CHAPTER II
LOOK HOMeward, ANGEL

Thomas Wolfe, one of America’s most evocative writers, drew inspiration from his Southern roots, particularly his mother's rambling Asheville boarding house. Considered one of literature's most famous landmarks, the old Victorian home once known as the Old Kentucky Home today is the Thomas Wolfe Memorial State Historic Site.

Considered by many to be one of the giants of 20th Century American Literature, Thomas Wolfe immortalized his childhood home in his epic autobiographical novel, Look Homeward, Angel. Wolfe's colourful portrayal of his family, his hometown of Asheville, North Carolina, and the Old Kentucky Home boarding house earned the historic Victorian home a place as one of the most famous landmarks in American literature.

Thomas Wolfe was perhaps the most overtly autobiographical of this country's major novelists. His boyhood at 48 Spruce Street shaped his work and influenced the rest of his life. So frank and realistic were his reminiscences that Look Homeward, Angel was banned from Asheville's public library for over seven years. Today Wolfe is celebrated as one of Asheville's
most famous citizens, and his boyhood home has become a part of America’s literary history.

Wolfe’s mother lived in the Old Kentucky Home until her death in 1945. Four years later her surviving sons and daughters sold the house to a private organization, the Thomas Wolfe Memorial Association, and it opened to the public as a house museum on July 19, 1949. The association continued to operate the memorial until 1958, when it was taken over by the City of Asheville. On January 16, 1976, the North Carolina Department of Cultural Resources acquired the property.

This chapter deals with the autobiographical strain in his novel *Look Homeward, Angel*. In the novel the author, Thomas Wolfe plans to include his whole life experience with its infinite variety of feelings and manifestation. He perused his own experience so slavishly that it has become impossible to separate his writing from his personal life.

Wolfe immortalized the house as the fictional Dixieland in his epic autobiographical novel, *Look Homeward, Angel*. In the book, the character of Eliza Gant operates a boarding house modelled on the Old Kentucky Home run by Julia Wolfe. Here Wolfe resentfully spent much of his youth, forced to make his
home among boarders rather than in a family home, just as the character of the young Eugene did later on in the novel.

Thomas Wolfe left an indelible mark on American letters. And his mother's boardinghouse in Asheville, North Carolina now the Thomas Wolfe Memorial has become one of literature's most famous landmarks. Named Old Kentucky Home by a previous owner, Wolfe immortalized the rambling Victorian structure as Dixieland in his epic autobiographical novel, *Look Homeward, Angel*. A classic of American literature, *Look Homeward, Angel* has never gone out of print since its 1929 publication, keeping interest in Wolfe alive and attracting visitors to the setting for this great novel.

The sprawling frame of the Queen Anne-influenced house was originally only six or seven rooms with a front and rear porch when it was constructed in 1883 by prosperous Asheville banker, Erwin E. Sluder. By 1889, additions had more than doubled the size of the original structure, but the architecture changed little over the next 27 years. In *Look Homeward, Angel* Thomas Wolfe accurately remembered the house he moved into in 1906 as a "big cheaply constructed frame house of eighteen or twenty drafty, high-ceilinged rooms." In 1916, Wolfe's mother enlarged and
modernized the house, adding electricity, additional indoor plumbing, and 11 rooms.

Today the boardinghouse, where Thomas Wolfe spent his childhood and adolescence feature furnishings that evoke the daily routine of life in both fact and fiction. Wolfe already had intuitively assessed the true importance of the house. He said his mother's old dilapidated house had now become a fit museum. It is preserved almost intact with original furnishings arranged by family members very much the way it appeared when the writer lived there. Memories, kept alive through Wolfe's writings, remain in each of the 29 rooms of the house.

It was situated five minutes from the public square, on a pleasant sloping middle-class street of small homes and boarding-houses. It had a rambling, unplanned, gabular appearance, and was painted a dirty yellow. It had a pleasant green front yard not deep but wide, bordered by a row of young maples. The yard sloped sharply down, the gaunt back of Dixieland was propped upon a dozen rotting columns of white-washed brick, fourteen feet high.

Eliza Gant had added a large sleeping-porch upstairs, tacked on two rooms, a bath, and a hallway on one side, and extended the
hallway, added three bedrooms, two baths, and a water closet, on
the other. Downstairs she had widened the veranda, put in a large
sun-parlor under the sleeping porch, knocked out the archway in
the dining-room, which she prepared to use as a big bedroom in
the slack season, scooped out a small pantry in which the family
was to eat, and added a tiny room beside the kitchen for her own
occupancy. The construction was after her own plans, and of the
cheapest material: it never lost the smell of raw wood, cheap
varnish, and flimsy rough plastering.

At Dixieland, Eliza slept soundly in a small dark room with a
window opening on the uncertain light of the back porch. Her
chamber was festooned with a pendant wilderness of cord and
string; stacks of old newspapers and magazines were piled in the
corners; and every shelf was loaded with gummed, labeled, half-
filled medicine bottles. Thomas Wolfe described:

“Eugene went out and began to mount the dark
stairs. Benjamin Gant, entering at this moment,
stumbled across a mission-chair in the hall.... Eugene
paused, then mounted softly the carpeted stair, so
that he would not be heard, entering the sleeping-
porch at the top of the landing on which he slept.”²
He did not turn on the light, because he disliked seeing the raw blistered varnish of the dresser and the bent white iron of the bed. It sagged, and the light was dim he hated dim lights, and the large moths, flapping blindly around on their dusty.

Thomas Wolfe’s case is quite the contrary. No particular social group is the subject of his books, which undertake to comprise as far as possible the whole of American life, South and North, together with a good deal of Europe, and to include people of diverse social station and cultural status. No such specific problem is set forth as that of the poolroom loafer or that of migratory labor or the bored man of wealth and convention. But it is still Thomas Wolfe and his people that form his subject. He does not cover much of the same ground in the different books; for his material was so abundant that he could recount his childhood twice over and seldom repeat an incident or an impression. But the whole thing makes one record and presents one complex of related problems.

That Wolfe’s Eugene Gant is a fictional representation of his own character and experience, seems self-evident. On the other hand, Wolfe repeatedly denied that his novels were
autobiographical in a literal sense. He wrote to Margaret Roberts the summer before *Look Homeward, Angel* appeared:

> I can only assure you that my book is a work of fiction, and that no person, act, or event has been deliberately and consciously described.  

*Look Homeward, Angel* is divided into three parts: the first and shortest deals with Eugene’s childhood, to his twelfth year; the second, with his schooldays in Altamont; and the third, with his college years, marked at the end by his brother Ben’s death, and his mother’s reluctant agreement to finance Eugene’s further education at Harvard. Through all this period of childhood and adolescence, the unifying force in the story is the conflict between Eugene’s passionate love for the emotional satisfactions of his growth and the even more passionate hatred for its frustrations. The death of his brother Grover (Ben’s twin) left upon the young child Eugene a sharp sense of the utter loneliness of death, caught in the refrain, “O lost, and by the wind grieved, ghost, come back again.”

In this novel Wolfe describes Eugene at six, just starting to school. Two pages explain his isolation at the time, his mother’s reluctance to let him go, the options of his brothers and sisters,
and his father’s plan to make a lawyer of the boy for the simple reason that he is a great reader. Then comes half a page of argument between Gant and Eliza. Eugene’s reading of Stoddard’s Lectures and With Stanley in Africa is described, and the exotic recollections of the World’s Fair in St. Louis lead into the two-page passage on smells. Eugene’s difficulties in learning to write, the big boy who teases him into giving them most of his lunch, the delights of Christmas, the boy’s first awareness of sex are all given in exposition that suggests the boy’s responses. Of the fourteen pages in the chapter, only five are unbroken by dialogue, sometimes the spoken words will be a brief interjection, like Eliza’s “Why, say-you can’t grow up yet. You’re my baby.”

Or in a brief episode there is the effect of conversation even when dialogue is not given, Eugene and a small playmate think they see a huge serpent. Shaken with fear they went away, they talked about it then and later in hushed voices. But they never revealed it. The adjectives would be misleading. Eugene’s developing awareness is not static. Things described as experience, and the language is dynamic. As Eugene grows older, the dramatic method is increasingly available and is well used. Chapter XVIII tells in twelve pages of Eugene’s departure for
college and his first impressions there. Included are dialogues between Eugene and Margaret Leonard, the parting advice of Ben, Eugene’s interview with Dr. Torrington, his English professors. It would indeed be surprising if Wolfe’s apprenticeship in drama were not reflected in his first novel. Because that apprenticeship has been so casually considered, Wolfe has never given sufficient credit for the dramatic quality of his fiction.

Though The Marble Man’s Wife is largely concerned with Mrs. Wolfe’s early life, there are many details that informs us about the fictional Eliza. Mrs. Wolfe tells us, for example, that when Mr. Wolfe first proposed to her, she explained that she had already been in love and did not think she could love again. He was incredulous, and persuaded her that love would come. The accounts of her learning to play the fiddle, her playful masquerade in men’s clothes, and her success in teaching present a more attractive woman as the virtually sexless Eliza.

The picture of W.O. Wolfe and Julia reading aloud to each other When Knighthood Was in Flower is hard to associate with the feuding Gants of the novel. Julia’s practical courage in the presence of the supposed burglar (who turned out to be a cat), her presence of mind in setting Tom’s dislocated finger when he was
twelve, and W.O. Wolfe’s agreement to, at least one of her real estate deals suggest a competence and family acceptance, not reflected in *Look Homeward, Angel*. Ben’s brief apprenticeship to his father is family detail not suggested in the fiction. Another is Julia’s tears over Tom’s failure to let the family know when he was out of money and nearly starving in Norfolk.

Wolfe’s attachment to Mrs. Aline Bernsein, whom he met at the end of his first trip to Europe, was immediate and intense. It was the major factor in his personal life during the academic year 1925-26, his second year at New York University. By June of 1926 he was convinced that he could not sell either of his two full-length plays, and he had little inclination to go ahead with any of his other dramatic ideas. Therefore, he sailed for England at the end of the academic year, and was shortly joined by Mrs. Bernstein at Ilkley, a small town in the Lake Country. There he outlined the novel, which eventually became *Look Homeward, Angel*, and when Mrs. Bernstein returned to New York, Wolfe remained in England to work on it. After a short trip to Belgium in September, he took a room at Hilltop Farm, near Oxford. On money sent him by Mrs. Bernstein, he went to Germany and Switzerland, sailing for home in late December.
Mrs. Bernsein had taken a loft at 13 East 8th Street, where Wolfe was to live and write, and where Mrs. Bernstein was to do part of the stage and costume designing for which she was in great demand. She persuaded him not to teach during the spring semester, though he was urged to return at $2,200 a year ($400 above his starting salary in 1924). In July, 1927, he went abroad again with Mrs. Bernstein, and in September returned to teach at the University.

The exact influence of Mrs. Bernstein can be measured by Wolfe’s monumental flow of memory, energy, and words in the form of *Look Homeward, Angel*, which had taken by its completion in the first draft in March, 1928 is a matter of debate, but it was certainly great. The manuscript of the book was completed after a violent quarrel with Mrs. Bernstein. Wolfe went again to Europe in July, leaving it with an agent and when he returned to New York in January, 1929, he finds a letter from Maxwell E. Perkins, editor of Charles Scribner’s Sons, publishers, expressing an interest in the novel, “if it could be worked into a form published by us”.

By March of 1928 he had finished the huge manuscript of some 300,000 words. He gave friendly notice to Professor Watt
that he would not teach in the fall, and was assured that he was welcome to return if he changed his mind. While various publishers were reading the novel and Wolfe considered the possibility of writing. The simple pattern of the novel—a small town, a large family, school and college—was one that thousands of readers had lived and could identify with it. Yet the sentimentality usually associated with the pattern was transformed into intensity, richness of impression, and a sense of insignificant ambition, that seemed something larger than life.

*Look Homeward, Angel* begins with the marriage of Oliver Gant, a stone cutter and monument maker from Pennsylvania to a woman Eliza Gant from the Carolina Hills. Wolfe’s own father, W.O. Wolfe, and his fictional self in the early novels, Oliver Gant, were men of tremendous energy, potency and magnetism, but ruined by illness, drunkenness, irresponsibility and gigantic defects of various kinds but the fictional representation of Julia Wolfe is Eliza Gant. She was the money grubbing women and always tries to build up her fortune by investment.

They are an ill-assorted pair, the man a dreamer and drunkard, and having a prodigious artistic temperament and her whole family to the sordid and anxious idol of mammon. Their
children are caught in the fiery atmosphere of conflict, and they
grow upto repudiate, in one way or another, the parents who
made life such a hell for them all. The central character is Eugene
Gant, he is his father’s son, artist and dreamer, a sprawling
awkward bulking disorderly fellow, over flowing with energy and
ambition, a man of gargantuan appetites and a mad drinker for
experience of every kind.

The first reading of Look Homeward, Angel is a strange,
moving, and memorable experience. That incredible, yet
extraordinarily vivid family of Gants! seen from the point of view
of Eugene, the sensitive youngest child. They are like characters in
a nightmare. W.O. Gant, the father, trade a maker of tombstones,
a man of huge and uncontrollable appetites, lurches drunkenly
through the narrative, roaring, weeping, howling:

Merciful God! It’s croo-el. What have I ever done that
God should punish me like this in my old age? Eliza,
his wife, is a practical woman who puts up with her
husband’s vagaries as the pioneers accepted acts of
God.7

What Eliza endured in pain and fear and glory no one knew.
He breathed over them all his hot lion-breath of desire and fury.
When he was drunk, her white pursed face, and all the slow
octopel movements of her temper, stirred him to red madness. She was at such time in real danger. She had to lock herself away from him. For from the first, deeper than love, deeper than hate, as deep as the unfleshed bones of life, an obscure and final warfare was being waged between them.

Eliza wept or was silent to his curse, nagged briefly in retort to his rhetoric, gave like a punched pillow to his lunging drive—and slowly, implacably had her way. Year by, above his howl of protest, he did not know how, they gathered in small bits of earth, paid the hated taxes, and put the money that remained into more land. Over the wife, over the other, the woman of property, who was like a man, walked slowly forth? 8

Of eight children born to this ill-assorted pair, seven lived to figure in the novel; and of these Steve, Helen, Ben, and Luke are important in the developing life of Eugene, the central character. Steve, the oldest, as expelled from school at fourteen, sampled all the vices early and found them all congenial. Eliza once defended her son:

Well, maybe if he hadn’t been sent to every drive in town to pull his daddy out, he would turn out better, You lie, Woman! By God you lie! [Gant] thundered magnificently but illogically. 9
Inevitably, Steve left home, but just as inevitably he returned, boasting, bullying, and whining his way into general disfavor. Ben, in contrast, was the slid, dependable boy who left school early and supported himself by miscellaneous tasks at the newspaper. “Ben, sullen, silent alone, had withdrawn more closely than ever into his heart, in the brawling house he came and went, and was remembered, like a phantom”\textsuperscript{10}. He did what he could for everyone except Steve but bitterly rented any interference. It was Ben’s loneliness that established a special bond with young Eugene: “He was a stranger, and as he sought through the house, he was always a prowl to find some entrance into life, some secret undiscovered door—a stone, a leaf,—that might admit him into light and fellowship”\textsuperscript{11} Luke, too, was dependable, but in a hard-driving, money-grubbing way.

And it was as the smiling hustler that he wanted to be known. He read piously all the circulars the Curtis Publishing Company sent to its agents. He posed himself in the various descriptive attitudes that were supposed to promote business—the proper manner of approach, the most persuasive manner of drawing the journal from the bag, the animated description of its
contents, in which he was supposed to be steeped as a result of his faithful reading.

Yes, sir. Yes, sir, he would begin in a sonorous voice, dripping wide-leggedly into the “prospect’s” stride. This week’s edition of The Saturday Evening Post, five cents, only a nickel, p-p-p-purchased weekly by t-t-two million readers. In this week’s issue you have eighty-six pages of f-f-fact and fiction, to say n-n-nothing of the advertisements. If you c-c-c-c-an’t read you’ll get m-m-more than your money’s worth out of the p-p-pictures” 12

Helen, the more important of Eugene’s two sisters, was ten years older than he. There was a special bond between Helen and her father, and even as a child do more with the drunken Gant than anyone else. “She adored him. He had begun to suspect that this devotion, and his own response to it, was a cause more and more of annoyance to Eliza, and he was inclined to exaggerate and emphasize it, particularly when he was drunk, when his furious distaste for his wife, his obscene complaint against her, was crudely balanced by his maudlin docility to the girl” 13. It was little Helen who gave the drunken Gant hot soup, slapping her father with her small hand to make him pay attention: “You drink this! You better”. 14 And it was Helen who kept house for her father
Eliza bought Dixieland, moved into it, and operated it as a boarding house.

Meanwhile the thrust of Eugene’s own individuality becomes more and more decisive. In the crude daydreams of early reading he sees himself as the young missionary bound for the Far West, exalted by the love of Grace, the beautiful parishioner; or again as Bruce, the heroic vagabond, saving an endangered Veronica from wild natives. Later still, there is the opportunity to go to the Leonard’s private school, where his taste for books is fed, and his isolation from his intellectual family increased. Then comes college; the groping towards some recognition for his mind and wit; the rebellious feelings against an unappreciative faculty; the escapades and pranks; the vacation love affair with Laura James; and a summer of war work in Norfolk. These are the elements of Eugene’s experience.

In *Look Homeward, Angel* Wolfe lays him out to show how, in the perpetual conflict of temperaments, between the grasping materialism of Eugene’s mother and the crazy inward brooding of his father, the children had their natures distorted and were wrought to a pitch of desperate neuroticism. Their family did not seem to fit into the pattern of life of their town, “Because they had
twisted the design of all orderly life, because there was in them a mad, original, disturbing quality, which they did not suspect."

He is abnormally susceptible to all impressions physical and moral, a passionate lover of nature in all her moods, of all her sights and sounds and smells. His sensitive quivering soul is made witness to the dramas and cruelties and shames and humiliations of life in his town; and above all, the turbulent passions and delights of family life. He delivers papers in the early morning in Niggertown. He is subjected to the miscellaneous contacts of his mother's boarding house. He goes to school and learns by heart the great lyric poetry of England; he attends the state university, suffers humiliation at the hands of boys older and less callow than himself.

Bone of their bone, blood of their blood, flesh of their flesh, by however various and remote a web, he is of them, they are in him, he is theirs has seen, known, felt, and has distilled into his blood every wild passion, criminal desire, and ending lust they have known. And the rivers of blood of the murdered men, which has soaked down quietly in the wilderness...has stained his life, his flesh, his spirit, and is on his head as well as theirs!. Just as his father's life spoke to him of all things wild and new, of exultant prophecies of escape and victory, of triumph, flight, new lands, the golden
...poison of the blood and soul, brown, thick, and brooding, never to be cured or driven out of him, in which at length he must drown darkly, horribly, unmassaged, unusable, and mad.  

However correctly he has traced the causes, there is no doubt that Wolfe’s hero is more than a little bent away from the normal in his psychological reactions. In Look Homeward, Angel he felt himself in schools a hunted animal with the entire herd against him. In college he was morbidly sensitive to the ridicule of upper class.

Wolfe’s literary intention was to present a literal or fair autobiography. It was to take the framework of his early life and develop the theme of a sensitive boy pitted against a family whose boisterous affection never included a real understanding of him. To carry out this intention, Wolfe carefully selected detail and intensified it. W.O. Gant is chiefly the comic, violent, and irrational side of W.O. Wolfe, subject to instance bouts of drinking, which upset the household. Eliza is the avaricious side of Julia; forced by a difficult marriage to get what comfort she could by satisfying her greed. Luke is the comic side of Fred, could by satisfying unmercifully underlined in every scene. Mabel’s
affection for Tom and the family is trimmed down to Helen’s rasping irritability, and her coarse, teasing of Eugene:

   Your girl when and got married, didn’t she? She fooled you, got left. Worse yet was the poisonous hatred of her tongue. Frank, the undisciplined and irresponsible boy, becomes Steve, of unrelieved petty vice. 17

The only strong affection Eugene has is for Ben, who intensifies Eugene’s sense of opposition to the rest of the family. A similar selection and intensification is observable when one turns to Eugene’s experience at Pulpit Hill. Arriving there as a boy just under sixteen, Eugene’s first year was filled for him with loneliness, pain, and failure. The students played pranks on him and jeered at him. His English teacher was an insufferable prig; his Latin teacher irritated him into deceptively and successfully riding a pony; only his Greek teacher taught him something worth learning. Sophomore year began in the autumn after America’s entry into World War I, but the campus was little changed.

Eugene began to be aware of college politics. Unpromising as his start had been, he began to be accepted. Winning a place on his college paper and magazine, he soon became a university joiner. Eugene’s third and the fourth year at college are not clearly
distinguished. In fact, the death of Ben appears to be in the October of his senior year instead of the third year (1918) as it actually was the fall of 1918, the year of the Students Army Training Corps, found Eugene in fervor of patriotism, but just under age for a uniform. He “did his bit”. 18 By turning out the school paper, filled with crusading editorials. When peace came, he remained:

A big man an aching tooth made him fear that he would soon lose all his teeth; or because a sore on his neck would not heal; or because other students thought he was not clean; or because other students thought him queer. 19

In the philosophy class he turned realistic, and cynically contradicted the conventional approval of Galileo’s heroism. And he resorted to solitary pranks such as ringing a doorbell and soberly asking for Mr. Coleridge- Mr. Samuel Taylor Coleridge.

At commencement, however, “his face grew dark with pride and joy”20 as he graduated with honors. In all this there is a heavy weighting of Eugene’s isolation from his fellows. Impressions of Wolfe at this period as recorded in a few published letters and in commends of friends are at variance with the fictional portrait.
Writing to his mother in December of 1919, his senior year, Wolfe said:

I have never been so horribly busy. Have not a moment to call my own. Exams are here and I am divided between studying for them and getting out a feature edition of the Tar Heel of which I am now Editor in Chief—highest honor in college, I believe. Everyone runs to me with this and that and I am busy not part of the time but all of it—sleeping five hours is essential but I can’t spare any more. I have my last examination tomorrow but will be forced to stay around when all the rest are gone getting out Tar Heel to send to students all over the state. It’s hard, I know, but you must pay dearly for college honors. I got lots of praise: faculty say Tar Heel’s editorials which I write have been steadying influences on campus this unsettled year, but you get tired of praise when you’re too tired to think, almost.21

The notable feature of this letter is its disappointment, the complete absence of humorous exaggeration. The writer is clearly well pleased with his college honors, responsibilities, and reputation. For this impression of Wolfe as a successful undergraduate well pleased with himself, there is strong support
in the sketches of Jonathan Daniels and Legette Blythe, two men who knew him in undergraduate days.

If anybody enjoyed companionship and college associations, it was Tom, says Blythe. He belonged to about everything on the Hill. 22

In the novel, of course, Wolfe may have emphasized discontents and frustrations no apparent to his classmates and unlikely to turn up in an isolated letter to his mother to whom he was always justifying himself. Perhaps in this respect the novel tells more of the petrified truth than the letter or the sketches of college friends. A more important point, however, is that such satisfaction as Wolfe got from his college experience is minimized and satirized. For example, here is a paragraph of interpretation regarding campus organizations:

The yokels, of course, were in the saddle—they composed nine-tenths of the student body: the proud titles were in their gift, and they took good care that their world should be kept safe for yokel and the homespun virtues. Usually, these dignities—the presidencies of student bodies, classes, Y.M.C.A.’s, and the managerships of athletic teams—were given to some honest serf who had established his greatness behind a plough before working in the college
commons, or to some industrious hack who had shown a satisfactory mediocrity in all directions...if he did not go into the law or the ministry, he was appointed a Rhoes Scholar.

This paragraph represents not the feeling of Eugene at the time he was happily collecting campus jewelry, but the later judgment of Thomas Wolfe on the triviality of campus honors. The effect of such a passage is to present not a literal autobiographical record, but an interpretation. The 1920’s saw a violent reaction against sentiment of all kinds, particularly the college spirit sort. So far as intellectual values were concerned, it was highly unfashionable to admit that they existed in colleges. And perhaps by the mid-1920’s, when he began Look Homeward, Angel, Wolfe’s Northern experience had attended. Perhaps by 1926 or 1927 he wished he had been a little more dissatisfied with the University of North Carolina than he had actually been when he was there. Certainly, the man who wrote the college chapters of the novel differs from the loyal alumnus who wrote his mother from Cambridge in 1920:

I recognize the greatness of Harvard but more and more every day I have borne to me the greatness of Chapel Hill...Of course my love and affection will
always be first with the University, with its unpaved streets which become pools of mud when it rains, and its brown dirty old buildings. The spirit of Carolina is just as great as that of Harvard.\textsuperscript{24}

Wolfe’s two great teachers at Chapel Hill-Williams and Greenlaw-only Williams appears in \textit{Look Homeward, Angel}, and there is no largeness in scene. Even more notable is the complete omission a part of his college experience, that one can only conclude that he was unwilling to treat it in the satiric pattern, which dominates the presentation of Eugene’s college years.

In its original form, \textit{Look Homeward, Angel} was the detailed and intense record of the ancestry, birth, childhood, adolescence, and youth of Eugene Gant. It began with a ninety page sequence on Eugene’s father’s life, and it concluded when, after Eugene’s graduation from college, he discovers, in an imaginary conversation with the ghost of his brother.

\textit{Look Homeward, Angel} although it had lacked the traditional novelistic structure, has a certain unity through its concentration on a family, a mountain town, and a way of life. In reading it one is caught up in the sharp impressions of youth and
somehow rushes along to that moment of self realization with which it ends.

Wolfe had written out of his direct experience, seemingly without a sense of form, and under the direction of the editors at Scribner’s. One of the principal facts of Wolfe’s career is summed up in his statement to Edward Aswell:

I begin life as a lyrical writer... I began to write with an intense and passionate concern with the designs and purposes of my own youth; and like many other men, the preoccupation has now changed to an intense and passionate concern with the designs and purposes of life.25

There is certainly the possibility that Wolfe was too completely lost in the deluge of his own memories and words to form them into an intelligent large whole in the years between 1930 & 1935, although his most distinguished short and middle length fiction was done in this period. Sometimes violent midwifery of Perkins may have been essential to getting anything publishable from the laboring author. Yet, in one sense Wolfe’s character transcend his themes. The paradox here is very great one:
Wolfe, who asserted that no man could know his brother described his fellowmen with deep understanding, Wolfe, whose subject seemed always to be himself, whose characters are drawn in large measure from real life rather than imagined, and who presented his world chiefly through the consciousness of an autobiographical hero, created a group of character so fully realized that they live with great vigor in the readers mind. *Look Homeward, Angel* is perhaps the most autobiographical novel ever written by an American, yet the protagonist, Eugene Gant, is a much less vivid person than the members of his family. It is W.O. Gant, Eliza, Helen, and Brethren Ben who glow with life and absorb our imagination. Eugene himself is mere a web of sensibility and a communicating vehicle that a person, or perhaps is that he seems to us more nearly ourselves and less some one whom we are observing.  

*Look Homeward, Angel* is a richly evocative account of the pains and joys of childhood and youth propelled with a lost of living characters. With all its flaws, it is a fine novel. In Wolfe’s total work, a personality is set down with a thoroughness and an honesty, with an intensity and a beauty of language unsurpassed by any other American prose writer, even though, aside from *Look Homeward, Angel* it is only in the short novels that we find really
sure artistic control, and sprinkled through the other books are passages of very bad writing and of irrelevant action. Wolfe got obsessed with paradox and contradiction, the shape of his whole career reflects startling contrast.

He who would have written the definition of his nation left primarily the definition of a self, he who would have asserted that though we “are lost here in America...We shall be found” was from birth to death a lonely man, vainly seeking communion. He survives and probably will continue to survive as the chronicler of a lost childhood, a vanished glory, the portrayal of an individual American outlined, start and lonely, beneath a cruel sky.

With Wolfe our experience is likely to different, he has been so prominently tagged as an autobiographical writer that the reader is likely to come to his work earned for with the knowledge that W.O. Gant was in fact Wolfe’s father; that Eliza is really Julia Wolfe, his mother, the shrewd real estate speculator; that everyone of the bickering Gant family has his counterpart in Wolfe’s brother and sisters. The pulpit Hill of fiction is transparently Chapel Hill of fiction is transparently Chapel Hill, the actual University if North Carolina; and professor Hatcher of the famous play writing course at Harvard is none other than the
renowned George pierce Baker exposed, for once, in all his Cambridge Snobbery.

There is truth in all these similarities and people cannot ignore it. But the truth in the novels is not the whole truth or the literal truth, and to assume that it is, is to distort our experience of the novels. Closely as Wolfe used events and observations of his personal life, he was selective and he shaped the material of his personal life for fictional effect. In Wolfe’s representations of his family, of his beloved, Asheville teacher, Mrs. Roberts, or of professor Baker of Harvard seems ungenerous to the point of bad manners or even bad morals.

We are still unwise in using the man to damn the book or the book to damn the man. We must perform a difficult critical art. We must see book and men together, for in a sense, they are inseparable; but we must also view book and man separately. It is necessary to use what knowledge we have of the man to understand the experience out of which the fiction came. It is even more necessary to understand the fictional process by which the experience was turned into fiction.

Wolfe was married to Julia Elizabeth Westall in 1885. Julia herself tells how, as a book agent, she called on the stone cutter
and how the acquaintance led to marriage an incident used with
comic effect in Look Homeward Angel. Returning to Asheville,
Mrs. Wolfe in 1906 bought the large house at 48 Spruce Street,
which she named the Old Kentucky Home, the Dixieland boarding
House in Look Homeward, Angel. To W.O. and Julia Wolfe, eight
children were born. The first, a girl named Leslie, died in infancy.
Effie, the next child, was older than Tom so she figures only a
mirror way as Daisy in Look Homeward, Angel. Frank as Steve,
Mabel as Helen, and Fred as Luke are all important fictional
characters, the twins, Grover Cleveland and Benjamin Harrison,
appear under their own given names. Though the correspondence
of the real life characters to the fictional characters is
unmistakable, Mabel Comments:

We Deny, as a matter of fact, being character in the
book, we know that the reading world so regards us,
and readers who know us, as they did in the day
immediately following the book’s coming out, make a
game of pairing off the real person with the fictional
counter parts. 28

In the summer of 1917 Wolfe had a love affair with a girl who
lived for a time at the Old Kentucky Home. His mother and sister
say that the Laura James episode in *Look Homeward, Angel*, based on this affair, is much exaggerated.

In the spring of his second year in college Tom’s roommate, as Asheville boy was Managing editor of Tar Hell, died suddenly of a heart attack. Tom was so much affected that he never slept in that room again, staying instead with other friends. The following summer 1918, Tom worked near Norfolk, Virginia, as time checker for a gang of laborer and later as checker of supplies at the docks. His brother Fred, who was in navy, saw him at this time, and he confirms the temporary jobless and near to starvation, described as part of Eugene experience in *Look Homeward, Angel*.

Ben, a competent young newspaperman and a moody but devoted elder brother of Wolfe, was closer to him than any other member of the family. The description of Ben’s death in *Look Homeward, Angel* quoted in part at the beginning of the chapter is generally considered one of the Wolfe’s best passages. It is a literary expression of the literally over-whelming grief felt at the time. Years later Tom said; Life at home practically ceased to be possible for me when Ben died.

Wolfe’s attachment to Mrs. Aline Bernstein, whom he met at the end of his first trip to Europe, was immediate and intense. It
was the major factor in his personal life during the academic year 1925-26, his second year at New York University. By June of 1926 he was convinced he could not sell either of his two full length plays, and he had little inclination to go ahead with any of his mother dramatic ideas. Therefore, he sailed for England at the end of the academic year, and was shortly joined by Mrs. Bernstein at likely a small town in the lake country. Therefore, he outlined the novel which eventually became *Look Homeward, Angel*, and when Mrs. Bernstein returned to New York, Wolfe remained in England to work on it. On October 18, 1929, *Look Homeward, Angel* was published. The typical reader of 1929 took the book as a novel and enjoyed it very much. After the gritty realism of Dreiser, the tired sophistication of Fitzgerald, the Waspish satire of Sinclair Lewis, and the feverish brooding of Eugene O’Neill, *Look Homeward, Angel* was like going home again, if only for a visit. The simple pattern of the novel— a small town, a large family school and college—was one that thousands of readers had lived and could identify with. Yet the sentimentality usually associated with the pattern was transformed by intensity a richness of impression, a sense of vaultness ambition, that the home one revisited was something larger than life.
The climax of the novel however is the death of Ben, which cut the last real tie with the family. Gant, Eliza, Helen, Luke and Steve all remain vibrant strands of his past, but Eugene has gone beyond them now. On his graduation from college his ambition is vaguely fixed on writing as a career. Whatever reservation the reader may make about the adolescent qualities of the novel, it powerfully represents the American struggle to go beyond the limitations of home and home town. In a sense, the very weaknesses of the individual passages make the total effect more comprehensive and convincing. Such passages are usually better in their context than when they are detached for the ironic critical comment.

Obvious as it is that both Thomas Wolfe and Eugene Gant grew up in a North Carolina resort town, he presents at the death of a beloved older brother, and attends the state university, the autobiographical problem remains. Wolfe’s novel was filled with readily identifiable portraits of people he had known in his native Asheville North Carolina, and in Chapel Hill, where he attended college. Most easily recognized were Wolfe’s members of his own family. Any body who lived in Asheville in 1929 knew that W.O. Gant was William Oliver Wolfe, Thomas Wolfe’s father and that
Eliza Gant was Julia E. Wolfe, his mother. The Gant children’s correspondence and appearance was very similar to Wolfe’s siblings and in that case of Benjamin Harrison Gant and Grover Cleveland Gant the author used the actual names of his brothers. Eugene Gant; the protagonist of the novel was unquestionably Thomas Wolfe. The Edenic character or Eugene Gant’s infancy in his father house on Woodson Street was wholly unlike the turbulence of the Wolfe household at 92 Woodfin Street. In the novel the Gants home was a place of rich abundance. Everything about it was over sized.

Thomas Wolfe’s mother, like Eugene Gant’s was over forty years old when he was born, and she had already produced seven other children. W. O. Wolfe, her husband, was indeed sometimes as proud of Tom as W.O. Gant was of Eugene, but like Julia, he did not initially welcome this addition to his large and expensive family. Almost every character, place, and events in *Look Homeward, Angel* has its real counter part, in the life of whole, his family, their neighbors, and Asheville, the novel most assuredly is about buried lives. The degree to which each member of the Gant family is vulnerable to isolation and to loneliness is extreme.
Eliza Gant, for example, never calls her husband anything but Mr. Gant a habit not uncommon for a Southern woman of her generation, but a manner of address that is nonetheless extremely formal. W.O. Gant is a Warder, not a contended husband and father. He finds his consolation in travel and drink, rather than in domestic life. The children are isolated by virtue of their tastes, ambitions, and prospects while the novel does present outward actions of this family, it also explores their inner longings and disappointment. Wolfe’s childhood was a time of much ugliness, and sometimes the depiction of Altamount that we read in *Look Homeward, Angel* is as bleak, as barren, and as unlovely as any description in the work of the Midwestern naturalistic novelists such as Dreiser and Anderson.

Eugene Gant’s career no less than Thomas Wolfe’s was a search for loveliness, for aesthetic joy. He dreamed the shining city beyond the mountains, where all would be radiant and beautiful. In Wolfe’s letters to Mrs. Roberts and to his mother, in conversations with his friends, and in this first novel, he shows that he was hunted by the recognizably direct relation between his experience and his fiction. He felt a difference, but could never clearly articulate what the difference was. A partial answer can be
found by turning to the factual accounts left by his mother and his sister Mabel.

The picture of W.O. Wolfe and Julia reading aloud to each other when knighthood was a Flower is hard to associate with the Feuding Gants of the novel. Julia’s practical courage in the presence of the supposed burglar, her presence of mind is setting Tom’s dislocated finger when he was twelve and W.O. Wolfe’s agreement to at least one of her real estate deals suggest a competence and family acceptance not reflected in *Look, Homeward Angel*. Ben’s brief apprenticeship to his father is a family detail not suggested in the fiction. Another is Julia’s tears over Tom’s failure to let the family know when he was out of money and nearly starving in Norfolk.

Conspicuous in showing the difference between Wolfe’s treatment of incident and his mother’s are the two accounts of how the young woman sold books to the man in the marble shop. As Wolfe tells it in the novel, Eliza finds Gant drawing on his coat after a rest on an old sofa in the shop. To his explanatory complaint that he has been in bad health:

> Pshaw! Said Eliza briskly and contemptuously. There’s nothing wrong with you in you in my opinion. You’re a

...
big strapping fellow, in the prime of life. Half of it’s only imagination. 29

In a long paragraph Eliza elaborates the deceptive powers of imagination, with no opportunity for Gant to interrupt. He thought with an anguished inner grief. “How long is this to keep up? But she’s a pippin as sure as you’re born. Then Eliza gets down to business. “My name,” she said portentously, with slow emphasis, is Eliza, Pentland, and I represent the Larking Publishing Company.”30. She spoke the words proudly, with dignified gusto.

Merciful god! A book-agent! Thought Gant. We are offering,’ said Eliza, opening a huge yellow book with a fancy design of spears and flags and laurel wreaths, ‘a book of poems called Gems of Verse for Hearth and Fireside as well as Larkin’s Domestic Doctor and Book of Household Remedies, giving directions for the cure and prevention of over five hundred diseases.

Well, said Gant, with a faint grin, wetting his big thumb briefly, I ought to find one that I’ve got out of that.

Why, yes, said Eliza, nodding smartly, “as the fellow says, you can read poetry for the good of you soul and Larkin for the good of your body. 31
So Gant bought the books, and as Eliza departed with hearty good humor, Gant “turned back among his marbles again with a stirring in him that he thought he had lost forever.” Following, in full, is Mrs. Wolfe’s account of the transaction:

I was one of those dread book agents at that time, after Mr. Wolfe’s wife died. I had an agency; I took the orders during vacations and in the afternoons and Saturdays. I was prissy, you know, didn’t go just anywhere. I went into the tailor shop next door to Mr. Wolfe’s place. It was Mr. Shartle’s shop. He was a very fine man, and after he had bought a book I asked if any of his tailors might like to see my book. He said, oh no. They didn’t read.

But, he said, you’ go in next door. Mr. Wolfe will buy.

That there was more than quarrel between W.O. Wolfe and Julia is illustrated by the story of what happened after Effie, emulating her absent father, threw Kerosene on the fire and set the house ablaze. Immediately after the fore was put, Julia set about rebuilding, and when W.O. returned home several weeks later he saw the rebuilt house and heard the story. He himself told it repeatedly with admiration:
Julia’s the most resourceful woman I ever saw: he would invariably end his recital, Merciful God, that little woman can do anything, and do it right. 34

W.O himself, an episode unused in *Look Homeward, Angel* is Mabel’s story of being awakened on a winter night and a taken to a window from which she and her father watched a women and a boy stealing coal from the Wolfe basement. Her father whispered: “Don’t say a word... let the poor devile have whatever they can carry and welcome to it. Any one, who would come out on a night like this, Baby, is sorely in need-freezing, no doubt.”35

Along with the tempestuous Spree Drinker as Julia called him, W.O. was a man of dignity and character, he was a generous father who at the Christmas time gave Mabel fifty dollars- a large sum for these days –to spend on the presents for the family in the light of such incidents, it is possible to accept Mabel’s assertion that her father’s epithets he called his children miserable scoundrels and friends from hell and the boarding house a murderous and bloody barn were not so seriously meant as they seem in the novel. In Mabel’s opinion W.O. Wolfe was a born actor, to whom exuberance and exaggeration were natural.
A pervasive change in the novel is the social status of the family. Mabel is at pains to emphasize that the Wolfes were highly respected in Asheville, she speak of the parlour at Woodfin Street as a room of grandeur, attesting to the family’s influence and culture. There were Havil and China and a silver tea service. The description of Effie’s wedding in 1908, and Mabel’s own wedding in 1916, supported by a photograph showing a men in formal dress, certainly suggests a family in the upper middle class. Through the successful marble business and through Julia’s accumulation of property, the family would naturally have been regarded as substantial. Mabel insists that the neighbors were fond of the Wolfes. She specifies that one of the Cromwell daughter married Douglas Mac Arthur. There were also the Perkinsoms, the Browns, the Colvins and the Hazards, whom Mabel recalls as being very friendly. Julia’s brother, Will Westall, was in the early 1990s, a wealthy man with an imposing brick residence.

From Mabel’s account, it is not possible to tell how much the status of the family was affected by Mr. Wolfe’s speech, the frequent family quarrels, and frank’s scrapes. Mabel’s touring as a vaudeville singer and especially the establishment of the Old
Kentucky Home as a boarding house. In general, the keeping of a boarding house in those days before the small apartment, was quite respectable. Yet Mr. Wolfe seems to have resented the idea from the beginning. Mabel concedes that Tom himself was quite self-conscious about the boarding house, for he asked his University friends to let him out of their car some distance away.

Church affiliation, usually of social importance in small town, seems rather indefinite. For several years after their marriage, Mr. and Mrs. Wolfe attended the Baptist Church. Later, they seem attended any church, but pastors of the Presbyterian Church (where Tom attended Sunday school) presided at family weddings and funerals.

In the novel, Wolfe says of Ben and Eugene, when the two boys were twenty and twelve that they were by nature Aristocrats. Eugene had just began to feel his back of social status. Ben had felt it for years. After Ben rages at his mother for not providing his little brother with clean clothes and for not having his hair cut, he moodily comments; “The rest of us never has anything, but I don’t want to see the kid into little tramp.” Shortly afterward, when Eugene goes to a private school, the older children (except Ben), think he is putting on airs. Eugene’s attachments to Margaret
Leonard, his new found teacher, are especially accounted for by the misery, drunkenness, and disorder of his life at home. Luke and Helen are represented as opposed to their mother’s side of the family. Helen is represented as highly conscious of the questionable nature of some of the guests at the Old Kentucky Home just before her wedding: “Mama, in heaven’s name! What do you mean by allowing such goings – on right in the face of Hugh and his people?” When Eliza visits Eugene at college, she embarrasses him by giving some of his friends several advertising cards for the boarding house and asking them to send people to her. From such passage it is evident that Wolfe desired that the family had something less than solid self-respect and social position. This is fictionally appropriate for the situation constantly disorganized by Gant’s drinking and his unpredictable absences from home.

Turning inward to his story, he found a prospective on an important pattern in American life. The struggle of the individual against family and home town, the conflict his experience into fiction, he was sustained by the love novel. Despite the quarrels which had began even before, Look Homeward, Angel was published, Wolfe never minimized what her unfailing faith in his
talent meant to him at this crucial time of special importance was the fact that, as their acquaintance grew, Mrs. Bernstein’s own very different childhood and youth as a city girl, an actor’s daughter with a natural affinity for European culture – helped Wolfe to come to himself.

Floyed C. Watkins, who examined Wolfe’s use of materials drawn from his home town, Asheville, concluded, “there are many more than 300 characters and places mentioned by name or described in Look Homeward, Angel, and probably there is not an entirely fictitious person, place or incident in the whole novel”. 38

On Wolfe’s disarming statement, Dr. Johnson remarked that a man would turn over half the people in a town to make a single figure in his novel, is no defense at all when the people of town are merely represented under the thinnest and most transparent disguise, and when the change in name are as slight as “Chapel Hill” to “Pulpit Hill”, “Raleigh” to “Sydney”, “Woodfin Street” to “Woodson Street” or “Reoben Rawls” to “Ralph Rolls”, “Asheville” to “Altamount”. His father name is changed to “W.O. Gant” his mother’s from “Eliza Westall Wolfe” to “Eliza Pentland Gant”, his brother’s from “Ben Gant”.

Wolfe was frequently autobiographical in the strict reporting sense. He says, with reference to Look Homeward, Angel:

The younger writer is often led through inexperience to use of the materials of life which are, perhaps, somewhat too crude and naked for the purpose of a work of art”? 39

In many cases he evidently did produce easily recognizable portraits in his first novel. After the book was published, one of the neighbors complained gently.

It’s all right to put us on the book, he said, but you might have left out our address and telephone number. Wolfe was simply unable in this early writing, to escape the burden of his literal knowledge; he could not change even minor and trivial details, apparently because they happened that way.40

William, Van O’ Connor comments:

Wolfe’s father W.O. Wolfe becomes W.O. Gant in the Angel; his mother, Julia Elizabeth, becomes Eliza; his brother Ben remains Ben. Wolfe, in short, tends to forget that he is talking about his reactions to his perceptions of living persons, and above all to forget that there are many varied and interesting and adequate ways of talking about such things. 41
Look Homeward, Angel is essentially a part of an autobiography; and pretense of fiction is so thin and slovenly that Mr. Wolfe in referring to the hero writes indifferently “Eugene Gant” or “I” and “me”. There may be many modifications, omissions and additions in character and event, but the impulse and material are fundamentally personal. The story begins in Look Homeward, Angel in the later part of the nineteenth century with the arrival of Gant as the hero, in Altamont, in the state of Catawba, which is Asheville, North Carolina. It continues with the marriage to Eliza Pentaland, the birth of the various children, the debaucheries and repentances of old Gant, the growth of the village into a flourishing resort, the profitable real estate speculation of Eliza, her boarding house, the education of Eugene Gant in Altamont and at the State University, the college of old Gant’s health and the departure of Eugene for Harvard.

Look Homeward, Angel brought Wolfe praise from many readers. The novel has survived for over fifty years even though some critics continue to emphasize its weakness. Besides, the moments of great emotion and passion the novel conveys, most readers are captivated by the memorable characters that Wolfe
presents through their distinctive speech, mannerisms, gestures, and physical details as Ben with his lean, gray face saying beyond reality to his angel:

O, my, God...listen to that, won’t you, Eliza, pursuing her lips incessantly and declaring about yet another piece of property”. It’s a good buy; W.O., drunk and maudlin, weeping Merciful God ...it’s fearful, it’s fearful, it’s awful, its cruel. What have I ever done that God should punish me like this in my old age; Luke’s stuttering; Helen’s nervous laughter; and Grover with his dark, quiet adult eyes and his strawberry birthmark in addition to the Gant family. 42

Thomas Wolfe presents the entire town of Altamont with vivid minor characters – for example, Horse Hines the undertaker, Hugh Barton’s mammoth and dyspeptic mother; and Mrs. Pert, Ben’s tipsy lover. There are Altamont doctors and merchants, it’s black, summer tourists, native, and new comers – Wolfe views this rich world with candour, often with compassion and almost consistently with humour. In 1930 Wolfe wrote to his sister Mabel a defence of the novel and pointed to some of its lasting values.
NOTES AND REFERENCES


2 Ibid., p. 71.


5 Ibid., p. 86.

6 Ibid., p. 95.

7 Ibid., p. 98.

8 Ibid., p. 99.

9 Ibid., p. 113.

10 Ibid., p. 112.

11 Ibid., p. 113.

12 Ibid., p. 119-20.

13 Ibid., p. 113.

14 Ibid., p. 125.

15 Ibid., p. 139.
16 Ibid., p. 156.
17 Ibid., p. 170.
18 Ibid., p. 178.
19 Ibid., p. 182.
20 Ibid., p. 191
21 Thomas Wolfe, Letters to His Mother, ed. by Walser, Richard Gaither,


23 Thomas Wolfe, Letters to His Mother, ed. by Walser, Richard Gaither,


27 Ibid., p. 229.
28 Ibid., p. 250.
29 Ibid., p. 298.
30 Ibid., p. 20.
31 Ibid., pp. 10-12
32 Ibid., p. 199.
33 Ibid., p. 125.
34 Ibid., p. 227
35 Ibid., p. 98.
36 Ibid., p. 220
37 Ibid., p. 231
38 Ibid., p. 246
39 Ibid., p. 248
40 Ibid., p. 249
41 William, Van O’Connor, Seven Modern American Novelists,
University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, Minnesota, U.S.A;
1968, p. 208.