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THOMAS WOIFE'S CHARACTERIZATION

by

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OUTLINE

- I. Wolfe reveals his artistic desires through his characters.
 - A. His fully-developed characters are memorable.
 - B. His characters are very American.
 - 1. He wanted to expose America through fiction.
 - 2. His fully-developed characters are dual in nature.
- II. Wolfe's treatment of his characters shows his own experiences.
 - A. His own family members are his most outstanding characters.
 - B. Other characterizations reveal his own disappointments.

THOMAS WOLFE'S CHARACTERIZATION

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The poetic prose of Thomas Wolfe stands almost alone in twentieth century American literature as marvelously descriptive. For, "fully does Look Homeward, Angel deserve the rather generally agreed upon opinion that it is the most lyrical novel ever written by an American."¹ Numerous passages of his work are frenzied dithyrambs of lyrical beauty, both in Look Homeward, Angel and his later novels. Wolfe's feel for and command of the sound of the English language, although often submerged in a rather loosely-connected narrative based on personal experience, ranks him as one of the foremost American writers. His characters stand out just as his style does.

Buried in his novels, amidst unrelated scenes and insignificant character sketches, are some of the most emotive, poetic, complexly-structured passages of local color variety in the entirety of American fiction. For Wolfe, however, local color became a national color which bordered on patriotism. Pounds of manuscript erupted from his pen which explored the American nation, its people, its praiseworthy virtues, and its unmistakable faults. "He is American as Whitman was American, and like Whitman realizes the earliness of the time at which he speaks."² His characters were also very American.

Overwhelmed by his desperate attempt to intellectually capture the entire soul of his nation's fiber, Wolfe often ignored

such piddling matters as coherence and logical sequence-development. His autobiographical approach to fiction enabled him to better understand people, places, and events. His limited scope also made it possible for Wolfe to better understand his family, his country, and the world in which he lived. Concentration on events and people most familiar to him allowed Wolfe the freedom to express his belief that "fiction is fact selected and understood. . . fiction is fact arranged and charged with purpose."³

Wolfe's characters were fictional caricatures of actual friends, relatives, and passing acquaintances. Even though Wolfe was often maligned by literary critics who protested his aversion to more objective substance, Richard Walser offers that, "if the people in his book had their basis in human experience, the life and being they possessed was only what he himself gave them."⁴ Wolfe's careful eye for detail cannot be overlooked when examining his characters. He felt that everything must be told, that nothing should be implied. He emphasized showing American people just as they really were.

Familiarity usually bred contempt in Wolfe's life. The sensitive artist carried much of his bitterness into his characterizations. He dwelt on the faults and human weaknesses of his fictional persons. Seldom did Wolfe's characters appear overly virtuous; however, neither were they entirely lacking in redeeming qualities. The conflict between good and bad aspects gave his characters a dual nature.

Wolfe's Faustian dreams of artistically expressing a nation's being, the way Tolstoy did in Russia with War and Peace, resulted in failure. Wolfe's own knowledge of his inevitable failure probably heightened his bitterness.

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.⁵

Out of this dismal, pessimistic view tempered by hope came an inherent contradiction. Accordingly, Wolfe's attitude toward his characters is an ambiguous one. This ambiguity created the necessity of including worthwhile aspects of his characters along with the bad ones. Wolfe's bitterness shows through and the undesirable qualities of his characters dominate their behavior.

Fellow Southerner William Faulkner, who ranked Wolfe at the top of the list of his contemporaries, described him as "a failure, but a magnificent one." That description could also be applied to several of Wolfe's characters. Controlled by one or more tragic flaw(s), his characters are magnificent for their gusto and their vitality. Near the top of the list of Wolfe's characters noted for these traits is W.C. Gant, who was portrayed in Look Homeward, Angel and Of Time and the River. The stonecutter-father of the protagonist of these two novels, usually referred to simply as "Gant," has been called "a grandiose failure."⁶

Gant (in real life he was W.C. Wolfe, Thomas's father), a good provider for his family, is essentially a tragic figure. He yearned, with a powerful creative urge, to carve a stone angel. The creation was beyond him. His fondest wish was unobtainable. Failing to master his obsession, as much as anything else, causes Gant to periodically indulge himself in drunken rampages. His alcoholic sprees were accompanied by wild rhetoric, poetry-spouting, and invective denunciation of his wife, Eliza Gant. Gant views Eliza as an obstacle in the paths of his creative desires and his instincts for routine in daily life. Her purchase of Dixieland, an old boarding house, separates the Gant family and frequently causes one of Gant's verbal tirades.

Woman, you have deserted my bed and board,
 you have made a laughing stock of me before the
 world, and left your children to perish. Fiend
 that you are, there is nothing that you would not
 do to torture, humiliate and degrade me. You have
 deserted me in my old age; you have left me to die
 alone. Ah, Lord! It was a bitter day for us all
 when your floating eyes first fell upon this damnable,
 this awful, this murderous and bloody Barn.
 There is no ignominy to which you will not stoop
 if you think it will put a nickel in your pocket.
 You have fallen so low not even your own brothers
 will come near you. 'Nor beast, nor man hath fal-

Gant takes great pride in bringing home whole sides of meat or baskets of fruit. His lusty, sensual nature manifests itself in frequent visits to a local "house of ill repute." His hungry, rich spirit is somewhat satisfied by travel. He is Gant the Far-Wanderer. Gant, in character with his six-foot-four frame and his gigantic stride, has a "Dutch love of abundance." His duality rests in his ecstatic joy offset by violent hostility. At least one critic finds Gant the center of a novel (Look Homeward, Angel) lacking in formal structure.⁸ He certainly dominates the first half of the book.

In Of Time and the River, Gant is reduced to a cancer-ridden, hospitalized, dying man. All that remain of Gant's strength are his hands, the sinewy, long, bony hands of the artist. The creativity and expression those hands had represented had been admired by Eugene Gant, the stonecutter's youngest son and hero protagonist of Look Homeward, Angel and Of Time and the River.

As Eugene saw him, he felt that this was no common craftsman, but a master, picking up his tools briefly for a chef-d'oeuvre.

"He is better at this than any one in all the world," Eugene thought, and his dark vision burned in him for a moment, as he thought that his father's work would never, as men

reckon years, be extinguished, but that when that
 great skeleton lay powdered in earth, in many a
 tangled undergrowth, in the rank wilderness of
 forgotten churchyards, these letters would endure.⁹

One of the most memorable of Gant's states is that of his marriage to Eliza--a stormy and unhappy union.

Eliza Gant is one of the most easily dislikable characters in American fiction. A shrewd, calculating real-estate dealer who values property and material possessions over the love and understanding of her family, Eliza is full of sentimental recollections of no particular importance and practical advice. Her standards of success rest, not upon Christian ethics, but on how much property one owns. One must do nothing more than own not "a single stick of property" to be crowned with infamy in Eliza's eyes. Whether promoting business for Dixieland or urging her children to support themselves, Eliza is first and last a selfish person. Uttering clichés and hoarding money are more important to Eliza than is communicating with a restless Eugene. Eliza resents her daughter Helen, for Helen is sympathetic toward Gant and exerts control over his chaotic revelry. Wishing to remain "thrifty," Eliza calls a less-expensive quack, rather than a qualified doctor, when her son Ben is ill. Ben, the secretive, brooding member of the family, later dies of pneumonia. Eliza even makes bad coffee.

Yet, Eliza is not without her admirable points. She is "independent, energetic, proud, generous, and noble."¹⁰ She

endures the heartbreak of the death of Grover, Ben's twin, in characteristic strong-willed manner. She is even compassionate and empathetic toward a distressed pregnant woman. In Wolfe's own words, Eliza is "a very strong, resourceful, and courageous woman, who showed great character and determination in her struggle against the odds of life."¹¹ In Of Time and the River and in The Web of Earth, Eliza appears as a garrulous, flighty conversationalist who hints at, but does not explain, her own inherent wisdom. Eliza's wit and good humor are characteristic of these two portrayals.

Eliza's duality is contained in the balancing of her greed, selfishness, and pride with her resourcefulness, strength, and courage. Her distinguishing characteristic remains, however, her inability to relate to people close to her. She never refers to her husband as anything but "Mr. Gant," for example.

The character of Ben Gant remains a monumental puzzle to many readers. He is a silent, gray, brooding figure who shares a communion with Eugene's spirit. A stranger to his own family, Ben resorts to frequent conversations with his own angel. No one understands this supernatural communication except Eugene. Ben remains unbefriended by anyone except Mrs. (Fatty) Bert, an older woman who lives at Dixieland until Eliza boos her out of the house to preserve appearances of community morality. One critic finds the death of Ben Gant significant for its "power and pity and horror."¹² Look Homeward, Angel ends when Ben's ghost advises Eugene to turn within himself to

find happiness. Ben remains "the only really dead person in a book noteworthy for its characters."¹³ In Of Time and the River, Eugene enters a nostalgic reminiscence of the time Ben gave him a watch for his twelfth birthday. Ben, modelled after Wolfe's own brother, is noteworthy for his invisible bond with Eugene. Wolfe felt that Ben's death was one of the most important events in his own life.¹⁴

Luke Gant, an outgoing, hustling salesman, cultivates an image of himself as a big-hearted, unselfish, witty person. Fred Wolfe, Luke's living counterpart, says of this image, "I'm the damned fool Luke, but I guess I'm still in character."¹⁵ A good-natured extrovert, Luke is memorable for his stuttering speech and his hard-core sales tactics.

Helen Gant (later Barton), appears in Look Homeward, Angel as a "warm, unsparing, open-hearted"¹⁵ person. Her need for the love of her father causes her to forego the privacy of her marriage. Considering Wolfe's habits of characterization, Helen is unusual for her unselfishness. She is still somewhat of a tragic figure, giving of herself until she reaches a sort of martyrdom.

Of Time and the River concludes with Eugene Gant meeting an American woman aboard ship in a voyage that returns him to America. We learn only that her name is Esther. She is a fully-developed character, Esther Jack, in The Web and the Rock and You Can't Go Home Again. Based on the personality of Aline Bernstein (Wolfe's mistress and patron), Esther is a middle-

aged Jewess. George "Monk" Webber, protagonist of Wolfe's posthumous novels, falls in love with her. She is a jolly, clever, talented, independent stage designer. Her association with the artistic culture of New York first attracts Webber. Gradually, this same association stifles Webber and disgusts him. The affluent world she represents seems phony to Webber. Although the Webber-Jack affair ends in bitter disappointment, Wolfe weaves a fascinating love story. Esther Jack remains for Webber, even after he decides that her world is not for him, a symbol of the city. That symbol is one of a rock, or "a kind of new America."¹⁷

Wolfe took a dim view of the world of the artists (dialectically satired as "Ottists") he encountered during his Harvard days. George Pierce Baker, whose friendship Wolfe valued and whose judgment he trusted,¹⁸ was portrayed as Professor Hatcher in Of Time and the River. "Professor Hatcher's celebrated course for dramatists" was shown as a shallow conception of a writer's apprenticeship. Professor Hatcher appears as an inveterate name-dropper who was "the unfailing wise and strong and gentle spirit who knew all, had seen all, could solve all problems by a word, release us of all the anguish, grief and error of our lives by a wave of his benevolent hand."¹⁹ Professor Hatcher proves to be a dishonest charlatan.

Wolfe felt little respect for F. Scott Fitzgerald, whom Wolfe of as a living embodiment of the "Lost Generation" of

artists and writers. Fitzgerald was portrayed as a shallow, insincere Hunt Conroy in You Can't Go Home Again. Sinclair Lewis, portrayed as Lloyd McHarg in You Can't Go Home Again, was representative of wasted talent to Wolfe. McHarg, when George Webber met him, was the leading novelist of his day. Fame had dissipated him to an alcoholic and Webber realized that recognition was a worthless attainment.

Wolfe probably never would have been a successful writer had he not been fortunate enough to find the leadership and guidance of Maxwell Perkins. Nevertheless, Perkins encountered criticism from Wolfe's pen when he appeared in You Can't Go Home Again as Foxhall Edwards. Edwards was George Webber's editor who had become a sort of spiritual father to the young author. Webber comes to doubt Edwards' eccentricities and his resignation to life's never improving.²⁰

Margaret Roberts, who appeared in Look Homeward, Angel as Margaret Leonard, was one of Wolfe's superpersons.²¹ Margaret Leonard was Eugene's spiritual mother. She guided his literature studies at school and worried about his health with uncommon interest. She eventually came to love Eugene as though he were her own son. Margaret Leonard is one of Wolfe's few admirable characters.

Some critics feel that all of Wolfe's writings dealt with the same general subject--one man's life.²² Following this vein, the Eugene Gant of Wolfe's first two novels and the George Webber of his last two were essentially the same person. Eugene

is a romantic, lonely lad who struggles against spiritual isolation. George Webber is a more mature person who is not as emotional as Eugene. Eugene wishes to know all, whereas George accepts some of his human limitations. Both protagonists are portrayed as heroic people and both have superior, almost inhuman sensitivities. George Webber is a slightly mellowed, adult version of youthful Eugene.

Wolfe concentrated on the habits and mannerisms of his characters. They were alive: their vitality and presence were impossible to disregard. Most of his characters, with the exception of numerous minor ones, were dual in nature--not wholly good, but not all bad, either. Wolfe often hurt those people who were nearest and dearest to him, but never did he allow them to be boring when they were fictionalized.

FOOTNOTES

¹ Richard Walser, Thomas Wolfe: An Introduction and Interpretation (New York, 1961), p. 67.

² Pamela Hansford Johnson, The Art of Thomas Wolfe (New York, 1963), p. 164.

³ Thomas Wolfe, "To The Reader," Look Homeward, Angel, (New York, 1929), p. xv.

⁴ Walser, p. 54.

⁵ Thomas Wolfe, You Can't Go Home Again (New York, 1940), p. 737.

⁶ Coughlan, Robert, "Grand Vision, A Final Tragedy," Life, xxxcii (September 24, 1956), p. 170.

⁷ Thomas Wolfe, Look Homeward, Angel, p. 108.

⁸ C. Hugh Holman, "Loneliness at the Core," The New Republic, cxxxiii (October 10, 1955), 16-17; reprinted in The World of Thomas Wolfe, edited by C. Hugh Holman (New York, 1962), 57-58.

⁹ Thomas Wolfe, Look Homeward, Angel, p. 83.

¹⁰ WALSER, p. 59.

¹¹ John Skally Terry (ed.), Thomas Wolfe's Letters To His Mother (New York, 1943), p. 191.

¹² Johnson, p. 50.

¹³ Holman, p. 50.

¹⁴ Interview with Fred Wolfe, Spartanburg, South Carolina, Feb. 27, 1971.

¹⁵ Fred Wolfe interview.

¹⁶ Walser, p. 60.

¹⁷ Walser, p. 100.

¹⁸ Richard S. Kennedy, The Window of Memory (Chapel Hill, 1962), pp. 71-73.

¹⁹ Andrew Turnbull, Thomas Wolfe (New York, 1969), p. 41.

²⁰ Walser, p. 112.

²¹ Nora Stirling, "Thomas Wolfe," Who Wrote the Modern Classics? (New York, 1970), pp. 162-163.

²² Johnson, p. 4.

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