# A STUDY OF THOMAS WOLFE: WOLFE'S LITERARY WORKS AS A RECORD OF HIS EGO

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## INTRODUCTION

Thomas Wolfe was a Gargantuan man who excelled the average man in scale in every aspect of his life. He died when he was still thirty-seven, but he wrote and published several million words. He was a man of extreme vitality. In fact, there are many fabulous anecdotes about him. It is said that he worked fifteen hours each day and wrote thousands of words. After midnight, when he had become completely exhausted, he lunged out into the streets to talk to someone, anyone. Moreover, he yelled for a truck to haul his mountainous manuscripts to the publisher's office.[1] In her biography of Wolfe, Elizabeth Nowell writes:

> He had a gourmet's passion for good food, but he starved himself day after day, with only cigarettes and strong black coffee to sustain him. . . . Even his physical appearance varied greatly: when he saw a nice thick sirloin steak, a bottle of good wine, or a pretty woman, he would crow and ogle like a suckling babe, and when he told his comic stories and tall tales, he would roll his eyes and grin like Wordsworth's idiot boy: but in repose of meditation, his face had the grandeur and the genius of the Höfel Beethoven, and his eyes were always dark and sad with a knowledge of the strangeness and the tragedy of life.[2]

However, behind his eccentric conduct, he kept his furious passion for life. His hard work, his violent emotion, his huge appetite, his great ambitions, and his extreme sensitivity—all of his furious, contradictory characteristics showed, in fact, the vital power of his great ego. It is natural that, as this powerful ego dominated his existence, it also dominates all his writing.

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[1] Richard Walser, *Thomas Wolfe: An Introduction and Interpretation* (New York, 1961), pp. 12–13.

[2] Elizabeth Nowell, *Thomas Wolfe: A Biography* (Garden City, New York, 1960), pp. 12–13.

First, when we ask why Wolfe wrote, we find an answer in his following letter written to his mother:

> . . . I want to know life and understand it and interpret it without fear or favor. This, I feel is a man's work and worthy of a man's dignity. . . . God is *not* always in his Heaven, all is *not* always right with the world. It is not all bad, but it is not all good, it is not all ugly, but it is not all beautiful, it is life, life, life—the only thing that matters. . . . I will go to the ends of the earth to find it, to understand it, I will know this country when I am through as I know the palm of my hand, and I will put it on paper, and make it true and beautiful.[1]

Here we can see his eagerness for life and his strong desire to write down life as he grasps it. That is—what made him create his works was his powerful ego, which passionately strove to comprehend life truly. The amazing quantity of his work tells us clearly how strong his inner power was. Second, we can see a clear reflection of his ego in all his works. One might protest here that in every literary work the writer's ego is reflected in one way or the other. In some cases, though, an utterly objective inquiry is the way the writer chooses to work. In other cases, we find the writer's ego hidden in highly fictional works. However, in Wolfe's case, his works are much more positively direct self-expression. In this sense, they are close to letters or diaries. Therefore, in his works we certainly feel the presence of his powerful, naked ego.

As the most marked evidence of this, Wolfe's novels take an autobiographical form. It is a quite natural result of his ego's strong drive for self-expression. He wrote about himself, and his protagonists are all aspects of himself. Almost everything he wrote is based on fact; according to Floyd C. Watkins' remark, among the many more than 300 characters and places mentioned in *Look Homeward, Angel*, there is probably none entirely of Wolfe's own making.[1] With all his power Wolfe wrote down the facts so honestly and thoroughly that the nakedness of *Look Homeward, Angel* infuriated the people of his hometown, and he himself was thrown into the fire of torment. Anyway, by using the autobiographical form, he could pour himself into his works as he wished.

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[1] Thomas Wolfe, *Thomas Wolfe's Letters to His Mother Julia Elizabeth Wolfe*, ed. John Skally Terry (New York, 1943), pp. 49–50.

To sum up, Wolfe's powerful ego made him create his works, it projected itself directly in his works, and the one entity we grasp from his works is this vital ego. Now in the following pages, let us examine his literary form, his themes, and his ideas to see how his ego is directly projected in all of them.

## CHAPTER I. WOLFE'S LITERARY FORM

It is surprising how Wolfe wrote his books. Like one possessed Wolfe would write with an amazing speed. He would fill innumerable sheets of paper with his vigorous scrawl, and would then toss them aside to lie scattered on the floor. The words came too fast for him—he just tried to keep up with them. The task of his secretary was to gather the papers and put them into correct order, typing on the basis of the evidence in the contents.[2] What a unique way of writing ! We understand why he was never a careful technician. Instead, in his works there is a rich, powerful torrent of words. He wrote and wrote as some eagerness inside him led him.

> Could I make tongue say more than tongue could utter! Could I make brain grasp more than brain could think! Could I weave into immortal denseness some small brede of words. . . .[3]

His choice of words has no accuracy, though it is careful enough to convey his meaning. The number of technical flaws is considerable, but there is yet something of genuine value in his writing. Both the good and bad points in his literary form, in fact, clearly show us Wolfe himself. When we think of his unique way of writing, it is easy to imagine that his great ego had a decisive influence on his literary form. Now, let us discuss in detail the main characteristics of his literary form and examine how his ego expresses itself there.

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[1] Floyd C. Watkins, *Thomas Wolfe's Characters: Portraits from Life* (Norman, Oklahoma: 1957), p. 9.

[2] Edward C. Aswell, "A Note on Thomas Wolfe," in *The Hills Beyond*, by Thomas Wolfe (New York, 1941), p. 355.

[3] Thomas Wolfe, *The Web and the Rock* (New York, [1939]), p. vi.

As a beginning, is the following passage prose or poetry?

> . . . 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?[1]

As in this passage from the preface of *Look Homeward, Angel*, Wolfe's style is often very close to poetry. The sentences are very rhythmical; in them we can find the use of meter, refrain, and even poetic diction. Like poetry, his passages are often based on a rich imagery which appeals directly to our feelings. His style is not compact, and his words are not precise. He never depends on just one word; rather, his words convey a certain mood as a whole. Through this rhythm of words, rich imagery, and moods, his prose-poems are more effective than usual prose. Wolfe wanted the most impressive, most effective expression possible. The prose-poem, more spontaneous than usual prose, was the form Wolfe desired to cultivate. In his works, these prose-poems convey his impressions or his feelings very well.

Besides his favorite genre of the prose-poem, Wolfe's works are composed of parts of various other literary genres—such as the short story, the essay, the chant, and so forth. However, if we look into his descriptions carefully, we notice that there are two different types of descriptions—descriptions of actual life and those of inner experience. His descriptions of his characters and their life-like conversations or of beautiful nature are often successful because of their concrete vividness and intensity. It is good to remember here that Wolfe's materials are limited to those that he had experienced directly or had heard about fully. With his passion for life, Wolfe took every bit of his experience into himself. Then he tried to write it all down with the same intensity. As a result, these descriptions have just as much intensity as, if not more than, the actual experiences had. On the other hand, he tried to express his own thoughts or emotions directly with his powerful flow of words. Because of its emotional excess, though, this kind of description is at times less acceptable, and his dithyrambic rhetoric has been bitterly attacked by some critics. For example, Bernard DeVoto even declares that it is not fiction but only " logorrhea."[1] Yet both types of description, of outer and inner experience, are necessary for Wolfe, because life consists of both types of experience.

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[1] Thomas Wolfe, *Look Homeward, Angel* (New York, 1929), p. 2.

Let us first discuss Wolfe's concrete descriptions of actual life. We can find good examples of Wolfe's characterization in the members of the Gant family. Gant himself is a lonely " Far-Wanderer,"[2] yet with an extreme vitality and a huge hunger. His strong disgust for property is incompatible with Eliza's tenacious acquisitiveness. Every morning he rants to her in a furious declamation of curses and abuse. Yet Eliza, with her slow movement of emotion, is patient and unyielding. Helen is hysteric, with a rough but deep affection, and Luke fills the scenes with his stutter and his wild laughter—" Whah-whah-whah ! "[3] They are all more than life-size and full of vitality. There is no grace or tenderness, and their furious passion, naked emotions, and savage quarrels show us their strong egos. Their world is a world of vitality, and it strikes us with an intensity more than that of actual life.

Wolfe's conversations are powerful, too. We remember the famous lunchroom scene in *Look Homeward, Angel.* Against the background of the town at dawn, some townspeople, including Ben and Dr. McGuire, talk casually. Their talk is loose and rambling, and we can glimpse no special intention of the author. Yet the characters are living, and there is some force which draws us strongly into the scene. Through the course of the talk, we come to know or, rather, feel the existence of Dr. McGuire. With his skillful doctor's hand numbly gripping a fork, he sits "patiently impaling kidney beans."[1] He is a heavy drinker and a witty joker, and yet a warm and humane veteran doctor, one who casually shows warm sympathy for Helen. Jovial Horse Hines, frank Coker, vulgar Harry Tugman, and Ben, who looks old for his age—through their vulgar talk, they fill the scene with their humanity. With their amusing jokes and warm companionship, they compose a little world which is warm and happy. Once caught by Wolfe's imagination, a casual conversation changes into a presentation of warm human companionship.

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[1] Bernard DeVoto, " Genius Is Not Enough," *Forays and Rebuttals* (Boston, 1936), p. 146, quoted in *The Enigma of Thomas Wolfe*, ed. Richard Walser (Cambridge, 1953).

[2] Wolfe, *Look Homeward, Angel*, p. 58.

[3] *Ibid.*, p. 214.

We can find another example of Wolfe's powerful conversations in his mimicry of real speech. What he actually heard with his keen ears, he reproduces with his unique power of words. In "I Have a Thing to Tell You," a chapter of *You Can't Go Home Again*, a German friend, Franz Heilig, talks to George like this:

> "Zey are as bad as all ze ozzers, zese great, fat Chews. If I had my little machine gun, I vould shoot zem, too. Ze only sing I care about more is vhat zese dret-ful fools vill do to Chermany—to ze people." Anxiously, he looked at George and said: "You do so like ze people, Chorge?"[2]

The German accent sounds so real that we feel as if we were hearing it spoken directly. Similarly, in *Of Time and the River* we hear the drunken youths' stammering speech during Eugene's journey to Boston:

> —Creasman, you're a good fellow maybe but I don't know you. . . . You keep out of this. . . . Robert . . . I'm goona tell y' shump'n. . . . You made a remark t'night I didn' like—Prayin' for me, are they, Robert?
>
> —You damn fool!—You don't know what you're talkin' 'bout! Go on to bed!—
>
> —I'll go to bed, you bastard—I got shump'n to shay t'you!—Prayin' for me, are yuh?—Pray for yourself, y' bloody little Deke!
>
> —Damn fool's crazy! Go on to bed now—

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[1] *Ibid.*, p. 141.

[2] Thomas Wolfe, *You Can't Go Home Again* (Harmondsworth, Middlesex, 1970), p. 596.

> . . . Good night, Gene—Come on—let's go to bed!—
>
> To bed to bed to bed to bed to bed! So, so, so, so, so! Make no noise, make no noise, draw the curtains; so, so, so. We'll go to supper i' the morning: So so, so. And Ile goe to bedde at noone.[1]

The conversation is loose and conveys no special meaning. Yet the scene has a unique power in evoking the actual situation in our minds. Especially, in the last part, Wolfe is borrowing the words from Shakespeare, but he is not merely playing with words. The words enable us to have a glimpse into the drunken youth's confident mind. The words are also used properly to express the youth's dim consciousness and drunken lisp. It really seems a living experience. Here we notice that mere drunkenness is treated as if it were important and even splendid. With his skillful use of words, Wolfe unfolds before our eyes magnificent scenes which have more meaning and more intensity than our actual lives.

Wolfe's descriptions of nature are also effectively intense. Not only landscapes and seasons, but also towns, cities, rivers, train rides and food —all these are described, often with rich imagery like poetry. The following beautiful sketch of nature is from his *Look Homeward, Angel.*

> The plum-tree, black and brittle, rocks stiffly in winter wind. Her million little twigs are frozen in spears of ice. But in the Spring, lithe and heavy, she will bend under her great load of fruit and blossoms. She will grow young again. Red plums will ripen, will be shaken desperately upon the tiny stems. They will fall bursted on the loamy warm wet earth; when the wind blows in the orchard the air will be filled with dropping plums; the night will be filled with the sound of their dropping, and a great tree of birds will sing, burgeoning, blossoming richly, filling the air also with warm-throated plum-dropping bird-notes.[2]

We can see the plum-tree before our eyes. We can see it frozen in the winter and see it become full of fruits and flowers in the spring. We can even feel the air filled with the odor of the plum and the songs of the birds. The sharpness of the description convinces us of the beauty of nature as if we were experiencing it directly. Wolfe was obviously a man of keen sensitivity. The change in tiny twigs, the way plums shake, the touch of the earth, and the smell of the air—the most delicate changes in nature assume unfathomable meanings in his works.

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[1] Thomas Wolfe, *Of Time and the River* (New York, 1935), pp. 73–74.

[2] Wolfe, *Look Homeward, Angel,* p. 137.

Let us look at another example. Eugene-Wolfe introduces us to the rich stores of food inside the big refrigerator of Joel Pierce's house.

> Food! Food, indeed! The great icebox was crowded with such an assortment of delicious foods as he had not seen in many years. . . . Even as the eye glistened and the mouth began to water at the sight of a noble roast of beef, all crisp and crackly in its cold brown succulence, the attention was diverted to a plump broiled chicken, whose brown and crackly tenderness fairly seemed to beg for the sweet and savage pillage of the tooth. But now a pungent and exciting fragrance would assail the nostrils: it was the smoked pink slices of an Austrian ham—should it be brawny bully beef, now, or the juicy breast of a white tender pullet, or should it be the smoky pungency, the half-nostalgic savor of the Austrian ham? Or that noble dish of green lima beans, now already beautifully congealed in their pervading film of melted butter; or that dish of tender stewed young cucumbers; or those tomato slices, red and thick and ripe, and heavy as a chop; or that dish of cold asparagus, say; or that dish of corn; or, say, one of those musty fragrant, deep-ribbed cantaloupes, chilled to the heart, now, in all their pink-fleshed taste and ripeness. . . .[1]

Has there ever been such abundant, powerful description of food? Hundreds of words are devoted to this celebration of food, and, indeed, food seems something splendid. Here the description is also sharp and intense. Wolfe tells us in his *The Story of a Novel* that a central characteristic of his memory is an intensity of " sense impression," the " power to evoke and bring back the odors, sounds, colors, shapes, and feel of things with concrete vividness."[2] We know now that he was right. There is certainly an evocative power in his words. Furthermore, his unique power with words gives the scenes intensity and even magnificence.

Thus far I have discussed Wolfe's descriptions of actual life—his characters, their conversations, and his descriptions of nature and food. In all of these we can see the unique evocative power of his words. His characters are believable in spite of their extravagance. Their conversations and the descriptions of nature are powerful enough to remind us of our actual situations. This power of words is, in fact, the fruit of his strong desire for self-expression. Wolfe wanted to express what he himself had experienced, and with the same intensity. He had a strong attachment to his own experience. Thus, the world he created becomes a world of magnificence. The characters are full of vitality, the scenes are unusually powerful, and everything has profound meaning. In his world we can see clearly the reflection of Wolfe's own passion for life. The vitality of the characters and the power of the scenes reflect Wolfe's own vitality. Wolfe's loneliness and deep affection toward his fellows changed, for instance, the casual talk in the lunchroom into a depiction of warm human companionship. It is Wolfe's own love of food that made possible such powerful descriptions of food. With his strong desire for life and his wish for self-expression, he created his own magnificent, powerful world.

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[1] Wolfe, *Of Time and the River*, p. 542.

[2] Thomas Wolfe, *The Story of a Novel* (New York, 1936), p. 31.

Now next, let us consider another type of his descriptions—the descriptions of inner experience. Wolfe was not satisfied with making the characters talk themselves. He also directly expressed his own philosophical ideas or emotional responses to the various scenes of life. These descriptions are characteristic of Wolfe's style. They contain a number of adjectives, superlatives, exaggerated expressions and words with vague connotation, or pairs of words with quite opposite meanings. His rhythmical sentences sometimes seem like some incantations. His sentences are loose and verbose, as usual, and the passages are emotional and ranting. The views expressed may even be immature. At the same time, however, there is a pure power in his vigorous flow of words:

> Proud, cruel, everchanging and ephemeral city, to whom we came once when our hearts were high, our blood passionate and hot, our brain a particle of fire: infinite and mutable city, mercurial city, strange citadel of million-visaged time—Oh! endless river and eternal rock, in which the forms of life came, passed and changed intolerably before us, and to which we came, as every youth has come, with such enormous madness, and with so mad a hope—for what?
>
> To eat you, branch and root and tree; to devour you, golden fruit of power and love and happiness; to consume you to your sources, river and spire and rock, down to your iron roots; to entomb within our flesh forever the huge substance of your billion-footed pavements, the intolerable web and memory of dark million-

visaged time.[1]

There is indeed a " drunkenness of words "[2] here. By this strong flow of words we are engulfed and swept forward into Wolfe's own mood. His enthusiasm and his youthful vitality are indeed overflowing and forceful. Into these passages Wolfe directly poured himself, and his passion makes them strikingly powerful.

There are, then, two kinds of descriptions—descriptions of actual life and those of inner experience. In Wolfe's works these two factors mainly support the development of the stories. When we look into these two factors closely, though, we notice that their directions are quite opposite. His evocative descriptions of actual life show his desire to emphasize the concrete things of the physical world. On the other hand, the descriptions of his feelings or ideas are proof of his search for abstract ideas as a means of entering a spiritual world. The mixture of these two opposite kinds of descriptions is, in fact, characteristic of Wolfe. However, the mixture seems a natural result in Wolfe's case, because we can see clearly that both types of descriptions come from one source inside Wolfe. In his consciousness, we find two kinds of urges—one to know actual life thoroughly and to reproduce it, and the other, to search for the meaning of life and to express it directly. Both come from his strong drive to know life and to express what he has grasped. He wants to know everything, for he wants to live life truly. Actually, our world consists of both physical and spiritual worlds. Therefore, Wolfe quite naturally takes opposite directions at the same time, and chooses the most direct ways of expression in both. In this way, Wolfe's strong inner drive produces his unique mixture of two opposite kinds of descriptions.

Now let us consider other characteristics of Wolfe's literary style. Humor and satire stand out among them. First, his natural humor makes his works rich and attractive. For example, in the early part of *Look Homeward, Angel*, he describes a childish fantasy of Eugene as follows:

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[1] Wolfe, *Of Time and the River*, p. 508.

[2] Joseph Warren Beach, " Thomas Wolfe: Discovery of Brotherhood," *American Fiction* 1920–1940 (New York, 1941), p. 212.

> . . . They stood silently a moment in the vast deserted nave of Saint Thomas'. Far in the depth of the vast church Old Michael's slender hands pressed softly on the organ-keys. The last rays of the setting sun poured in a golden shaft down through the western windows, falling for a moment, in a cloud of glory, as if in benediction, on Mainwaring's tired face.
>
> " I am going," he said presently.
>
> " Going? " she whispered. " Where? "
>
> The organ music deepened.
>
> " Out there," he gestured briefly to the West. " Out there—among His people."
>
> " Going? " She could not conceal the tremor of her voice. " Going? Alone? "
>
> He smiled sadly.[1]

With his melodramatic tone, Wolfe seems to kid the childish innocence of Eugene's fantasy. The comic description seems very natural and makes us feel not a shade of artificiality. It is very close to our everyday humor, and behind the description we can see Wolfe himself looking quite warmly at the boy, Eugene.

We can find another example in *You Can't Go Home Again.* When Wolfe describes the night journey with Mr. Lloyd McHarg in the suburbs of London, he also shows his humorist aspect. Through exaggeration Wolfe puts the nightmarish setting and the terrified driver in effective contrast:

> 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.
>
> The driver himself was being rapidly reduced to a nervous wreck. The little man was now plainly terrified. He agreed with frenzied eagerness to everything that was said to him, but his voice trembled when he spoke. From his manner, he obviously felt that he had fallen into the clutches of two madmen, that he was now at their mercy in the lonely countryside, and that something dreadful was likely to happen at any moment. George could see him bent over the wheel, his whole figure contracted with the tenseness of his terror. If either of the crazy Americans on the back seat had chosen to let out a blood-curdling war whoop, the wretched man would not have been surprised, but he would certainly have died instantly.[2]

Yet this, too, does not really seem to be intended to entertain the readers. Rather, it seems that Wolfe is enjoying himself by making fun of the little driver. By some unique power of his words and image, we are unconsciously involved in the comical mood. Here, too, we can see Wolfe's warm attitude toward the quite human character of this little driver. Thus, through his warm, natural humor, we feel his humanity directly.

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[1] Wolfe, *Look Homeward, Angel,* p. 86.

[2] Wolfe, *You Can't Go Home Again,* p. 540.

Wolfe's satire is found in his attacks on Philistinism, the false social structure, and so on. He penetrates into man and society honestly. For example, let us look at the following passage from his description of Piggy Logan in *You Can't Go Home Again:*

> However that may be, Mr Piggy Logan's fame was certainly blazing now, and an entire literature in the higher aesthetics had been created about him and his puppets. Critical reputations had been made or ruined by them. The last criterion of fashionable knowingness that year was an expert familiarity with Mr Logan and his dolls. If one lacked this knowledge, he was lower than the dust. If one had it, his connoisseurship in the arts was definitely established and his eligibility for any society of the higher sensibilities was instantly confirmed.[1]

Here he attacks the upper classes, so under the control of fashion and so utterly blind to the truth. Wolfe directly exposes the inner emptiness of the upper class out of his own eagerness for true life. However, he never tries to escape from the ugliness of reality by becoming bitter. Wolfe has the power to go straight through reality. Thus, his power, honesty, and eagerness for true life are reflected in his satire.

The last big problem that I wish to discuss here is that of unity in a novel. Scholars have had great difficulty in assigning Wolfe's works by genre. Besides the mixture of ways of writing, we can find no firm plot developing the central themes. This lack of integration as a novel is a big defect which his works could never manage to escape.

Wolfe himself writes in his *The Story of a Novel:*

> In the middle of December of that year the editor . . . called me to his home and calmly informed me that my book was finished. I could only look at him with stunned surprise, and finally I only could tell him out of the depth of my own hopelessness, that he was mistaken. . . . He answered with the same quiet finality

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[1] *Ibid.*, p. 210.

> that the book was finished whether I knew it or not. . . .[1]

This seems a very unusual way of writing a novel. Maxwell Perkins, the editor, not Wolfe, the writer, decided the ending. In such a way of writing could there be any firm plot supporting and revealing the central theme? Why did Wolfe write in this way? Because what mattered to Wolfe was not the individual theme, but the whole—life itself. He wanted to express the whole of life and to " find our America "[2] in it. Between this great intention and his plethora of materials, his struggle was big enough. We find the plan of his huge saga novel in the publisher's notice of *Of Time and the River*. Wolfe intended to write a hexology which was to cover and contain almost a hundred and fifty years of American history. Yet, what Wolfe had to do first was to divide his materials into readable, publishable units. Next he had to search for some central themes to bring some coherence to each unit. Then he had to find some scheme to give at least a superficial shape to the whole. However, is there any such scheme which could give shape to the whole of life? Faulkner's remark that " Wolfe had made the best failure because he had tried hardest to say the most . . . "[3] assumes this extravagant intention of Wolfe. At any rate, with this gigantic intention in mind, Wolfe continued to write.

The result is chaos in his huge novels. His novels do bear a looseness evocative of real life and do convey his intended big scale. Yet, they seem mere gatherings of fragments. They take the form of a chronicle, but the organization is very poor. There is no development of a central theme, and there is no real plot. The story is digressive, and, after all, the meanings contained in the separate episodes add up to nothing. Lack of integration is apparent both in each of his big novels and in his work as a whole. Yet, this structural poverty shows us Wolfe himself, for it reflects very clearly his figure, rushing straight forward, impelled by his powerful urges and his great intention.

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[1] Wolfe, *The Story of a Novel*, pp. 73–74.

[2] *Ibid.*, p. 93.

[3] Richard Walser, " Preface," *The Enigma of Thomas Wolfe* (Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1953), p. vii.

In order to prove this point, let us look more closely at each novel. *Look Homeward, Angel* has a comparatively tight structure as a novel. The reason might lie in the distance between Eugene and Wolfe himself. Perhaps Eugene was so young that Wolfe could achieve enough detachment to observe him from outside and to compose a comparatively successful structural unity. Two facts support this idea. First, the novel has an autobiographical unity as a " Bildungsroman." The central theme is a youth's growth until his repulsion at his ugly environment, and his subsequent escape from that pent-up world to the wider outer world. The plot is loose and a little digressive, yet it is, on the whole, about the process of Eugene's growth until the final climax of Ben's death and Eugene's leaving home to start the long journey of life. Second, there is an integration resulting from the legendary atmosphere. God-life qualities are attached to the characters. Gant is a " Far-Wanderer "[1] with an " earth-devouring stride,"[2] and Ben has his dark angel. Moreover, Wolfe sets an eternal world of spirit in contrast to the human world in the continuous flow of time and space. This is the Wordsworthian world of pre-existence and life after death surrounding the span of human life. From the first scene to the last, with Ben's Ghost, a legendary atmosphere envelops the whole story. Thus, by means of these two kinds of integration Wolfe achieves a comparative unity in *Look Humeward, Angel.*

In his later novels, though, Wolfe could not achieve such an integration. When he wrote these novels, he was clearly conscious of his mission to celebrate America and planned a huge saga novel. He thought of the central theme as a search for a father[3] and found many small themes to help the organization. He also planned to use the Antaeus legend to give shape and meaning to the whole. However, the plan was huge and extremely complex. In addition, he did not write his novels straight from the beginning to the end. He wrote one episode one day and then a quite unconnected episode the next day.

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[1] Wolfe, *Look Homeward, Angel*, p. 58.

[2] Wolfe, *Of Time and the River*, p. 327.

[3] Wolfe, *The Story of a Novel*, p. 39.

Furthermore, he could not get enough detachment from such large-scale novels because of the short distance in time between Wolfe and his protagonists. Wolfe poured himself straight into his works, and his works became like the continuous flow of a river. It just flows until it meets the sea. The one entity we grasp from it is his own power, which appears in the torrent of words and emotions or in his eager search. In this way there is no unity in his later works.

To sum up, Wolfe's literary form is quite unusual, and it has many faults. Wolfe never forced himself to follow the literary convention of careful technique. He wrote in his own way, freely adopting only a few techniques which he thought he could use. He had a strong faith in himself. Then, with his powerful flow of words, he created his own imaginative world, one filled with vitality, magnificence and intensity. His self-reliance, his eagerness for self-expression, and the clear reflection of his own passion for life—all support the idea that Wolfe's literary form is dominated by his ego, which seeks for true fulfillment in life.

## CHAPTER II. WOLFE'S THEMES

There is no thematic integration in Wolfe's works, either in each of his four big novels or in his work as a whole. Various themes are scattered throughout his works. They appear without careful planning and often do not lead to any satisfactory, logical solution. His themes are, thus, wild, and his handling of those themes is disorderly. Nevertheless, his approach to his significant themes is vigorous. How clearly his treatment of themes reflects Wolfe's own vital approach to life! Before the profound mystery of human existence, he could do nothing but write down on paper with his whole energy, one after another, those things which his mind had grasped certainly.

There is involved here an essential problem about the nature of Wolfe's works. The absence of a central theme and their fragmental structure, together with his desultory, incoherent method of writing, has brought about a theory that Wolfe was essentially a short novel writer. Hugh Holman explains that Wolfe used to divide his effective short fictions into fragments and use them as portions of his big novels, but never succeeded completely in this effort.[1] This may be true. If we should divide his long works into small parts and thus make original short fictions of them, each might be found to have a desirable integrity in both theme and structure. However, are neat structure and small integration necessary? The various scattered themes may indeed be confusing, but it must be said that each theme becomes more significant when we see it in relation to the whole. They remind us of our actual life, and the weight of a whole life, together with Wolfe's vigorous approach to it, does give a meaning to his works. As we know, Wolfe eagerly struggled to achieve his extravagant goal of writing down life itself. If we deprive his works of his big scale, his wide view, and his vigorous approach to life, what remains? I know that a certain thematic integration is necessary for an artistic work to be complete. Yet, in Wolfe's case, if we insist on form and divide his gigantic works into short fictions, I am afraid that we might spoil his most precious quality.

At any rate, there is no central theme and no systematic development of theme in his works. Instead, through his four novels there is the very small development of his theme which comes as a result of his own life. In other words, in his books Wolfe follows his own process of growth. Let us examine this development of theme through his four novels.

*Look Homeward, Angel* is a story of a youth's growth in conflict with his bitter environment, from his birth to his leaving the town in search of freedom and the isolation necessary for a creative spirit. The world around him is a close world filled with the ugliness of reality; in it he is chained to man's mortality in contrast to the immortal, spiritual world of angels. In the last scene, the Ghost of Ben from the immortal world tells the youth that what he searches for exists in himself and that there is " one voyage, the first, the last, the only one."[2] Then the youth launches out into the voyage of life. *Of Time and the River* describes " the period of wandering and hunger in a man's youth."[1] The youth wanders in the city or in foreign countries, hungering to devour everything and searching for " a father "—" the image of a strength and wisdom."[2] At the end he finds love. *The Web and the Rock* is a story about " one man's discovery of life and of the world."[3] Through his passionate love and his short glimpse into the basic human bond in Germany, he reaches an acceptance of human limitations. After all the madness of hunger, he becomes a member of this world, reconciling his body and spirit. His subsequent earnest inquiry into society is recorded in *You Can't Go Home Again.* At the end of his keen observations and deep thought, he forms his own view of the world.

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[1] C. Hugh Holman, " Thomas Wolfe," in *Seven Modern American Novelists*, ed. William Van O'Connor (Tokyo, 1964), p. 224.

[2] Wolfe, *Look Homeward, Angel*, p. 521.

Within this large frame of thematic development which reflects his spiritual growth, let us consider how Wolfe approaches each important theme. He tries to reach the core of existence. He grapples with essential problems about the existence of man, asking " how? " or " why? " It is understandable that he first inquires into what is the most certain thing he can grasp—his own existence. He thus inquires into man and faces the reality of human existence. Then he looks into the social structure. He further tries to catch some truth and to know the meaning of human beings. He gropes his way to the mystery of existence eagerly and powerfully.

First, the existence of man is bound by the restrictions of time and space. In his inquiry into human existence, Wolfe had first to solve the problem of time. Philosophical by bent, he grappled with this complex problem straightforwardly and earnestly. He analyzed the concept of time and divided it into three elements—" actual present time," " past time," and " time immutable."[4] The " past time " is not only the actual lost days, but also the past in our minds; he sees man as the " sum of all the moments "[1] of his life. The third element of time, " time immutable," is " 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."[2] Though the past remains in our minds, he knows that it will eventually be lost forever and that there will remain only the eternal flow of time. The past life of Gant and Eliza, the boyhood of Eugene, and his young love—all will be lost. Death—as in the deaths of Grover, Ben and Gant—is an especially fatal reality. Wolfe, though, tries to deprive their deaths of any tragic tone by suggesting a world beyond this one—Ben's with the help of his dark angel and Gant's with the " child " appearing at the time of his death. By this attempt, Wolfe tries to move the problem into our minds from actual life. However, he knows that this is an unreliable visionary solution.

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[1] Wolfe, *The Story of a Novel*, p. 77.

[2] *Ibid.*, p. 39.

[3] Wolfe, *The Web and the Rock*, p. v.

[4] Wolfe, *The Story of a Novel*, pp. 51–52.

> October had come again, and that year it was sharp and soon. . . .[3]
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> So, thinking, feeling, speaking, he lay there in his mother's house, but there was nothing in the house but silence and the moving darkness: storm shook the house and huge winds rushed upon them, and he knew then that his father would not come again, and that all the life that he had known was now lost and broken as a dream.[4]

The death of Gant is an irrevocable fact, while nature continues, with its annual cycle. In contrast to the immutable time of nature, human mortality is a cruel reality. In his concept of the past, Wolfe searches for the dignity of man in the spiritual world, but his consciousness of the vast flow beyond human beings—his concept of " time immutable " —is nothing but a confession of his recognition of the limits of man. His concept of time thus shows his honest recognition of the transience of man.

What is it that restricts the existence of man in space? Wolfe's eyes shift to the actual life in this world; he dares to look straight at the stern reality of human relationships.

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[1] Wolfe, *Look Homeward, Angel*, p. xv.

[2] Wolfe, *The Story of a Novel*, p. 52.

[3] Wolfe, *Of Time and the River*, p. 327.

[4] *Ibid.*, p. 334.

> He understood that men were forever strangers to one another, that no one ever comes really to know any one, that imprisoned in the dark womb of our mother, we come to life without having seen her face, that we are given to her arms a stranger, and that, caught in that insoluble prison of being, we escape it never, no matter what arms may clasp us, what mouth may kiss us, what heart may warm us. Never, never, never, never, never.[1]

In *Look Homeward, Angel,* this essential loneliness of man is evident in the world around Eugene. Gant is a lonely wanderer who seeks for the order and warmth of a family. With a bitter consciousness of his lost youth and a never-fulfilled hunger, he drowns his loneliness in drunkenness. It is the same with the other members of the family. They are all isolated, and each pursues his own happiness. We can rarely see any warm understanding or gentle affection. Eugene escapes from this cold, close world. He wanders under the immense cruel sky in search of certitude. A stone, a leaf, a door—he seeks after some hints of his " home." However, he can find no door—and no home.

> . . . we walk the streets, we walk the streets forever, we walk the streets of life alone.[2]

Wolfe overlaps this vision of human isolation with the image of the tininess of man amid the vastness of space, and makes the facts echo deep in our hearts. He confronts isolation—the tragedy of human existence—boldly, and expresses it on paper just as he feels it.

How does he look at human nature itself? The world described in *Look Homeward, Angel* is never beautiful or pleasant. It is, rather, filled with the ugliness of reality. The characters have unlovely dispositions, they act savagely, and their emotions are naked. Wolfe sometimes describes man as a mere animal creature, one whose existence seemingly has no important meaning. He knows man's value well, but he never averts his eyes from the ugliness and pettiness of human nature.

Thus, he views man as a lonely, transient, tiny creature amid a vast, eternal nature. What he grasps most firmly about the existence of man is its cruel, stern reality. Yet without hesitation, Wolfe looks straight at it and dares to expose it in all his works. His approach to the sternness of reality is bold, honest and eager, an approach which makes us feel certainly the great power which exists inside Wolfe.

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[1] Wolfe, *Look Homeward, Angel,* p. 31.

[2] Wolfe, *Of Time and the River,* p. 155.

In this tiny creature of man, Wolfe finds a driving force toward life. We remember Eugene's furious reading in the early part of *Of Time and the River*. He reads with a watch in his hand,

> . . . muttering to himself in triumph or anger at the timing of each page: " Fifty seconds to do that one. Damn you, we'll see! You will, will you? "—and he would tear through the next page in twenty seconds.[1]

He wants to " devour the earth and all the things and people in it."[2] His huge hunger and his surging emotion are both Wolfe's conscious descriptions of his own inner drive. He knew the power inside himself, and he knew its value. He believed in it and celebrated it positively without hesitation.

Now in this inquiry into the existence of man, he examined himself and his surroundings. As a result, his earlier books seem egotistic. It is easy to point out their subjectivity, because Wolfe's feeling is very often poured into them so as to be one with Eugene's feeling. However, the urge to live in the true sense gradually led him to examine society. This change in his viewpoint surely brought a certain objectivity to his later works, especially in *You Can't Go Home Again*. He there observes the events or the structure of society from some distance. Through his works, there is this shift—from subjectivity to objectivity—which reflects Wolfe's own growth very clearly.

I have spoken of a " certain objectivity "; it is different from a thorough objectivity. I mean that Wolfe ceases to concentrate exclusively on himself and his reactions and comes to observe the outer world more objectively; consequently, his strong emotion is more under control. The works could still be called " subjective," though, because the reality written of in them is seen through his eyes and is greatly affected by his strong personality. He wrote down what he had himself experienced, and at the base of his observations there is always his own view of man and the world. Let us next examine Wolfe's observations of society.

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[1] *Ibid.*, p. 91.

[2] *Ibid.*

In *You Can't Go Home Again*, George-Wolfe observes the world of wealth and power through observing Mr. Jack and the party at his house. The figure of Mr. Jack looking down from the high building upon the streets with complete satisfaction symbolizes the existence of a world of privilege entirely different from that of common men. Even though Wolfe knows of the injustice of the rich, he is never simply biased against Mr. Jack or the people of the upper class. Wolfe understands them as men, but thinks that their distorted vision of human nature is at fault. He regards them as " the victims of an occupational disease."[1]

> 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."[2]

When he finds something wrong with the social structure, he always tries in such a way to search for the cause deep in human nature. At any rate, at the party George-Wolfe observes what these people do and sees their spiritual corruption. For example, he casually comments on the banker Lawrence Hirsch, a leader of " advanced opinion " :

> Who should cavil, then, at the fact that a banker might derive a portion of his income from the work of children in the textile factories of the South? . . .—that still another might come from steel mills in the Middle West where armed thugs had been employed to shoot into the ranks of striking workers? . . . Business was business, and to say that a man's social views ought to come between him and his profits was cavilling, indeed![3]

Wolfe's penetration is keen. It even reminds us with bitterness of various modern social problems facing us today. We cannot deny his following words.

> . . . business was the most precious form of egotism—self-interest at its dollar value. Kill that with truth, and what would be left?

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[1] Wolfe, *You Can't Go Home Again*, p. 182.

[2] *Ibid.*

[3] *Ibid.*, p. 244.

> A better way of life, perhaps, but it would not be built on business as we know it.[1]

Together with his satiric comment on Piggy Logan's circus,[2] George-Wolfe thus clearly exposes the inner emptiness of this world of wealth and power, which is utterly controlled by fashion.

Then after the party, a fire breaks out. In an instant, their privileged positions collapse and they rank with common men. From the beginning their high social position has lacked true foundation, for the big building trembles every time the subway runs under it. However, the fire becomes more meaningful when the death of two elevator boys is told quietly. While the fire is something strange and intoxicating for "them," the two loyal laborers die without being noticed.

> He had sensed how the hollow pyramid of a false social structure had been erected and sustained upon a base of common mankind's blood and sweat and agony.[3]

George now sees that the social structure is false and decides to part from Esther in order to leave this privileged world and to find the "truth." Thus, his observations are still closely connected with his own affairs, and we can see the influence of his feelings. However, within those limits, his inquiry is thorough and his criticism is sharp.

Now George witnesses the Great Depression. When he first returns home, he notices that speculative fever has changed his hometown completely. He describes the look on the people's faces as "madness." He realizes that the people are moving toward ruin and death. Moreover, he finds the inhumanity of the Federal Weight, Scales, and Computing Company. When he realizes the firmly constructed structure of the Company, he is reminded of a picture of a throng of slaves, driven by whiplashes, constructing the Great Pyramid. When he hears Merrit's voice scolding Randy, he feels that

> . . . its very tone was a foul insult to human life, an ugly sneer whipped across

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[1] *Ibid.*, p. 363.

[2] *Ibid.*, pp. 208–212.

[3] *Ibid.*, p. 296.

> the face of decent humanity . . .[1]

Wolfe knows the importance of humanity. At any rate, when the Great Depression actually happens, all these facts are disclosed and prove George's penetration. The fall of the bank and the death of the mayor throw the whole town into panic, and Randy is dismissed. George-Wolfe again tries to search for the cause in human nature.

> How can one account for such complete drying up of all the spiritual sources in the life of a people?[2]

After the catastrophe he concludes that

> . . . America went off the track somewhere—back round the time of the Civil War, or pretty soon afterwards. . . . 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 . . . the real things like freedom, and equal opportunity, and the integrity and worth of the individual—things that have belonged to the American dream since the beginning—they have become just words, too.[3]

Then during the depression, back in New York, George sees a crowd of vagabonds around the public latrine seeking refuge. They drift everywhere, looking in vain for work and crumbs. Savage fights sometimes break out over the possession of the doorless stools. A few blocks away, though, George can see " the pinnacle of power," the " silvery spires of Wall Street."[4]

> The blind injustice of this contrast seemed the most brutal part of the whole experience. . . .[5]

George-Wolfe thus witnesses the cruel reality of this world. He approaches it boldly and honestly, with a keen penetration.

Wolfe interprets Green's suicide as his ultimate refusal to remain a nameless atom in a big city. In America, unnumbered nameless ciphers come and go without leaving even a mark on the pavement, and the suicide of just an average middle-aged man has no importance. Yet, Wolfe refuses to accept it as meaningless. For him, Green's death is a defiant assertion of human dignity. This is quite a Wolfean interpretation because it is based on his own rich imagination; it reflects Wolfe's own eagerness to try to believe in his own value as an individual man. The interpretation is quite subjective, but we also never fail to notice the importance of the problem that he grapples with. In our modern society, one man's existence does indeed seem less and less valuable.

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[1] *Ibid.*, p. 131.

[2] *Ibid.*, p. 339.

[3] *Ibid.*, p. 360.

[4] *Ibid.*, p. 381.

[5] *Ibid.*

Wolfe's handling of the desire for fame also clearly reflects his vigorous approach to life. He does not try to suppress this fundamental desire by self-deception. Rather, he indulges in it to his heart's content. The result of his thorough inquiry is knowledge as to the limits of fame. George meets Lloyd McHarg (modelled on Sinclair Lewis), who is the real embodiment of fame. All that fame has given McHarg is the ugliness and devastation of his face, his collapse, his irritability and a restless searching for something more. Meeting him teaches George that fame is *not enough*.

In his social criticism, we notice that Wolfe rarely becomes bitter. He sometimes makes fun of the objects of his criticism (such as Mr. Paul S. Appleton III's dramatic statement[1]), but he never forsakes them coolly or never seems merely to enjoy himself by attacking others. On the contrary, there can always be seen his sympathy with, and hearty concern for, society. He thinks about society as his own affair.

" I Have a Thing to Tell You," a chapter of *You Can't Go Home Again*, is a good example. In Hitler's Germany, the power demonstrated, some events, and some conversations with his friends awaken George to the spiritual disease of that great nation. At last he sees the core of evil when the little Jew is captured while running away with his money. Just a while before the travel companions have talked like old friends in the same compartment. Now they grow strained in the face of this unreasonable, forceful, political persecution of the life of a man.

> George and the others felt somehow naked and ashamed, and somehow guilty.

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[1] *Ibid.*, pp. 126–127.

> 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.[1]

Compared to this fatal disease, George concludes, there is still hope in America, with all the evil he had witnessed, if only men could have courage enough to see the truth. Wolfe's interpretation of this event is based on his deep sympathy. It is no longer what one could call the prejudice of an egocentric youth.

To sum up, in his social observations we find one thing certain—the existence of his powerful ego. We can see always the reflection of his own feelings in his criticisms. There is no entire objectivity. Yet, his penetration is keen, with a width of view and a depth of thought. In spite of the sternness of reality, he approaches it vigorously and eagerly. He further thinks about society as his own affair. He worries about his *own* matters, his *own* society, and his *own* America. This shows nothing but the great embracing power of his ego. Thus, his powerful ego supports the whole story from the bottom.

Wolfe thus grasped reality vigorously in his own hands; nevertheless, he was not satisfied until he could reach what he could call the " truth " of human existence. After all his inquiry into the small, lonely existence of man, he thought about the meaning of life. He throws out the question directly—" For what is man? " His view of human life is bare and without a bit of compromise.

> Yes, this is man, and it is impossible to say the worst of him, for the record of his obscene existence, his baseness, lust, cruelty, and treachery, is illimitable. His life is also full of toil, tumult, and suffering. His days are mainly composed of a million idiot repetitions. . . .[2]

Still he tries to search for the meaning of life.

> . . . man lives on amid the senseless nihilism of the universe.
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> For there is one belief, one faith, that is man's glory, his triumph, his immortality —and that is his belief in life. Man loves life, and, loving life, hates death, and

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[1] *Ibid.*, p. 637.

[2] *Ibid.*, p. 400.

> because of this he is great, he is glorious, he is beautiful, and his beauty is everlasting. He lives below the senseless stars and writes his meanings in them. He lives in fear, in toil, in agony, and in unending tumult, but if the blood foamed bubbling from his wounded lungs at every breath he drew, he would still love life more dearly than an end of breathing. Dying, his eyes burn beautifully, and the old hunger shines more fiercely in them—he has endured all the hard and purposeless suffering, and still he wants to live.
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> Thus it is impossible to scorn this creature. For out of his strong belief in life, this puny man made love.[1]

It seems that at the end of the long eager search for meaning Wolfe met with a force which supported his existence. That is—what he grasped as a certainty in the existence of man was the reflection of his own love of life. This was nothing but the reflection of the strong drive of his powerful ego. Yet, we can see that it is indeed a " truth " of human existence.

He tries to believe, then, in the possibility of the fulfillment of hope.

> 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.[2]

This may remain only *his* truth, but we feel that it is desirable if it could be the truth in our society.

At the end of all his thought and his observation of stern reality, he expresses an important idea. By having George leave Fox, he rejects a fatalism of acceptance and resignation. His faith is in growth with the flow of time:

> 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.*[3]

This is the conclusion of his powerful ego. Growth toward the better—it is a great truth, for it supports human existence. He tries to believe in the possibility of this and continues, " . . . man's life can be, and will be, better . . . ."[1]

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[1] *Ibid.*, pp. 401–402.

[2] *Ibid.*, p. 466.

[3] *Ibid.*, p. 675.

> I believe that we are lost here in America, but I believe we shall be found.[2]

*You Can't Go Home Again* closes with his belief in the possibility of the future.

Some object that in Wolfe there is no concrete policy or no firm logical background, and that the solutions of the basic problems are based only on his own emotions. However, logic cannot necessarily give us satisfactory solutions. When we try to grapple with the same problems, these truths seem to give ringing responses to our hearts. Therefore, these are, I think, great truths which are the fruits of his long, eager search for meaning. There is a strong passion for true life in Wolfe. We realize here that his ego is not just a primitive urge to live or to dominate. It is led by a moral sense to some extent. The significance of these truths give evidence of power and the value of his ego.

To sum up, there is a direct projection of his ego in his themes, too. Wolfe poured into his works all of what he thought was important. The result is an absence of thematic integration. Amid various scattered themes, the only central concern is his own process of growth. Yet Wolfe's attitude toward each theme is serious. He vigorously grapples with the essential problems of human existence—man's isolation and transience, false social structure, or evil. Reality is stern and cruel, but he faces it honestly, boldly, and eagerly. His ego is a powerful ego whose eager search knows no end.

In addition to this, we feel the existence of his ego in each of his inquiries. He first inquires into himself, because his own self was the most important thing for Wolfe. Yet inquiry into himself was also for him an inquiry into the nature of man. That is—he knew and strongly believed in the universal nature and the value of his existence. Then, with this strong faith in himself, he observes society. As a result there is much subjectivity in his observations. Powerfully he takes every event into himself and thinks about it eagerly. We can see the strong embracing power of his ego. His ego is thus a vital ego which supports all his inquiries.

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[1] *Ibid.*

[2] *Ibid.*, p. 678.

At last, after his thorough inquiry undertaken with keen penetration, his eagerness enables him to find the " truth." As we know, his ego has a strong drive to live life in the true sense, and it is always eager to achieve its goal. For this purpose it expands its power more widely and more deeply. It is a powerful ego, and it gives his works their unusual weight and power. In this way, in his themes also, we meet his great ego.

## CONCLUSION

Wolfe wants to know life eagerly, and with his strong attachment to his own experience, he writes down powerfully what he has seen, what he has felt, and what he has thought. In the course of doing so, his vital ego expresses itself nakedly in his works. His ego is a wild ego which expands its power defiantly into the external world. It is natural that it gives his works many artistic flaws. At the same time, though, it gives them a pure power; indeed, it supports his whole works. As we have discussed, we can see evidence of this ego throughout his works.

I have to add one more point here. It concerns his whole idea. As I have discussed, he views a man as a being isolated in time and space—a lonely, transient creature amid a vast, eternal nature. A man has vitality in himself, but he is no more than a tiny, seemingly insignificant creature. Wolfe knew that there could be no home and no certitude, and that there would just remain the eternal flow of time.

> 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 lyricism, to singing just for singing's sake . . . 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 escapes of Time and Memory.[1]

" You can't go home again "—this is the conclusion he reached.

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[1] *Ibid.*, p. 644.

His view of man is naturalistic, and it would have seemed natural if it had given birth to a serious pessimism when we read such a poetic expression of this view as follows:

> 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.[1]

While Wolfe knows this "illimitable and terrifying darkness," he yet believes in human dignity. He believes in man's belief in life and in man's value, while looking straight on the tragedy of existence. Through the process of his growth, his eyes gradually turn to society. He comes to know people—people with a distorted vision of human nature, people with falseness and hypocrisy, people who cling to life amid deadly poverty, people deeply wounded in soul by the threatening evil made by man himself . . . people, people—every kind of people. With his deep sympathy, he knows them all as fellow men. He accepts society, a community of people, with his heart rather than with his mind. There must be a way for us somewhere. "The essence of Time is Flow not Fix."[2] If so, there is a growth with the flow of time. There is a possibility of improving. Moreover, there is the flow of history beyond our own tiny existence, and through the flow of history, man can be better. Wolfe wrote his hopeful view at the end of *You Can't Go Home Again:*

> I think the true discovery of America is before us. I think the true fulfilment 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.[3]

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[1] *Ibid.*, p. 5.

[2] *Ibid.*, p. 669.

[3] *Ibid.*, p. 678.

This optimistic view comes from his enthusiastic idealism. From pessimistic to optimistic—if we examine this change in his view carefully we cannot but recognize an abrupt leap. What took him out of his deeply pessimistic view of man and led him to believe so passionately in the possibility of the future? Here again we see evidence of his vital ego. His ego told him a way of growing up with time, and it could make him believe in possibility.

> . . . in his novels [Wolfe] caught that strange and unique combination of brilliant hope and black despair which is the quintessence of the American spirit.[1]

What bridges the gap between these two elements—" brilliant hope " and " black despair "—is, we now understand, his powerful ego. It seems that in his ego there is something akin to the vitality of the frontier spirit. Surrounded by hard reality, with their high ideals, the frontiersmen could only depend on their own inner power. Different from that ego which, amid the calmness of nature, tries to suppress its wildness and to achieve some delicate inner balance in response to the universal harmony it feels surrounding it, their ego was one which defiantly struggled with the outer world in order to verify its own existence. Is this not the "American ego " with which we so often meet in American Literature? It seems to me that more than anything else that Wolfe created, this ego tells us of America.

Now we can see how his ego dominates his whole works. It projects itself in his literary form, it permeates his themes, and it supports all his ideas. However, his works are quite different from a mere celebration of an ego. Although Wolfe believed in his inner power strongly, ego was not everything for him in any of his works. Always his goal was " true life." His works are unique because they are a direct record of this powerful ego, with its strong drive for true life. From his works, the vital force of this ego is poured out, directed to the readers, to ourselves. Hence, in conclusion, we can say that the essence of Wolfe's literature lies in the fact that it is a record of a powerful ego which tries passionately to live life in the true sense.

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[1] Thomas Lyle Collins, " Wolfe's Genius vs. His Critics," in *The Enigma of Thomas Wolfe*, ed. Richard Walser (Cambridge, 1953), p. 174.

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