

THOMAS WOLFE'S "LOOK HOMEWARD, ANGEL" IS THE PROTAGONIST DYNAMIC

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ABSTRACT: This article covers the protagonist of Thomas Wolfe's "Look Home, Angel".

KEYWORDS: The main character of the work, classified as an American romantic, American romantic tradition.

INTRODUCTION: A thinly disguised autobiography and a portrait of the early twentieth-century American South, *Look Homeward, Angel* is the most famous book of an author who used to be regarded as an equal of Ernest Hemingway, F. Scott Fitzgerald, and William Faulkner. Published in New York in 1929, Thomas Wolfe's novel was considered striking and important—a work by a genius with a grand, compelling personality. It is a novel in the American romantic tradition, meant to contain Wolfe's own "American experience" as represented by his alter ego, Eugene Gant.

In the seventy-four years since it was published, the novel has received steadily less critical attention. Wolfe's initial editor, Maxwell Perkins, cut sixty thousand words from its original text to make it more readable, but many recent critics and readers continue to find *Look Homeward, Angel* a hugely sprawling text that is sometimes clearly bombastic. Some are also offended by what it says about race and gender. These elements have led to a decline in Wolfe's reputation and a reevaluation of his importance to the literary movement of his time.

Look Homeward, Angel begins with the journey of Englishman Gilbert Gaunt to Pennsylvania; there he marries a Dutch woman. One of his sons, Oliver Gant (the name was changed upon Gilbert's immigration), becomes a stonecutter and travels through the South until settling with his first wife, Cynthia. After her death, Gant thinks he is dying of tuberculosis and travels west until he reaches the small mountain-valley town of Altamont.

Gant sets up a stonecutting shop and recovers from his restless illness when spring comes. He then meets Eliza Pentland, whom he marries. Then he builds a grand house. Oliver Gant and Eliza have nine children (six of whom survive). Gant begins to go on severe drinking binges, which Eliza vehemently tries to temper.

In 1900, when Gant turns fifty, the conflict between Gant and Eliza comes to a climax. Eliza tries sending him to sanitariums and forbidding saloon owners to serve him drinks, but this only infuriates Gant. One night, he comes home violently drunk. It takes two neighbors, a doctor, and Eliza's brother, Will, to help his daughter, Helen, calm him down. Eliza gives birth that night to her youngest son, Eugene. Gant begs forgiveness from her.

Even as a small child, Eugene thinks deeply about the isolation and loneliness in the world. When he is two, he wanders into his aristocratic neighbors' estate and is almost killed by a horse. His older brother Grover's death from typhoid saddens him deeply. This death causes Eliza to move home from St. Louis, where she was attempting the first of her money-making adventures.

Gant continues to grow further from his wife and closer to his daughter Helen. When he is fifty-six, Gant takes a "last great voyage" to California. When he finally returns, he continues his habits of building gigantic fires and making his family eat huge amounts of food.

Eugene discovers his love of books and begins his vibrant inner life at age six. He has several adventures playing with his friends from school (including racist pranks against Jews, African Americans, and poor whites), and once he is almost beaten by the principal for writing insults about him. Eugene's parents make him start a job selling the Saturday Evening Post, like his brothers Ben and Luke.

Before Eugene turns eight, Eliza takes him on her next big project—to purchase and run a boarding house called "Dixieland." Eugene still spends much of his time at Gant's house with Helen. But he has his first major crush at Dixieland, on a married woman who has an affair with Eugene's oldest brother, Steve.

Eugene grows up rapidly. One day he wins the composition contest the new principal, John Leonard, holds. Margaret Leonard convinces Eliza to send Eugene to their new private school. Mr. Leonard teaches the boys rudimentary Latin and his sister Amy teaches math and history. Mrs. Leonard (whom Eugene idealizes) teaches the boys English, a subject she is passionate about.

Eugene becomes closer with Ben and grows to hate Steve more. Luke and Ben hate Steve too. One night, after Steve has been yelling drunkenly at Eliza and has given Luke a bloody nose, Ben angrily beats him up. Helen tours the South singing but moves back to Alabama after her partner, Pearl, gets married. Luke does a lot of hustling and tries to pay his way through school, but he drops out and gets a factory job.

Gant sells Eliza his precious stone angel for a poor woman's grave. He takes Eugene to early movies and visits Dixieland more often, but he is "dying very slowly" of prostate cancer. Gant has a very brief affair with a Dixieland tenant and sexually harasses an African American cook but is rapidly and visibly decaying of old age.

Eugene gets a paper route through the African American section of town and grows wilder, harrying subscribers for payments. He nearly has sex with a mulatto (mixed race) prostitute, Ella Corpening. Eliza goes on a trip to Florida, while Eugene stays with the Leonards and continues reading a great deal of literature.

Look Homeward, Angel was adapted as a three-act comedy/drama by Ketti Frings, first produced in New York at the Ethel Barrymore Theatre in 1957. It was published by Scribner in 1958, won the Pulitzer Prize, and was adapted by Gary Geld and Peter Udell as the musical comedy *Angel*, performed on Broadway in 1978.

John Chandler Griffin's *Memories of Thomas Wolfe: A Pictorial Companion to "Look Homeward, Angel"* (1996) is a very helpful companion piece to Wolfe's novel, both as a source of contextual information and as a way of bringing the events to life.

With the beginning of World War I, Eugene wants to join the navy and Ben tries to join the army, but neither actually does so. Eugene goes on a trip to Charleston, where he has a fling with an older girl named Louise. When he returns, he wins a medal for an essay on Shakespeare and acts in a pageant as Prince Hal (from Shakespeare's *Henry IV* cycle). After Helen gets married and moves away, Gant decides inflexibly to send Eugene (at only sixteen) to the state university.

Wolfe is interested in portraying a representative American experience and an allegory of American youth in his novel. Although Wolfe is often associated with expatriate American writers such as Hemingway and Fitzgerald, and made several long trips to Europe while he was writing *Look Homeward, Angel*, the author saw himself within the American tradition. Wolfe would not

have deemed his writings "modernist" in the international sense of the term. He is better classified as an American romantic.

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