Thomas Wolfe was an American author whose autobiographical fiction novels drew inspiration from his early days in North Carolina and America during the Depression. *The Web and the Rock, (1939)* is one of the four autobiographical novels of Thomas Wolfe. In this novel the author, Thomas Wolfe searches for truth and fulfillment and a way to balance his burning passion to write with his desire to live. This novel is filled with vivid prose and strong characterization which is derived from his personal life. His eloquent, often stream of consciousness writing style has been compared to Walt Whitman, William Faulkner and James Joyce.

The *Web and the Rock* is formless autobiography, chopped up, retailed, and re-arranged by the author’s editor and friend Maxwell E. Perkins. The motive force of his work seems to have been his desire to express the elements of a Universal experience which closely tied up with the national, the American experience to a remarkable degree.
In this novel Thomas Wolfe was using himself to describe and to define both this universal experience and his native land, to produce the American epic, to create the egalitarian and generic hero because his conviction was that a native has the whole consciousness of his people and nation in him; he knows everything about it, every sight, sound and memory of the people. Thus much of his career was a search for America.

The centre art of this novel was in a similar view of the self, but the method was different. Like Whitman, he believed that the writer ought to see in what has happened to him the universal experience. All the people, events, images and visions that crossed his experience became a part of him and were to be transmuted into a final coherent union in which America was to be embodied.

Thomas Wolfe did not live to complete his representation of his America through the portrait of himself as the generic man, and out of novels, shorts stories and letters we piece out the pattern he was trying to follow and we guess at meaning and intentions. One thing seems clear. Wolfe was as Southerner, torn by the tensions and issues oppressed as they tend to be with the tragic nature of life and feeling as they often do a sense of guilt that demands some kind of expiating action. The work he
completed, had demonstrable Southern qualities the total work, had he lived to complete it, would probably have had these qualities too. The South did, indeed, burn in his blood and on his pages like a urinated Helen beautiful, passionate, and dark with violence and guilt.

The subject matter and method of this novel, inevitably, led to the issue of the legitimacy of autobiographical strain. Few critics avoid this issue, for it is essential to Wolfe’s work, but various views have been taken as to its artistic propriety.

In fact, Wolfe was a writer with two distinctive and contrasting styles. On one level he wrote with lyrical intensity a web of sinuous images capable of evoking to his readers, on the other hand response that resulting from his direct experience. Of American writers in this century, Ernest Hemingway of Wolfe’s only equal at the evocative representation of the physical world through images so startlingly direct that they seem to rub against the reader’s raw nerve ends. Wolfe said:

The quality of memory is characterized, I, believe, in a more than ordinary degree by the intensity of its sense impressions, its power to evoke and bring back the odors, sounds, colors, stages, and full of things with concrete vividness. ¹
At its best his style is superbly suited for transferring this concrete vividness to the reader and there is one final and very important theme, effort to adjust the psyche to the distresses and disillusionments of life. This is what we might call the theme of return to the past. It is a common psychological operation and evidently one of the greatest importances to Thomas Wolfe. But the prominence he gives it in his work seems to the influence of Marcel Proust. Proust’s great series of novels, called in *English Remembrance of Things Past*, has for its general title in French, *A recherché du temps perdu*, literally, and the search after lost time.

Impressed by Thomas Wolfe, Proust’s undertaking was to describe the process by which he explored back into the mists of childhood experience, and thereby discovered his own peculiar secret of happiness. It was to disentangle himself from the web of time to break through into the state of pure time no longer flowing and destroying, but fixed in the imagination as an unchanging ideal thing.

It was by a happy accident that he discovered how this might be done. And the trick by which it was done was that of associating a physical sensation in the present with a similar physical sensation in the remote past. And so, in some mysterious
way, the happiness, which he had always missed in actual experience, the sense of fulfillment, is attained in the mystic identity of the present moment with that of long ago. Marcel Proust comments:

Now, I doubt whether Wolfe would have accepted, even if he could understand them, the full implications of Proust’s metaphysical theory, which is said to be derived from Bergson. It is a theory suited to an extreme neurotic temperament a temperament disposing one to escape from experience into pure abstractions of thought. But there is a common psychological element in what Proust and Wolfe go through. It is found in the recall by means of present sensations or impressions of closely similar impressions received in extreme youth. And the unconscious motivation is the urge to give to the present the tone of hopefulness and security and liveliness, which attached to childhood experience, to substitute the good impressions of childhood for the weariness and disenchantment of maturity.²

This theme appears in many incidents in The Web and the Rock. Take, for example, the occasion when George Webber, worn out by suffering and discouragement, is sitting in an old inn in the city of Dijon. Peace settles down upon him as he quietly watches
the doings of the ancient tranquil city. Inside the hotel two waiters are polishing silverware and talking together in a cozy pleasant way. The younger waiter is awkward and violent in his handling of the silver and it makes a loud jingling noise “Ah!” says the older waiter. “On fait la musique.”³ (You are making music.) Webber’s mind is carried back fifteen years:

Suddenly he was a child, and it was noon, and he was waiting in his father’s house to hear the slam of the Iron Gate, the great body stride up the high porch steps, knowing his father had owed home again. ⁴

It is clear from many similar incidents that George Webber the man is trying to take refuge from the tribulations and frustrations of manhood in the mental world of the child:

That was a good time then. It is another way of seeking his mystical father, but in a sense it means the abandonment of the quest. He wants to go back home again and give up his manhood. But that he cannot do. And it is for the final volume to answer the question where he is to go if he can’t go back to the child. ⁵

He follows with attentive ear the various homely noises in the town square in France:
And presently there began the most lonely, lost and unforgettable of all sounds on earth the solid, liquid leather shuffle of footsteps going home one way, as men had done when they came home to lunch at noon some twenty years ago, in the green gold and summer of full June, before he had seen his father’s land, and when the kingdoms of this earth and the enchanted city still blazed there in the legendary magic of his boyhood vision.6

Wolfe’s artistic method was a combination of the realistic representation and romantic declaration; and it seems to have reflected accurately a contradictory or perhaps double-view of the nature of art. On one hand, he was committed to the detailed, exact accurate picturing of the actual world, committed to such as extent that he found it hard to represent anything that he had not personally experienced. On the other hand, his view of the nature and function of art was essentially that of the nineteenth century romantic poets and critics.

The men of Wolfe’s region were like Wolfe himself caught between the romantic view of their own past and the realistic fact of their present poverty. And over the years they have proved themselves capable of living with unresolved contradiction. Thomas Wolfe was marked almost from his birth by certain
unique paradoxes, which formed a peculiar aspect of his life and, therefore, an inevitable aspect of his autobiographic art.

Thomas Wolfe certainly stands in sharp contrast in many ways to the other writers. 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 poulroom loafer or that of migratory labour or the bored man of wealth and convention. Thus the author is aiming to include the whole of life, in its infinite variety of feeling and manifestation.

He is not viewing life as a detached spectator, who can size it up coolly, but as passionately involved himself, struggling desperately in its lacon serpent folds, blinded by its illusions, confused by its complexities, bewildered by its paradoxes and protean change, tortured by its cruelties and helplessly bound by its Venusberg enhancements. Thomas Wolfe as a writer can be compared with other writers, who appear to be guided more by his emotions than by his reason.

To begin with, it is all very largely autobiographical. In this late book, *The Web and the Rock*, reacting from the criticism that
he had too slavishly followed his own experience, he made some efforts to mould and disguise the crude substance of his own life. Perhaps no important American writer other than Whitman approached Wolfe in the extensive and direct use of himself, his emotions, his experiences, and his personal observations as the materials of his artistic expression yet the persona of the author and the person of real life are difficult to separate. Therefore, the facts of his life and the reality of his experiences in this book have tended to create a promethean legend or perhaps a Gulliver myth about the vastness of his experience, appetite, emotions, and responses.

It has seemed to be practically impossible for critics to write about Wolfe’s work without reference to the autobiographical character of his writing and almost equally difficult for the biographer to avoid using his fiction, as factual evidence. The efforts of biographical writers to steer a same course in this rocky sea have not often been marked with single success. Furthermore, Wolfe’s works seem to inspire the same intense response that his personality did, so that the scholars and biographers have tended to be impassioned.
Wolfe’s principal utterance on his view of himself as a writer is in *The Web and the Rock*, he wrote not in terms of narrative structure, but in terms of realizing the vast and varied materials of his experience. Mcelderry, Bruce Robert comments:

The central idea or purpose remained the same and the deepest search in life, it seemed to me, the thing that in one way or another was central to all living was man’s search to find a father, not merely the father of his youth, but the image of a strength and wisdom external to the need and superior to his hunger, to which the belief ands power of his own life could be united.7

The second and longer part of the novel *The Web and the Rock* narrates George Webber’s love affair with Esther Jack, the rejection of his first novel and his trip to Europe to escape from Esther. Twelve chapters develop The Magic Year, the meeting with Esther on shipboard and the first year of their idyllic life together. Returning from Europe, George becomes acquainted with a man who knows two ladies traveling first class. The four have dinner together, and in one evening George is captivated with Mrs. Jack. From New York, George immediately goes from South to Libya Hill for a two-week visit, but he thinks constantly of Mrs. Jack.
Returning to New York, he writes a long, pretentious letter hoping to continue the acquaintance but at the same time awkwardly asserting his independence. Mrs. Jack telephones him the next day, and invites him to see a show for which she has designed the sets. Some time later, when they meet to celebrate George’s twenty-fifth birthday at lunch, George drinks too much and quarrels outrageously with Esther. She overlooks this and telephones him the next day. He calls upon her and is impressed with the grandeur and the fine taste of her home. At length she finds a large, cheap apartment, which she and George can share:

This thing is ours, she announces. She sends around a drawing board so that she can do some of her work there. Daily she comes, cooks favorite dishes for George, listens to his despairs, and gives him encouragement about his writing. The woman had become a world for him. 

Especially as she could introduce him to the fascinating inner details of the city, society, and the theatre, two chapters put together episodes from her childhood:

Her actor-father introducing her to the man who designed Brooklyn Bridge; her meeting with Richard Brandell, the great Shakespearean actor; and the success of her sister Edith as a dress designer.
The passionate affection, which develops between George and Esther, has one ominous aspect:

Nothing was his own any more, not even the faintest, farthest memories of his childhood. She inhabited his life relentlessly to its remotest sources, haunting his memory like a witness to every proud and secret thing that had been his own.  

After this first magic year, another passes, and George is writing his novel “with the full intensity of creative fury.” Jealousies appear, and she suspects him of bringing other women to their place. When he replies that he is free:

You’re not free! You belong to me and I belong to you forever. You have belonged to me, he said. You have a husband and a daughter. Your duty is to your family, Sister Jack, he said, in an oily tone. Try to rectify the mistakes of your past life before it is too late. There is yet time if you will only repent sincerely. 

But George, despite his taunts, and his own jealousies, continues to admire the brilliant competence of Esther’s genius. Her capacities are effectively organized and incorrigibly disorganized. His admiration only intensifies his jealousy. He
loathes the theatrical crowd, he loathes her participation in society, he loathes in particular the lion-hunting admirers of literature he meets at her parties.

He eats her cooking with great relish, but increasingly he resents her control of his life. She tries to help market his novel, and introduces him to a famous critic, a Mr. Malone, whose condescension infuriates George. Consequently a hundred pages of *The Web and the Rock* are devoted to a series of bitter quarrels, accusations, taunts, partings, and frustrated reunions; and the repetition is tedious.

Thomas Wolfe due to frustrated in love with Aline Bernestine believed that people in love become so completely interested in each other that they cease to be interesting to other people. Their mutual absorption dissipates the sense of character. And in the last, skillful dialogue and plentiful living and talking makes life painful, at that time they fell a milestone between them. At the end of the school year, like Thomas Wolfe, George decides to end the affair by going to Europe. He receives Esther’s affectionate farewell letter on shipboard and tears it up.

George’s lonely wanderings lead him to the English Lakes, to Paris, to Munich. He longs to hear from Esther but is enraged by
her letters. In Paris he is annoyed with American tourists who say, “Never again! The good old U.S.A. is good enough for me!”

In Germany, however, the good food and the genial people are agreeable. He visits art galleries and struggles to improve his command of German. In October, his head injured, his nose broken. The fight itself is not specifically, explained. The last two chapters show Esther, lonely and disconsolate in New York, and George is surveying his face in a mirror and conducting a whimsical debate with the Body. As he thinks over his youth, the Body warns: “But you can’t go home again.”

The latter part of *The Web and the Rock* is more unified than the account of George’s youth given in the first three books. The rise and fall of the affair with Esther is the obvious explanation. The attachment is treated with a convincing blend of feeling and inelegance. There is every reason for George to be attracted to Esther, and a good deal of reason in her attraction to him. The failure to treat her husband is a conscious gap, but there is an implication that George has qualities which he lacks. The decline of the love affair into bitter quarrels is almost wholly emotional. In theory there are reasons as well-mutual jealousies, George’s resistance to her possessiveness, his intense
concentration on his writing, her own self-assurance—but these intelligible factors are so immersed in the tide of invective that the literary quality of this long sequence is impaired.

Aside from the affair with Esther, the latter part of the novel is made up of digressive and minor episodes. So little is said of George’s novel *Home To Our Mountains* that the satiric picture of the publishers Rawang and Wright seems extraneous. Even the visits to the theatre, the parties, the episode of Mr. Malone’s literary advice, important as they are in showing the basis of later quarrels, seem digressive because George tries so hard not to become involved in any positive way. George’s visit to the expense of theatre in Chapter 20, for example, becomes a satiric essay at the expense of theatre people in general. George is disgusted when he hears someone say, “The play is nothing, of course. But you really ought to see the sets.”

The birthday party becomes the occasion to describe at length a New York speak easy of the time and to give a history of the proprietor. The visit to Esther’s apartment includes a three-page essay on the difference between people “who have the quality of richness and joy” and those who do not. As Esther introduces George to “A New World,” she does it by panoramic typical
reports of her activities and acquaintances, rather than by episodes that have direct relevance. Chapter 26 and 27, the excursion into Esther’s childhood, are a dreamlike expedition into a past which, for all its charm is not made to focus sharply on the developing story of George and Esther. After the separation, George’s wanderings in Europe are aimless, and seem so it would matter little if the sequence of his itinerary were altered.

*The Web and the Rock* was naturally open to the charge that Wolfe was merely retelling the story of Eugene Gant. This is true in the most general sense. The differences in the Webber novel are many and important. Home life and school life are almost ignored in the later novel. George’s companions, Nebraska Crane and Negro Dick, suggest a wider horizon and a more solid external world than Eugene Gant encountered. There is no counterpart to the boyish faces prompted by Eugene’s early reading of romantic stories and his visits to the movies. George is treated more seriously, and there is less of the comic in his surroundings.

This change is carried over into George’s college years. George is not exposed to campus ridicule as a native and friendless boy. He immediately attracts the friendship of Jim Randolph, the football star, and he is an accepted member of
Jerry Asop’s literary salon until an interest in Dostoevski leads him to defy Jerry. Instead of going to Harvard and trying to become a playwright, as Eugene did, George goes to New York and settles down to writing his novel.

Though he becomes a college instructor, there is no mention of his students or colleagues. George’s life in New York with four other Southern boys has no parallel in Eugene’s experience. On the other hand, the first trip abroad, which filled the last third of *Of Time and the River*, is barely mentioned in *The Web and the Rock*. Hence the latter half of the later novel can be used to develop the love affair with Esther Jack.

Many of these differences were necessitated by the simple fact that Wolfe wanted to minimize the repetition of material already treated. Nevertheless, it is important that he did resourcefully confront his problem and that he did achieve a different book—a different emphasis on the basic story of the young man who aspires to become a writer. The person who has read the Gant books has certainly not thereby read *The Web and the Rock*.

A broad difference is that, for all his self-centred isolation, George is a much more thoughtful observer of the satire, is essentially good-natured—leaving aside the perhaps malicious
ridicule of Jerry Alsop. The pathos of Jim Randolph’s aimless maturity as an anticlimax to his athletic and military glory shows insight unspoiled by sentiment. George’s revulsion at the hypocrisy of theatrical and arthritic society reflects Wolfe’s own jealous disappointment in not selling his plays in the middle 1920’s, but there is something more than sour grapes. By the middle of 1930’s, when he was formulating *The Web and the Rock*, the native boy who had gone to Harvard in 1920 had come long way. He had a larger stock of worldly wisdom through which to view the experience he looked back upon as fictional material. There is, perhaps, some doubt at the end of *The Web and the Rock* whether George really does look “calmly and sanely forth upon the earth,” 21 but the mood induced by his injury is more convincing than the love at the end of *Of Time and the River*, when Eugene first catches sight of Esther.

In *The Web and the Rock*, he makes even more of the contrast of temperaments; and his mother’s family becomes the type of all that is dark and mad in human nature, while his father is made a symbol of that ideal world in which he takes refuge from the ruin and madness of the other. We are given pictures of slum life in Libya Hill the horrible death in life of slatternly pregnant
women, of sneering, bullying, murderous, obscene gangster boss from a certain section of the town which has been settled by poor white trash from the back country hills.

We have many tales of the uncles and aunts and grandparents on his mother’s side sunk in poverty, violence, superstition, pride and ignorance is the mirror of his life. Even as a boy he realizes that this is the same stock, and that he is of them by his mother’s blood.

But it is in *The Web and the Rock* that this perversity raises to a climax, above all in his relations with Esther Jack. He is proved unfaithful to her, and unreasonably jealous and suspicious. He makes her the symbol of a great conspiracy of evil forces against him; he suspects her of having sold him out to his enemies and of laughing at him behind his back. He abuses her as a Jew and heaps humiliations upon her, and all in the last analysis because he is in an agony of discouragement and wounded pride over his manuscript, which has not been snapped up by the publishers. He must lash out at someone, and he makes his nearest and dearest the victim of his personal grief. Thomas Wolfe comments:

That is one reason for his abusing her; and another is that, while she is the most precious thing he has, he is
too perverse to keep it. He wants a great and faithful love, and at the same time he wants to be free to make love to the entire world! 18

All this, as I see it, of the utmost importance to Wolfe’s autobiographical theme; for it is these personal flaws and discouragements that in his one case make impossible the finding of happiness entering the secret door reaching the mystic goal. The essential truthfulness of Wolfe’s account of this affair will be memorable but the account of Aline Bernstein’s is more impressive in The Journey Down (1938). Indeed, the chief difference between George’s and Esther’s side of the story so far as characterization is concerned is that Wolfe paints George much blacker than Esther.
NOTES AND REFERENCES


2 Marcel Proust,


4 Ibid., p. 231

5 Ibid., p. 239

6 Ibid., p. 250

7 Mcelderry, Bruce Robert, Thomas Wolfe, New Haven, Conn; College & University Press, 1964, p.73.


9 Ibid., p. 298.


11 Ibid., p. 449.
12 Ibid., p. 458.
13 Ibid., p. 468.
14 Ibid., p. 469.
15 Ibid., p. 470.
16 Ibid., p. 475.
17 Ibid., p. 476.