; damp vapours of dungeons are sliced by rays of light; and subterranean labyrinths are hushed by the silence of death itself.³⁶

Dr. Tompkins sees in Mrs. Radcliffe "the focus of all the romantic tendencies of her time." He said: "She collected, combined and intensified them, harmonizing her work by picturesque beauty and quickening it with fear and awe." Certainly her love of romantic scenery and solitude combined with her passion for the mysterious,

³⁵Ibid., p. 88.

³⁶Ibid.

the weird and eerie make her landscapes and her agencies of dread equally powerful.³⁷

Possessing an eye for sad color and gloomy grandeur, Mrs. Radcliffe produced her effects among settings like the large romantic ruins of abbeys and Gothic buildings with their crumbling casements grimly shadowed by starlight, as moaning and groaning through their trembling turrets. Surrounding such structures are bleak and solitary heaths, foreboding forests, and menacing precipices overlain by a blanket of haze and color.³⁸

As can be seen from the discussion of Mrs. Radcliffe, the Gothic mind is hardly content to perceive only the features of the landscape. It sees them as they are colored by atmospheric conditions. It finds rest and satisfaction from that which is indistinct or presents no end. Thus it revels in the portentous storm clouds, fierce howling winds, and the darkest and wildest imagery of nature.³⁹ With the intensification of atmospheric phenomena comes an intensification of Gothic machinery. Designed to quicken the pulse with ghastly apprehensions, the terror novel introduces mysterious caverns, dark forests at midnights, and hellish thunder and lightening accompany any creature who braves the perils of the countryside.⁴⁰

³⁷Ibid., p. 110. Dr. J. M. S. Tompkins wrote The Popular Novel in England (1932), from which Varma quotes.

³⁸Ibid.

³⁹Ibid., p. 21.

⁴⁰Ibid., pp. 16-17.

One more point should be emphasized concerning the painting of Gothic landscapes. It seems that the love of natural objects is often combined with a deep religious feeling. Man's mood and the predominant aspects of nature are made to coincide. This subjective presentation of scenery and weather results in the portrayal of agitated men in agitated elements. Thus, a Gothic villain is happy to work his evil against a background of black clouds, crashing lightening, or deafening thunder. Similarly, every roaring blast and gleam of lightening characteristically becomes connected in someone's mind with a calamity to be dreaded, with the fate of the living, or with the destination of the dead. The dim and hallowed tints of the autumnal sky or shades of the autumnal woods are combined with horrid recollections.⁴¹

One of the most significant of the natural elements abounding in the Gothic novel is the wind. Horace Walpole's wind caused doors to creak on their rusty hinges, and as it wandered through underground passages and elsewhere it carried out its special duty assigned by Walpole:

It sweeps fast through the vaults in sudden gusts, to extinguish the fluttering candle flame borne by the persecuted heroine just at the time when her flight is at its climax, launching her into awful, pitch-black darkness. In later novels, when it whines in the night outside the despairing and trembling maiden's window, the loquacious chamber-maid takes it for a sighing ghost...Lightening is the mighty ally of wind and storm; at a critical moment there comes a sudden burst of thunder shaking the foundations of the haunted castle, hinting at the existence of avenging eternal powers.⁴²

⁴¹Ibid., pp. 20-21.

⁴²Ibid., p. 59.

Thomas Wolfe's account of George Webber's early life, and much of his later life, is told against a Gothic setting. Such an atmosphere is particularly evident as the young boy listens to his Aunt Maw's tales. He hears "lost voices in the mountains long ago, wind-torn rawness, the desolate bleakness of lost days in March along clay-rutted roads in the bleak hills a hundred years ago":

Someone was dead in a hill cabin long ago. It was night. He heard the howling of the wind about the eaves of March. He was within the cabin...He heard lost voices in the hills long ago, saw clouds' shadows passing in the wilderness, listened to the rude and wintry desolation of March winds that howl through the sere grasses of mountain meadows...⁴³ He heard lost voices of his kinsman in the mountains one hundred years before--and all as sad, faint, and remote as far-faint voices in a valley, all passing sad as a cloud shadow passing in the wilderness, all lonely, lost, and sad as strange, lost time. All hill-remote and lonely they came to him.⁴⁴

Aunt Maw's yarns haunt the youth, perhaps greatly because of such a gloomy setting in which she tells them:

And always, when she spoke in the night, as the coalfire flared and crumbled in the grate, and the huge, demented winds of darkness howled around them and the terror of strong silence fed forever at his heart--he could hear the thousand death-devouring voices of the Joyners speaking triumphantly from the darkness of a hundred years, the lost and lonely sorrow of the hills.⁴⁵

As an adolescent the hero takes long walks with his Uncle Mark, and these rambles are strongly reminiscent of the scenes of the Frankenstein monster on the hilltops or the characters of Ann Radcliffe in their familiar mountains:

⁴³The Web and the Rock, p. 8.

⁴⁴Ibid., p. 61.

⁴⁵Ibid., p. 82.

The mountains in the Wintertime had a stern and demonic equality of savage that was, in its own way, as strangely, wildly haunting as all of the magic and the gold of April. In Spring, or in the time-enchanted spell and drowse of full, deep Summer, there was always something far and lonely, haunting with ecstasy and sorrow, desolation and the intolerable.

All about them, the great trees of the mountain side, at once ruggedly familiar and strangely, hauntingly austere, rose grim and barren, as stern and wild and lonely as the savage winds that warred forever, with a remote, demented howling, in their stormy, tossed, and leafless branches.⁴⁶...

And above them the stormy wintery skies--sometimes a savage sky of wild, torn grey that came so low its scudding fringes whipped like rags of smoke around the mountain tops; sometimes an implacable, fierce sky of wintery grey; sometimes a sky of rags and tatters of wild, wintery light, westering into slashed stripes of rugged red and incredible wild gold at the gateways of the sun-bent over them forever with that same savage and unutterable pain and sorrow, that ecstasy of wild desire, that grief of desolation, that spirit of exultant joy, that was as gleeful, mad, fierce, lonely, and enchanted with its stormy and unbodied promises of flight, its mad swoopings through the dark over the whole vast sleeping winteriness of earth, as that stormy and maniacal wind...⁴⁷

The drama is so heightened at this point that the two beings on the hilltops are transformed into veritable forlorn creatures of suffering. The Gothic aura thickens:

That wind would rush upon them suddenly as they toiled up rocky trails, or smashed through wintery growth, or strode along the hardened, rutted roads, or came out of the lonely, treeless bareness of a mountain top. And that wind would rush upon him with its own life and fill him with its spirit. As he gulped it down into his aching lungs, his whole life seemed to soar, to swoop, to yell with the demonic power...

He would hear his uncle's voice again, and see the gaunt fury of his bony figure, his blazing eye, the passionate and husky anathema of his trembling voice, as, standing there upon that mountain top and gazing down upon the little city

⁴⁶Ibid., p. 158.

⁴⁷Ibid., p. 159.

After Wolfe's hero has reached maturity and gone abroad, he still occasionally finds himself in eerie, Gothic surroundings. At one point, he and his companions embark on a horrible automobile trip through, significantly, southern England:

The very geography of the night seemed sinister and was conducive to an increase of terror. As the hours passed, the night grew wilder. It became a stormy and demented kind of night, such as one sometimes finds in England in the winter...It was one of those nights when the beleaguered moon drives like a spectral ship through the scudding storm rack of the sky, and the wind howls and shrieks like a demented fiend. They could hear it roaring all about them through the storm-tossed branches of the barren trees. Then it would swoop down on them with an exultant scream, and moan and whistle around the car, and sweep away again while gusts of beating rain drove across their vision. Then they would hear it howling far away--remote, demented, in the upper air, rocking the branches of the trees. And the spectral moon kept driving in and out, now casting a wild, wan radiance over the stormy landscape, now darting in behind a billowing mass of angry-looking clouds and leaving them to darkness and the fiendish howling of the wind.⁵²

The region they had now come to...was densely wooded, and as wild and desolate on that stormy night as any spot he had ever seen. As the car ground slowly up the tortuous road, it seemed to George that they were climbing the fiendish slope of Nightmare Hill, and he rather expected that when the moon broke from the clouds again they would find themselves in a cleared and barren circle in the forest, surrounded by the whole witches' carnival of Walpurgis Night. The wind howled through the rocking trees with insane laughter, the broken clouds scudded across the heavens like ghosts in flight.⁵³

Finally taken in by a rather mysterious master of a country manor, the hero is plagued by the effects of the storm as he retires for the night:

⁵²Thomas Wolfe, You Can't Go Home Again (Garden City, New York: Sun Dial, 1940), p. 591.

⁵³Ibid., p. 593.

He lay there thinking over what had happened and listening to the wind. It would rush at the house and shiver the windows, then swoop around the corners and eaves, howling like a banshee. Somewhere a shutter flapped and banged insanely. Now and then, in the momentary lulls between the rushes of the wind, a dog barked mournfully in the faint distance. He heard the clock in the downstairs chime...⁵⁴

Just as the late eighteenth century turned to the Middle Ages for subject matter in its literature, so did it imitate the architecture of the earlier period. And that architectural revival became evident in the literature. Professor Ker pointed out that the original appeal of the Romantic Revival was primarily architectural, and that the Middle Ages have influenced literature more strongly through their architecture than through their poems.⁵⁵ The more cultured and prosperous persons who participated in the Gothic Revival diverted themselves by reconstructing Gothic romance in mortar and bricks. Before writing Otranto Horace Walpole built his castle at Strawberry Hill and nestled in it to form his recollections. But, according to Ruskin in The Stones of Venice, "pointed arches do not constitute Gothic, nor vaulted roofs, nor flying buttresses, nor grotesque sculptures; but all or some of these things with them, when they come together so as to give life."⁵⁶

Moreover, Gothic architecture combined in itself a variety of appeals. It possessed a gloomy grandeur, and an atmosphere which evoked terror, suspense, and gloom. Indeed, "Gothic gloom" was one of the conventional descriptive phrases for characterizing its effect

⁵⁴Ibid., p. 614.

⁵⁵Varma, op. cit., p. 14.

⁵⁶Ibid.

upon the mind. The gloom and 'a dim religious light' seemed to touch the imagination with impressiveness and solemnity, evoking sensations of awe and playing upon the ingrained primitive element of natural and superstitious fear. As the union of Gothic and gloom took place, the ingredient of fear crept in as a by-product; hence, terror became closely related to Gothic architecture. Castles, convents, subterranean vaults, grated dungeons and ruined heaps become the home of sinister doings.⁵⁷

Needless to say, the great affinity between the Gothic landscape and the Gothic structure is a natural one, and they traditionally intermingle. As has been shown, most of the scenes are amid profound darkness, and suspense is heightened by a ray of moonlight or by the faint glimmer of a taper. A typical contrast between light and darkness may be emphasized in the following way: approaching night casts an aura of gloom across the wide arches until the darting moonbeams tinge casements, roofs, and massy pillars with a great many shades of light and color. One part of the hall may be engulfed in complete darkness while the other may be lit up in festive light. From the gloomy areas may come unearthly yells or half-stifled groans which raise the hair.⁵⁸

The Castle and its gloomy architectural associations--the bewildering vaults and secret panels, the underground passages, the winding spiral staircases, the creaking trap door, the decayed apartments and mouldering floors--were made central in Gothic novels

⁵⁷Ibid., p. 17.

⁵⁸Ibid., p. 21.

by Horace Walpole in the first Gothic novel. His building seemed to acquire a personality and spirit all its own, and it has been called the true hero of Walpole's book. In fact, it has been said that if it were eliminated the whole fabric of the romance would lose its underpinnings and its predominant atmosphere would fade away. Varma describes the Gothic Castle in the following manner:

The remote castle, with its antique courts and ruined turrets, deserted and haunted chambers where hang age-old tapestries; its grated windows that exclude the light; its dark, eerie galleries amid whose mouldering gloom is heard the rustle of an unseen robe, a sigh, a hurried footfall where no mortal step should tread; its dark, machicolated and sullen towers set high upon some precipice of the Appenines frowning upon the valleys below...⁵⁹

Thomas Wolfe created no Castle of Otranto in the Piedmont section of the United States, but he does create several such Gothic-like structures. Even as he imagines a perfect seduction of a beautiful lady, he pictures an enormous mansion extravagantly furnished. Although the scene is one of pleasant seduction and does not even vaguely border on horror, Wolfe cannot resist creating a bit of mysterious atmosphere:

The rain would fall coldly and remotely from bare branches, and from all the eaves. The first floor of the house would be dark, but behind drawn curtains the second floor would be warm with mellow light. Again the maid would open the door for him, leading him past the dark library, up the broad, carpeted stairs, where a single dim lamp was burning at the landing...At the top of the stairs, waiting to greet him, the lady would be waiting.⁶⁰

⁵⁹Ibid., pp. 57-58.

⁶⁰The Web and the Rock, op. cit., p. 284. The Gothicism goes further and appears in the furnishings of the lady's dark library. The hero is particularly drawn to works of the occult and the past: "Then there would be some of those books that Coleridge 'was deep in' at the time he wrote The Ancient Mariner, such as Iamblicus, Porphyry, Plotinus, Josephus, Jeremy Taylor, "the English Metaphysicum"--the

Even in the heart of New York City, Wolfe is apt to give a description of a building so that it seems to hint of the Gothic.

Witness a place purchased by the mistress of George Webber:

It was an old four-story house on Waverly Place that had obviously fallen on evil days. One mounted from the street by a rusty flight of steps. On the first floor as one entered there was a dingy-looking tailor shop. The hall stood open to the winds, the door having been wrenched from its fastening and hanging by one hinge. Then one went up a flight of stairs that was so old and decrepit that it leaned crazily to one side as if its underpinning on that side was giving way. The stairs creaked heavily as one stepped on them, and the old rail sagged...

Upstairs the place was dark and completely deserted. The only illumination was provided by a gas jet in the narrow hallway, which was kept burning night and day. In the walls along the stairs were niches, hollowed in the plastering; they reminded her of a more prosperous and gracious day for the old house, when marble busts and statues had been stationed here.⁶¹

In You Can't Go Home Again, another place in New York is referred to by the author as his protagonist's "room, his home, his castle". A visitor is rather cautious as he approaches the place:

He entered the dim-lit hall. The stairs were dark and the whole house seemed sunk in sleep. His footfalls rang out upon the silence. The air had a close, dead smell compounded of many elements, among which he could distinguish the dusty emanations of old wood and worn plankings.⁶²

whole school of the neoplatonists; all the works that could be collected on the histories of demons, witches, fairies, elves, gnomes, witches' sabbaths, black magic, alchemy, spirits--all the Elizabethans had to say about it, particularly Reginald Scott; and all the works of Roger Bacon; all the legends and looks of customs and superstitions whatever, and works of quaint and learned lore....", p.290.

⁶¹Ibid., p. 386.

⁶²Ibid., p. 373.

Wolfe goes on to a further account of the place:

The place may seem to you more like a dungeon than a room a man would voluntarily elect to live in. It is long and narrow, running parallel to the hall from the front to the rear, and the only natural light that enters it comes through two small windows rather high up in the wall, facing each other at opposite ends, and these are heavily guarded with iron bars.⁶³

The most obvious Gothic-like structure in Wolfe's work is Dixieland, the monstrous boarding house in Look Homeward, Angel purchased by Eugene Gant's mother:

Dixieland was a big house of eighteen or twenty drafty high-ceilinged rooms: it had a rambling, unplanned, gabular appearance...⁶⁴

The man who owned that old house before Mrs. Gant bought it was literally driven from it:

The sheltering walls of Dixieland inspired him with horror--he felt that the malign influence of the house had governed his own disintegration. He was a sensitive man, and his promenades about his estate were checked by inhibited places; the cornice of the long girdling porch where a lodger had hanged himself one day at dawn, the spot in the hall where the consumptive had collapsed in a hemorrhage, the room where the old man cut his throat.⁶⁵

Mrs. Gant persists, but the old place has miserable aspects even for her:

It was the winter at Dixieland--the dim fly-specked lights, the wretched progress about the house in search of warmth... The chill walls festered with damp: they drank in death from the atmosphere: a woman died of typhoid, her husband came quickly out into the hall and dropped his hands...Upstairs, upon a sleeping porch, a thin-faced Jew coughed through the interminable dark.⁶⁶

⁶³Ibid., pp. 399-400.

⁶⁴Look Homeward, Angel, p. 104.

⁶⁵Ibid., p. 105.

⁶⁶Ibid., p. 115.

The house's haunting qualities are particularly sensed by Eugene Gant in Of Time and the River after his return from college and his memory of former days at home is sharp:

Storm shook the house at night--the old house, his mother's house--where he had seen his brother die. The old doors swung and creaked in darkness, darkness pressed against the house, the darkness filled them, filled the house at night, it moved them about soft and secret, palpable, filled with a thousand secret presences of sorrowful time and memory, moving about him as he lay below his brother's room in darkness, while storm shook the house in late October, and something creaked and rattled in the wind's strong blast. It was October, and he had come home again...Wind beat at them with burly shoulders in the night. The darkness moved there in the house like something silent, palpable--a spirit breathing in his mother's house, a demon and a friend--speaking to him its silent and intolerable prophecy of flight, of darkness, and the storm.⁶⁷

As Wolfe continues this scene he also continues his skillful use of traditional Gothic elements:

And the old house stood there in all its ugly, harsh, and prognathous bleakness, its paint of rusty yellow scaling from it in patches, and weathered and dilapidated as Eugene had never seen it before, but incredibly natural and familiar, so that all its ghosts of pain and grief and bitterness, its memories of joy and magic and lost time, the thousand histories of all the vanished people it had sheltered, whom all of them had known, revived instantly with an intolerable and dream-like strangeness and familiarity.⁶⁸

Eugene goes away for another time, yet again he is plagued by the house upon his return:

When he returned home, it was after midnight, and his mother's old gaunt house was dark. He went quietly up the steps and into the broad front hallway, closing the heavy door behind him. For a minute he stood there in that living dark, the ancient and breathing darkness of that old house which spoke to him with all the thousand voices of its vanished lives--with all the shapes and presences of things and people he

⁶⁷Of Time and the River, p. 242.

⁶⁸Ibid.

had known, who had been there, and who had passed or vanished, or died.⁶⁹

It seems that Wolfe, prompted by memories and associations with the past, felt he could best heighten the reader's emotions by creating romantic, eerie scenes. Not only did he use Gothic settings in relating incidents occurring at his rural boyhood home, but he also applied similar techniques in narrating events at urban sites.

⁶⁹Ibid., p. 316.

Chapter II

WOLFE AND THE GROTESQUE

INTRODUCTION

The term 'grotesque' is often associated with the Gothicism discussed in the preceding pages. It is significant that Horace Walpole employs the word "grotesque" in discussing Gothic architecture. He says, "Those grotesque monsters...with which spouts of ancient buildings are decorated." Or, at another place: "The wearied arms grotesquely deck the wall." These passages referring to grotesque decoration are both examples of early linkage of the terms "Gothic" and "grotesque".⁷⁰ As applied to Romantic literature, both terms carry the sense of 'highly fanciful', 'fantastic', and 'exceedingly strange'. Also, through its association with the Gothic, the word grotesque comes to be defined by Dr. Johnson thusly: 'Distorted of figure; unnatural; wildly formed; the nuance of fearful, terrible'.⁷¹

In The Stones of Venice, Ruskin notes that in the grotesque a ludicrous and a terrible element are almost invariably found together:

First, then, it seems to me that the grotesque is, in almost all cases, composed of two elements, one ludicrous, the other fearful; that, as one or the other of these elements prevails the grotesque falls into two branches, sportive grotesque, and terrible grotesque; but that we cannot legitimately consider it under these two aspects, because there are hardly

⁷⁰Arthur Clayborough, The Grotesque in English Literature (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1965), pp. 10-11.

⁷¹Ibid., p. 11.

any examples which do not in some degree combine both elements; there are few grotesques so utterly playful as to be overcast with no shade of fearfulness, and few so fearful as absolutely to exclude all idea of jest.⁷²

In one of his essays in Past Masters, Thomas Mann has a similar comment about the prevalence of the grotesque in modern literature:

I feel that, broadly and essentially, the striking characteristic of modern art is that it has ceased to recognize the categories of tragic and comic, or the dramatic classifications, tragedy and comedy. It sees life as tragi-comedy, with the result that the grotesque is its most genuine style--to the extent, indeed, that today that is the only guise in which the sublime may appear. For, if I may say so, the grotesque is the genuine anti-bourgeois style; and however bourgeois Anglo-Saxondom may otherwise be or appear, it is a fact that in art the comic-grotesque has always been its strong point.⁷³

Much of modern literature has seen an incorporation of the anti-poetic with the traditionally poetic, the cowardly with the heroic, the ignoble with the noble, the realistic with the romantic, and the ugly with the beautiful. The ugly has been often heightened until it exists in conjunction with the sublime. The grotesque defies the old sense of established order and satisfies the need for a seemingly more flexible ordering.⁷⁴

Such ordering enables artistic expression to explore new realms; and a necessary part of artistic expression, as George Santayana says, is exaggeration. That is, stylization involves distortion and exaggeration.⁷⁵

⁷²Ibid., p. 14.

⁷³William Van O'Connor, The Grotesque (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1962), p. 5.

⁷⁴Ibid., p. 35.

⁷⁵Ibid., p. 55.

Needless to say, the Southern writers have been prominent producers of the grotesque. The list of them includes Erskine Caldwell, William Faulkner, Robert Penn Warren, Eudora Welty, Carson McCullers, Flannery O'Connor, Truman Capote, and Tennessee Williams. Their reasons for giving pictures of distortion are rather clear: the old agricultural system depleted the land, so that poverty arrived and bred abnormality; in other cases people were trying to live by a code that was no longer applicable, and to do so they were detaching themselves from reality and losing their vitality.⁷⁶

In the grotesques created by the Southern school, one finds the comedy and the pathos of the misfit, or one finds the member of the regional world suffering from isolation and deracination. As a consequence, the regional types--hill-billies, evangelical ministers, "rednecks", sectional patriots--abound in Southern fiction. In reality, a visitor to the South might not notice those types to be as greatly exaggerated as they appear in the fiction. But the writers aim to stress grotesqueness because it best serves their theme. That stress is only natural in a fiction with a sense of the past informing the present.⁷⁷

It remains to show the similarity between the grotesques of Thomas Wolfe and those of other Southern writers. Perhaps some statements made by Wolfe as he narrated his stories will serve to verify the existence of the similarity. For instance, in The Web

⁷⁶Ibid., p. 6.

⁷⁷Ibid., p. 56.

and the Rock the phantoms of George Webber's lost kinsmen seem to be characteristic of many people of the Old South; and often he refers to the past and its unusual aspects. He thinks of the South and "something haunting, soft, and lonely in the air."⁷⁸ In portraying Dick Prosser, the Negro hired man who was a brutal killer, Wolfe says: "He came from darkness, from the dark heart of the secret and undiscovered South."⁷⁹ Perhaps Wolfe's opinion of the South's terrors is another explanation for his attraction to the Gothic and the supernatural as well as to the grotesque. He gives this view of the accursed South and its condition after the Civil War:

There was an image in George Webber's mind that came to him in childhood and that resumed for him the whole dark picture of those decades of defeat and darkness. He saw an old house, set far back from the traveled highway, and many passed along that road, and the troops went by, the dust rose, and the war was over. And no one passed along that road again. He saw an old man go along the path, away from the road, into the house; and the path was overgrown with grass and weeds, with thorny tangle, and with underbrush until the path was lost. And no one ever used that path again. And the man who went into that house never came out again. And the house stayed on. It shone faintly through that gangled growth like its own ruined spectre, its doors and windows black as eyeless sockets. That was the South...That was the South, not of George Webber's life, nor of the lives of his contemporaries--that was the South they did not know but that all of them somehow remembered.⁸⁰

He gives a similar yet even more analytical picture of his native grounds in the following passage:

He knew that there was something wounded in the South. He knew that there was something twisted, dark, and full of

⁷⁸The Web and the Rock, p. 13.

⁷⁹Ibid., p. 156.

⁸⁰Ibid., p. 245.

pain which Southerners have known all their lives--something rooted in their souls beyond all contradiction, about which no one dared to write, of which no one had ever spoken... Perhaps it came from their old war, and from the ruin of their great defeat and its degraded aftermath. Perhaps it came from causes yet more ancient--from the evil of man's slavery, and the hurt and shame of human conscience in its struggle with the fierce desire to own. It came, too, perhaps, from the lusts of the hot South, tormented and repressed below the harsh and outward patterns of a bigoted and intolerant theology, yet prowling always, stirring stealthily, as hushed and secret as the thickets of swamp-darkness. And most of all, perhaps, it came out of the very weather of their lives, out of the forms that shaped them and the food that fed them, out of the dark, mysterious pineland all around them with its haunting sorrow.⁸¹

With the preceding passages in predication of Wolfe's use of the grotesque, an attempt has been made to divide his grotesques into satisfactory headings for the purpose of creating an order for the reader. These headings are: The Maimed; The Old Informing the Young; Death; and Religion.

THE GROTESQUE ELEMENTS

Wolfe often depicts characters who suffer from distorted physical aspects. He is especially fond of dwelling on the unusual appearance of his protagonist. Indeed, the initial chapter of The Web and the Rock is entitled "The Child Caliban", indicating a horrid-looking creature. The title is further explained in the description of the boy: "He is a grotesque-looking little creature, yet unformed and unmade, in his makeup something between a spider and an ape (the boys, of course, call him 'Monk')." ⁸² He carries such features with him into manhood, where they are perhaps even more remarkable:

⁸¹Ibid., pp. 327-328.

⁸²Ibid., p. 29.

When he was listening or talking to someone, his body prowling downward, his head thrust forward and turned upward with a kind of packed attentiveness, the simian analogy was inevitable; therefore the name of "Monk" had stuck. Moreover, it had never occurred to him, apparently, to get his figure clothed in garments suited to his real proportions...Thus, in a way of which he was not wholly conscious, the element of grotesqueness in him was exaggerated.⁸³

Later, fresh from a barroom brawl, George's appearance is more warped than ever:

And what nature had invented, human effort had improved. In the dark pool of the mirror the Thing was more grotesque and simian than it had ever been. Denuded of its shock of hair, the rakishly tonsured skull between the big wings of ears came close upon the corrugated shortness of the forehead into the bushy ridges of the brow; below this, the small, battered features, the short pug-nose, up-tilted towards the right (it had been broken at the center on the other side)...⁸⁴

Another interesting grotesque character is Judge Rumford Bland, the blind man in You Can't Go Home Again. His description is highly disgusting, and he is not a pitiable character as a result:

He was stained with evil. There was something genuinely old and corrupt at the sources of his life and spirit. It had got into his blood, his bone, his flesh. It was palpable in the touch of his thin, frail hand when he greeted you, it was present in the deadly weariness of his tone of voice, in the dead-white texture of his emaciated face, in his lank and lusterless auburn hair, and, most of all, in his sunken mouth, around which there hovered constantly the ghost of a smile. It could only be called the ghost of a smile, and yet, really, it was no smile at all.⁸⁵

Interestingly enough, the judge is able to see better than the people around him in spite of his blindness. That is, he realizes the plight of the money-crazed nation and he predicts the Great Depression itself.

⁸³Ibid., p. 250.

⁸⁴Ibid., p. 689.

⁸⁵You Can't Go Home Again, p. 77.

In his ability to see better because of his blindness he is reminiscent of Flannery O'Connor's Hazel Motes, who intentionally blinds himself in an attempt at seeing spiritual reality.⁸⁶

Two characters who appear only in fragmentary sections of The Web and the Rock, but who are important in relation to the grotesque, are the idiot Willie and the legless Captain Suggs. Willie, who grins and works slavishly for folks without receiving pay, is another in the line of relatives to Faulkner's idiot, Benjy, of The Sound and the Fury.⁸⁷ Captain Suggs, on the other hand, is afflicted in a way similar to Flannery O'Connor's Hulga, the Ph.D. with the wooden leg in "Good Country People".⁸⁸ The Captain "had one leg shot off at Cold Harbor, and the other was mangled and had to be amputated. He got about on crutches when he had his wooden stumps on him; at other times he crawled about on the stump ends of his wooden legs."⁸⁹

Aside from these examples of handicapped characters, much of the grotesqueness among the people in the South stems from the fact that the old people often tried to impress an impractical system of living upon the young. Wolfe seemed to feel that the system was impractical even for the old generations. He invariably sees the ancestors of George Webber as a strange, even weird, group:

⁸⁶Flannery O'Connor, Wise Blood, 1962, in Three By Flannery O'Connor (New York: New American Library), pp. 7-126.

⁸⁷William Faulkner, The Sound and the Fury (New York: Random House, 1946).

⁸⁸Flannery O'Connor, "Good Country People," 1955, in Three By Flannery O'Connor, pp. 243-261.

⁸⁹The Web and the Rock, p. 193.

Against the wall, upon a bed, lay a sheeted figure of someone who had died. Around the flickering fire flame at the hearth, the drawling voices of the Joyners, one hundred years ago. The quiet, drawling voices of the Joyners, who could never die and who attended the death of others like certain doom and prophecy...Aunt Maw sat with other rusty, aged crones of her own blood and kin, with their unceasing chronicle of death and doom and terror and lost people in the hills long, long ago.⁹⁰

This same death-loving family had produced its share of grotesque individuals, and their incestuous relationships certainly helped to produce some of them. As Wolfe says in Look Homeward, Angel:

The...family was as old as any in the community, but it had always been poor, and had made few pretensions to gentility. By marriage, and by intermarriage among its own kinsmen, it could boast of some connection with the great, of some insanity, and a modicum of idiocy.⁹¹

Although these people were unlike the powerful Sutpen family of Faulkner's Absalom, Absalom! (the Sutpens did make 'pretensions to gentility')⁹² the incestuous acts bind them together in at least one respect.

At any rate, George Webber was deeply affected by the tales of his elderly, peculiar relatives:

As far back as he could remember, Aunt Maw had seemed to him an ageless crone, as old as God. He could still hear her voice--that croaking monotone which had gone on and on in endless stories of her past, peopling his childhood world with a whole host of Joyners dead and buried in the hills of Zebulon in ancient days before the Civil War. And almost every tale she had told him was a chronicle of sickness, death, and sorrow...From her he had gotten a picture of his mountain kinsmen that was constantly dark with the terrors of misery and sudden death, a picture made ghostly at frequent

⁹⁰Ibid., pp. 8-9.

⁹¹Ibid., p. 11.

⁹²William Faulkner, Absalom, Absalom! (New York: Random House, 1964).

intervals by supernatural revelations. The Joyners, so he thought, had been endowed with occult powers by the Almighty, and were forever popping up on country roads and speaking to people as they passed, only to have it turn out later that they had been fifty miles away at the time. They were forever hearing voices and receiving premonitions. If a neighbor died suddenly, the Joyners would flock from miles around to sit up with the corpse, and in the flickering light of pine logs on the hearth they would talk unceasingly through the night, their droning voices punctuated by the crumbling of the ash as they told how they had received intimations of the impending death a week before it happened.⁹³

Had the boy been as deeply ingrained with these tales as might be expected, his life may have been altered a great deal; for instance, Flannery O'Connor created several characters, among them Hazel Motes⁹⁴ and Francis Marion Tarwater,⁹⁵ who were caused to lead essentially grotesque existences because of repressive religious training they had received from their grandparents or uncles or aunts. Yet George Webber was saved from such a fate by, incidentally, his Great-Uncle Mark, whose stories are gruesome but probably more near the truth than those of Aunt Maw. The following is Mark's account of some family history as he interpreted it:

Do you know that even after I had reached the age of twenty years and we had moved to Libya Hill, we all slept together-- eight of us--in the same room where my mother and father slept?--And for three days, for three damnable never-to-be-forgotten days of shame and horror that left their scar upon the lives of all of us, the body of my grandfather, Bill Joyner, lay there in the house and rotted-rotted! In Summer heat until the stench of him had got into our breath, our blood, our lives, into bedding and food and clothes...while my father, and that damned, thick-lipped, drawling, sanctimonious, lecher of a nigger-Baptist prophet--your

⁹³The Web and the Rock, p. 97.

⁹⁴Flannery O'Connor, Wise Blood.

⁹⁵Flannery O'Connor, The Violent Bear it Away, 1960, in Three By Flannery O'Connor, pp. 305-447.

great uncle, Holy Rance, sat there smugly with that stench of rotting death of man's corrupt mortality thick in their nostrils--calmly discussing, if you please, the lost art of embalming as it was practiced by the ancient Egyptians--which they alone, of course...were prepared to practice on that rotting and putrescent corpse!⁹⁶

Further, Uncle Mark says:

My brother Edward died when he was four years old: there in the room with all of us he lay for a week upon his trundle bed--oh! we let him die before our very eyes! He died beneath the very beds we slept in, for his trundle bed was pushed each night beneath the big bed where my mother and father slept.⁹⁷

Aside from the death scenes portrayed by Aunt Maw and Uncle Mark, other characters in The Web and the Rock either bring about or participate in grotesque deaths. As has been intimated, the Joyner with the greatest powers of predeliction and prophesying is Uncle Rance. Not only did he foresee Doomsday in the immediate future, but all his life he has been known to mysteriously appear at the site of death, even while also appearing to be at some other place during the same time. As local folks phrased it, he had been "Seen". On one occasion his corporeal body was visiting a family fifty miles from home when he was "Seen" in the woods near home by a man seeking help for his ailing wife. The woman died.⁹⁸ Another time, when Rance and his brother were in the Confederate army, he was Seen by his mother as he emerged from the woods and approached the house. He disappeared just as quickly as he appeared, though. It was later learned that his brother had been killed in battle the same day.⁹⁹

⁹⁶The Web and the Rock, p. 166.

⁹⁷Ibid., pp. 167-168.

⁹⁸Ibid., pp. 78-81.

⁹⁹Ibid., pp. 81-83.

In Of Time and the River, even when W. O. Gant lies on his deathbed he sees his mysterious brother-in-law standing by his side. "Did you see him?" Gant asks his wife. She replies: "What on earth is in your mind? You know that (he) is way out West in Oregon--it's been ten years since he came back home last--that summer of the reunion in Gettysburg."¹⁰⁰ Of course Gant dies soon after he has seen the spirit.

Rance Joyner's penchant for initiating death through the projection of his spiritual being relates him to the ghosts discussed in an earlier section of this paper. Rance appears to be a modified form of a ghost; that is, he is a wraith. The ghost, the apparition of a dead person, has been distinguished from the wraith, which is the apparition of a living man. The behavior of the wraith is believed to indicate what is about to happen to the person in danger. In his story "A Halloween Wraith" William Black writes: "When a wraith appears, it is to tell you of a great danger, and if it comes forward to you, then the danger is over, but if it goes away from you, the person is dead."¹⁰¹ Thus it can be seen that the pattern of Rance's actions establish him as a wraith, a prophet of doom.

Death is also often dealt with by Wolfe at the gravesite itself. At one point in You Can't Go Home Again, it is decided to remove the protagonist's mother's body from its grave, and the ladies of the

¹⁰⁰Look Homeward, Angel, p. 102.

¹⁰¹Peter Penzoldt, The Supernatural in Fiction (New York: Humanitarian Press, 1965), p. 32.

family decide to have a glance inside the coffin. As a neighbor, Mrs. Delia Flood, tells it:

"The face was all gone until you could see the teeth! And the nails had all grown out long! But the hair!--the hair! Oh, I tell you what, the hair was beautiful! It had grown out until it had covered everything--the finest head of hair I ever saw on anyone!"¹⁰²

In another graveyard, in the same novel, a macabre episode occurs. An aspiring intellectual, failing at all he undertakes, finally becomes "death's aesthete--suicide in a graveyard...".¹⁰³

The actual happening of death itself is given a grotesque coloring by Wolfe in Of Time and the River. As W. O. Gant is stricken with pain as he nears death, Wolfe gives the following account:

"O Jesus! Save me! Save me!" He fell to his knees, still clutching at his entrails with his mighty hands...Even before Eliza got to him, her flesh turned rotten at the sight. Blood was pouring from him; the bright arterial blood was already running out upon the concrete walk, the heavy black cloth of Gant's trousers was already sodden, turning purplish with the blood; the blood streamed through his fingers, covering his great hands. He was bleeding to death through the genital organs.¹⁰⁴

After the attack, Gant is seen as barely alive:

Gant was a spectre in waxen yellow. His disease, which had thrust out its branches to all parts of his body, gave him an appearance of almost transparent delicacy. His mind was sunken out of life in a dim shadowland...His body was a rotten fabric which had thus far miraculously held together.¹⁰⁵

After his death:

¹⁰²You Can't Go Home Again, p. 107.

¹⁰³Ibid., p. 409.

¹⁰⁴Of Time and the River, pp. 150-151.

¹⁰⁵Look Homeward, Angel, p. 507.

Now the corpse was stretched out on the splendid satin cushions of the expensive coffin. It had been barbered, powdered, disembowelled, and pumped full of embalming fluid. And as it lay there with its waxen head set forward in its curious gaunt projectiveness, the pale lips firmly closed and with a little line of waxen mucous in the lips, the women came forward with their oily swollen faces, and a look of ravenous eagerness came into their eyes, they stared at it hard and long, and lifted their sodden handkerchiefs slowly to their oily mouths, and were borne away, sobbing hysterically, by their equally oily, ravenous, sister orgiasts in sorrow.¹⁰⁶

Gant's body is cared for by Horse Hines the undertaker, a man as macabre as the bodies with which he deals. In Look Homeward, Angel, Wolfe emphasizes the distortions of Horse's being:

He produced the effect of a skeleton clad in a black frock coat. His long lantern mouth split horsily in a professorial smile displaying big horse teeth in his white heavily starched face...His palm-flesh rattled together like old bones.¹⁰⁷

Extremely proud of his profession, Horse is able to solemnly say:

The sacred rites of closing the eyes, of composing the limbs, and of preparing for burial the lifeless repository of the departed soul is our holy mission; it is for us, the living, to pour balm upon the broken heart of Grief, to soothe the widow's nerves and to brush away the orphan's tears.¹⁰⁸

Horse takes charge of Ben Gant's body also and readies it for burial.

Eugene is amazed that, amid the gloom created by the death of his brother, the undertaker is so well-adapted to such scenes. Again

Horse's concern is strictly with his work:

"There are artists, boys, in every profession, and though I do say so myself, I'm proud of my work on this job. Look

¹⁰⁶Of Time and the River, p. 187.

¹⁰⁷Look Homeward, Angel, p. 142.

¹⁰⁸Ibid., p. 146.

at him! Did you ever see anything more natural in your life?"¹⁰⁹

An example of another kind of person who is not loathe to hover around death is the drunken Tim Wagner of You Can't Go Home Again. He finally succeeds in finding a home in the same mould as his personality:

One of the local undertaking firms had told Tim he could have their old horse-drawn hearse if he would only take it off their premises. Tim had accepted the macabre gift and parked the hearse in his lot. He then furnished it and lived in it.¹¹⁰

Since thoughts of death often precede ideas of Eternity, it may be well to note that Wolfe presents a number of people whose warped religious values bring the element of the grotesque into their lives. To an extent this type of grotesqueness has already been discussed, and the purpose here is to elaborate upon it.

As a primary example of the kind of character whose actions are of a religious yet an unnatural nature, there is old Doctor Ballard in The Web and the Rock. The good doctor is quite fond of his pack of dogs:

He held that they were sacred, that the souls of all the dear lost dead went into them. His younger sister's soul sat on the seat beside him; she had long ears and her eyes were sad. Two dozen of his other cherished dead trotted around the buggy as he went up the hill...¹¹¹

A larger category of religious grotesques is headed by Bascom Pentland (actually a brother of Rance Joyner), whose duty, he felt,

¹⁰⁹Ibid., p. 477.

¹¹⁰You Can't Go Home Again, pp. 117-118.

¹¹¹The Web and the Rock, p. 71.

lay in converting the evil world about them. In Of Time and the River, Bascom often blasted the wickedness of motorists as he stood on the streets:

Mr. Pentland would thereupon retort with an eloquent harangue, beginning with a few well-chosen quotations from the more violent prophets of the Old Testament, a few predictions of death, destruction and damnation for the owners of motor cars, and a few apt references to Days of Judgement and Reckoning, Chariots of Moloch, and Beasts of Apocalypse.¹¹²

Rance, too, is given to prophesying doom in all sorts of situations. In Look Homeward, Angel, he and W. O. Gant are reunited in this strange way:

Gant heard behind him the voice of a man who was passing. And that voice, flat, drawling, complacent, touched with sudden light a picture that had lain dead in him for twenty years. "Hit's a comin'! Accordin' to my figgers Hit's due June 11, 1886." Gant turned and saw retreating the burly persuasive figure of the prophet he had last seen vanishing down that dusty road that led to Gettysburg and Armageddon.¹¹³

Poor Rance is plagued by a repulsive body odor, and in view of his proselytizing tendencies, is nicknamed "Stinkin' Jesus" by his companions in The Web and the Rock. He admits: "I'd do anything in the world if I could only get rid of it...I reckon it's a cross the Lord has given me to bear."¹¹⁴ In spite of his distinctive odor, he is respected by many for his righteousness. As Aunt Maw tells it:

"Didn't he tell us that day when he came back that the Day of Judgment was already upon us?--Oh! said Appomattox Courthouse marked the comin' of the Lord and Armageddon--and for us all

¹¹²Of Time and the River, p. 20.

¹¹³Look Homeward, Angel, p. 8.

¹¹⁴Ibid., p. 72.

to get ready for great changes! And, yes! don't I remember that old linen chart--or map, I reckon you might call it-- that he kept strung around his neck, all rolled up in a ball, and hangin' from a string? It proved, you know, by all the facts and figures in the Bible that the world was due to end in 1865...He was certainly a good man."¹¹⁵

Apparently it made little difference to Aunt Maw that Rance's predictions and prophecies were consistently incorrect.

Another curious prophet is Jenny Grubb, a Negro cook in Look Homeward, Angel. Each Sunday afternoon, when she was freed from her work, she would make her way to the town square:

The Square was bare and empty but it made no difference. Swaying with a rhythmical movement of her powerful and solid frame, she propelled herself rapidly across the Square to the appointed corner, warning sinners as she came. And the Square was empty. The Square was always empty. She took up her position there in the hot sun, on the corner where McCormack's drug store and Joyner's hardware store faced each other. For the next three hours she harangued the heated, vacant Square.¹¹⁶

Such religious zealots are similar to characters created by both Flannery O'Connor and William Faulkner. From O'Connor comes Francis Marion Tarwater, whose purpose in life is to baptize his feeble-minded cousin, Bishop;¹¹⁷ from Faulkner comes Eupheus Hines, who persecutes his grandson, Joe Christmas, as God's abomination who must be destroyed.¹¹⁸

Wolfe's religious zealots and other grotesques, like the creations of other Southern writers, can strike the reader as humorous characters or pitiable characters, or often as both humorous and pitiable.

¹¹⁵The Web and the Rock, p. 73.

¹¹⁶Ibid., p. 116.

¹¹⁷Flannery O'Connor, The Violent Bear it Away.

¹¹⁸William Faulkner, Light in August (New York: New Directions Books, 1932).

CONCLUSION

In regard to the richness of each of Wolfe's four major novels in Gothic and grotesque material: The Web and the Rock contains a variety of both Gothic and grotesque traits; You Can't Go Home Again has some vivid Gothic settings, and it also has much grotesqueness centered around the graveyard; Look Homeward, Angel shows the Gant family's Gothic house and its associations with the supernatural; and Of Time and the River contains Gothic descriptions similar to those in Look Homeward, Angel, as well as grotesques like those in The Web and the Rock.

According to William Van O'Connor, the grotesque is the result of disintegration. He also maintains that in the Gothic, order often breaks down. Therefore, the producer of the Gothic may become a producer of the grotesque: "chronology is confused, identity is blurred, sex is twisted, the buried life erupts."¹¹⁹ All these things seem to occur throughout Wolfe's four major novels, as they occur in the works of other Southern writers.

¹¹⁹Irving Malin, New American Gothic (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1962), p. 9.

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