The value of a fictional work, according to both Henry James and D.H. Lawrence, becomes profoundly meaningful only in its relation to the ‘lived life’. James defines novel as “a personal, a direct impression of life that, to begin with, constitutes its value, which is greater or less according to the intensity of impression” (quoted in Selden, 1988: 503). The manner in which Thomas Clayton Wolfe (1900-1938), one of the important modern American novelists sees the relation between fiction and lived life comes very close to the understanding of James and Lawrence. To him, any creative endeavour is nothing but an intense encounter with life. Like art, the strange and bitter miracle of life existed for him as congeries of contradictions. He realized that only through contradictions, both life and art evolve, shape and progress. The meanings and workings of both become clearer only when their negations are brought forth. Sinclair Lewis, in his Nobel Prize acceptance speech in 1930, had described Wolfe as a gargantuan creature with great gusto for life. He was as hungry for experience as for food; he wanted, as he said, to explore life “with an
encyclopedic thoroughness” (Moser, 1967: 225). With this conviction, he lived through the variegated experiences of life, attempting to articulate those experiences in his works.

Thomas Wolfe is one of the great writers of the twentieth century. His opulent language and unique literary style have elevated his life to legendary status through his four autobiographical novels. His first novel, Look Homeward, Angel was published in 1929 and he burst upon the literary scene with sudden and spectacular force. His second novel, Of Time and the River, was published in 1935. This was followed by a collection of short stories, From Death to Morning, published that same year. An autobiographical essay on writing, The Story of a Novel, was published in 1936. These books, along with many short stories published in magazines, completes the works that appeared during his lifetime. There were three posthumous works – The Web and the Rock (1939), You Can’t Go Home Again (1940) and The Hills Beyond (1941) – that were gleaned from the huge manuscript Wolfe left behind. All of Wolfe’s manuscripts are at Harvard University. Wolfe scholars continue to use these
manuscripts to produce such works as the complete edition of *The Party at Jack's*, published in 1995.

Wolfe grew up in Asheville, North Carolina. During his youth, this was a middle class mountain resort town dazzled by real estate speculation. Wolfe's Mother, Julia E. Wolfe, was ahead of her time as a successful female real estate speculator. Wolfe felt her interest was a disease that interfered with her duties as a wife and mother. William Oliver Wolfe, his father, was a tombstone maker with a great vigour for living and a constant need to hurl himself against the prison bars of his dreary provincial life. While he provided well for his large family, he delighted in all the robust sensual aspects of life. He drank heavily and when in this state often verbally stonned at his family with great torrents of rhetoric and much quoting from Shakespeare. Wolfe portrays both of his parents with great spirit and good humoured satire.

Wolfe was the youngest of eight children, six of whom survived to adulthood. During his childhood the family member closest to him was his brother, Benjamin Wolfe. In *Look Homeward, Angel* Ben is portrayed a loner who hides his love for his youngest brother behind a mask of short
temperedness and sarcastic denial. It is perhaps through Ben’s feelings of bitter regret for his own lost opportunities that Thomas Wolfe acquired his drive to escape his provincial life so he could go out into the world to achieve his dream of being a writer. The profoundly eloquent description of Ben’s death in *Look Homeward, Angel* is emotionally gripping.

After age eleven Wolfe attended a private school in Asheville where he received personal attention and encouragement. Shortly before he was sixteen, Wolfe entered the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. At the university, he wrote for school magazines and newspapers, and became the editor of the Tar Heel, the college newspaper. His early ideas about a career leaned toward the theater, because of his work with the Carolina Playmakers under Professor Frederick Koch.

When Wolfe graduated, at age twenty, he went to Harvard to study playwriting further under Professor George Pierce Baker in his renowned 47 Workshop. He stayed at Harvard for three years. He completed his Master of Arts Degree in Literature in two years, but he remained an extra year to gain more experience in the 47 Workshop.
Wolfe later satirized the pretentiousness of Harvard life, and the 47 Workshop in particular, in *Of Time and the River.*

Though Wolfe had a good eye for scene, character, and drama his overall writing style and personal temperament were not well suited to the theater. Unable to get his plays produced, Wolfe took a job as an English instructor at New York University in 1924. He taught off and on at the Washington Square campus from 1924 until 1930.

When his first course of teaching was finished, he took his savings and money his mother was willing to give him and sailed for Europe, where he continued his writing. On his return voyage home in August 1925 he met Aline Bernstein, a successful set and costume designer in the New York Theater, and they began a passionate and turbulent love affair. Though they had much in common in artistic temperament, their lives were really a contrast of opposites. She was almost twenty years older than Wolfe, married, and the mother of two grown children. She had a Jewish heritage and had been born and raised in New York City. Her husband was a successful New York businessman who gave her a secure life of wealth and privilege. However, far from being a socialite, Mrs. Bernstein lived
her life as an artist and a worker. In spite of their differences and the turbulent problems of their love affair, Wolfe showed his admiration for the beautiful qualities of her character that attracted him to her, when he portrays her as the Esther Jack of his posthumous novels. Aline Bernstein recounts their love affair in *Three Blue Suits* and *The Journey Down*.

In June of 1926, while on vacation in England with Mrs. Bernstein, Wolfe began to write what would become *Look Homeward, Angel*. With the aid of Mrs. Bernstein, he was able to continue his writing in New York. It was this artistic, emotional, and financial support Wolfe wanted to recognize when he dedicated the book to her upon its publication by Scribners, in October of 1929.

However, their affair had reached a breaking point. Wolfe felt trapped both by Mrs. Bernstein’s love for him and his own emotional response to the many problems of their affair. In March of 1930 Wolfe was awarded a Guggenheim fellowship that allowed him to travel to Europe for almost a year. It provided the opportunity to finally end his relationship with Mrs. Bernstein. When he returned to New York in
February 1931 he rented an apartment in Brooklyn. In these new surroundings he continued to wrestle with his second book.

Wolfe found he could replace the emotional support he had lost when he left Mrs. Bernstein with his editor, the famous Maxwell Perkins. He also edited such authors as F. Scott Fitzgerald and Ernest Hemingway. Perkins became very close to Wolfe, being the father of five daughters, Wolfe became the son he never had. Though there has been much debate about Perkins' influence over the construction of *Of Time and the River*, there can be no doubt of his great belief in Wolfe's talent and ability. It was, perhaps, his parental feeling toward Wolfe and their close emotional bond that eventually caused even Wolfe to feel he was too dependent on Perkins.

In 1937, Wolfe broke with Scribners and signed a contract with Harpers. The young Edward Aswell, a great Wolfe admirer, became his editor. While on a trip out West, Wolfe came down with pneumonia. Doctors were perplexed by unusual complications that developed, so in September of 1938 Wolfe was admitted to Johns Hopkins Hospital in Baltimore, Maryland. Dr. Walter Dandy, the foremost brain surgeon in the
country at the time, believed Wolfe had tuberculosis of the brain. On September 12 he operated, in a last ditch effort to save Wolfe’s life. He found the entire right side of Wolfe’s brain was covered with tubercles. There was nothing that could be done. On September 15, 1938 never having regained consciousness, Thomas Wolfe died. He was buried in Riverside Cemetery, Asheville, North Carolina. Wolfe’s frantic rush to do all, see all, and write it all down had proved tragically correct.

Though his life was short, his literary achievements were, indeed, large. His words are torrential explosions of adjectives and adverbs, but through the magic of his words, he breathed life into his vision of the world around him. The lyrical quality of his writing, his robust rhetoric, his vast vocabulary, and his expansive eloquence are found nowhere else in American literature. He communicates his experiences through the shapes, sounds, colours, odours and textures of life, and he proclaims his impressions of the world with total mastery. In addition to the works stated earlier, Wolfe also wrote fifty-eight short stories, but only a few were published during his lifetime. A collection of all his short stories appeared in 1987 as The Complete Short Stories of Thomas Wolfe. Among other

As a creative writer, Wolfe is fascinating, as attested by the superlative comments others have made on his work and for his own claims on art and life. It appears that ambivalence at the level of ‘lived life’ and artistic endeavour has been the compelling force when we attempt to understand Wolfe the man and Wolfe the artist. Ambivalence has presided without restraint over his creative articulations. There is an unrequited exuberance in his work, manifested in an uncontrolled, fragmented style. His narratives also underline the rhetorical ambivalence. Any attempt to understand Wolfe and his works calls for examining the concept of ambivalence the way it manifests in the rhetorical articulations. Keeping in view the radical nature of his artistic vision, the present study is an attempt to explore the understanding of rhetorical ambivalence in Wolfe’s works, while examining the broader vision of “Life as Art”.

Ambivalence is the very essence of all literary art. Literature embodies the psychological assumptions of its makers thereby revealing the nature of ambivalence that serves as the origin of their creativity.
Ambivalence is the most poignant and excruciating fundamental feature of human nature. Ambivalence of thought and emotions on the part of an artist in most occasions bear upon his works. *The Encyclopedia of Psychology* (1972: 47-48) defines ambivalence as “the existence of two (possibly contradictory) values, goals or directions ... The simultaneous occurrence of two antagonistic emotions”. It seems that ambivalence has been Thomas Wolfe’s second self, a fact that his works reveal in abundance. Wolfe is a dreamer as well as a realist. The enormity of his uncontrolled creative energy makes him a different writer, lost in contradictions, projecting paradoxical worlds without being able to harmonize them. It might be that that is the stuff of real creativity where the real becomes unreal, fantasy presides over reality and the artistic self becomes multiple selves. In the sense, Wolfe has produced an aesthetics of radical situatedness. This radical situatedness at one level affirms and at another level negates subjectivity.

Traditionally, “Rhetoric” is viewed as a stylistic device, a method of persuasion, starting from Aristotle. In contemporary theoretical perspective, Rhetoric in its metaphorical and metonymic possibility in fact
continues to be central to our understanding of language creating its own reality. Some sense of ambiguity is always involved in the explication of rhetoric as an activity (what people say and do with language) and ways of describing and interpreting that activity.

Walter Pater, in his famous essay on ‘style’, implies that man is the marker of his style. In a general sense, ‘rhetoric’ can be described as the study of language in its practical uses, focusing on the effects of language, especially as an act of persuasion, and on the means by which one can achieve these effects in writing. From Aristotle to Post-structuralism, ‘rhetoric’ as a medium of expression has undergone radical changes in meaning and function. In his work *Rhetoric*, Aristotle defined rhetorical discourse as the act of “discovering all the available means of persuasion in any given case” and focused his discussion on the means and devices that an orator uses in order to achieve the intellectual and emotional effects on an audience persuading them to accede to his point of view. Most of the later rhetoricians of classical era concurred in the view that rhetoric concerns the principles of that type of discourse whose chief aim is to persuade an audience to think or act in a particular way.
The romantics, on the other hand, with their natural contempt for anything prescriptive, argue that the orator or his literary counterpart lack sincerity for their discourse is tutored by prescriptions and norms. The romantic poets stake claim to originality abandoning all rhetorical conventions, while speaking out from the heart. Besides the epistemological questions involved in analyzing rhetoric, one must give attention to 'desire' and style. 'Desire' has a deeper implication in creative endeavour and is directly related to the artist's psychic world. Very often an artist attempts to achieve something he possibly cannot because of a tangible incompatibility between his psychic make up or 'desire' and his ability to express that desire in language. The lives of talented men and women abound in episodes of 'filling up' and 'breaking through again'. This disequilibrium has been assumed to be intrinsic to genius. A successful artist is one who manages to camouflage his personal ambivalence in the vigour of stylistic flourish. The communication of one's self can become more inhibited where there is more to communicate; a greater degree of self-revealing is the artist's business in life and art whether or not he writes in the manner of Joyce or Dickens.
In his magisterial observation, Ezra Pound maintains that ‘good writing’ should be ‘perfectly controlled’ in which the writer says “just what he means” (1968: 5-6). Eliot profoundly echoes Pound when he discovers lack of integration between the theme and style in Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*, stating that the dramatist lacks *objective correlative*. Both Eliot and Pound favour classical order and precision in style. They are critical of and opposed to what Pound calls the “blurry” and “messy” style of the romantics. As Susan Langer puts it: “The primary function of any creative writing is to objectify feeling” (Selden, 1988). So, it all depends on the choice of language that carries the weight of the feeling. If language is used to express and objectify feeling, it also reveals the person’s character whose feelings it expresses or gives shape to. In this sense, the saying that *style is the man* becomes very significant. It points at both the nature of the artist, his psychic make up, and his ability to handle language.

Twentieth century criticism has often abandoned this Romantic faith hoping for a possibility of authentic and original utterance. If language is not only expression but articulated expression, as Ogden and Richards claimed long ago, then links from the observable to the conceptual must be
forged in social transaction, in that it is argued that truth and knowledge are synthetically created – not demonstrated or presented as necessarily causal. The method of verification upon which knowledge rests is derived from one’s structuring of reality. Such a position does not diminish the classical notion of rhetoric as persuasion but reveals a deeper structuring of persuasion – an inter subjective choice and construction of how one comes to acquire knowledge and views the world. To create one’s rhetorical structure of reality is to make use of a structure to establish a solidarity between accepted judgements and other views which one wishes to promote. One’s inter-subjective structuring of the world must be argued rhetorically, thereby allowing reconstruction of the hierarchy of values, rules and mode of rationality. Rhetoric is thus revealed by an act that is sited at a trajectory where intentional discourse provides a theoretical framework for the selection and structuring of ‘reasons’ to evoke and justify acts and attitudes.

Postmodern critical theory poses a serious challenge to this assumption. The postmodern theory takes note of the fact that any method of articulation is in itself rhetorical for methods themselves are rhetorically
invented entities. Nietzsche’s belief that language is essentially figurative and not referential or expressive was taken up by the key Poststructuralist theorists notably Jaques Derrida, Michel Foucault, Hayden White and Paul de Man. There is no original unrhetorical language, for discourse is always shaped by desire which in turn is communicated in tropes and figures. Paul de Man develops this argument about rhetoric to its fullest extent. He takes the view that figure of speech (tropes) pervade language exerting a force which destabilizes logic and meaning.

Wolfe’s intended structures of discourse is rhetorically articulated taking into account the complex human relationship. One may like to see in his stories and fictional works the projection of himself and his alienated psyche in friction with other people. Works concerning a broader awareness of himself as a member of a larger community mostly deal with social problems. This awareness is further enlarged, when he saw himself as an American writer. The image of the nation was very strong in his consciousness. He struggled to come out of the label that he is only a Southern writer so as to project himself as a national writer of the likes of Whitman, Frost and Lewis, one who writes for and speaks to the American
people. However, it would be limiting to suggest that Wolfe aspired only to be an American writer. His creative impulse was indeed universal.

One of Wolfe’s worlds was the very literal, immediate world of the 1920’s and 1930’s, a world presented in his fiction through objects, actions, persons and events apparently so directly transcribed from life that their originals greeted them with angry recognition. This world is a representation of the social context, described with great accuracy and directness. On the one hand, there was the world of his inner self, a world of consciousness, of inspiration, of impressions, of emotions, of nostalgic memories, brooded over by a sense of the inexorable passage of ‘dark time’, on the other, he articulates his inner world in ways that proved to be powerfully effective and affective. These two worlds are perpetually in conflict: the self in its insulated ‘dream of time’, lonely and alienated, while recognizing the fact that it is surrounded by others, not able to identify the door by which to enter the social context that constituted its milieu. In his early works, Wolfe allowed these two worlds to co-exist and contrast. But in some of his later writings, he attempted a reconciliation of both worlds through a democratic dream. Thus, the world of Thomas
Wolfe is actually three worlds: self, society and nation. And the problem of his art was his incapacity to integrate the three into a unity. Even if the desire for unity and synthesis was a growing awareness, a careful study of his works reveals that a sense of ambivalence has been evident in most of his works. The emergent creative self of Wolfe has all the characteristics of a Romantic artist who perceived his own self as a product of the available materials (experiences) and moved with it, never remaining static at a fixed point of time. He thus situates his self in an immanent teleology where mind comes to itself through loss of itself, being in this world. The sense of loss and recovery of the self has been placed in the perspective of time.

There were three time elements inherent in Wolfe's works. The most obvious one was the element of actual present time that represented characters and events manifesting the present and moving forward into an immediate future. The second time element was the past time; one which represented the characters as acting and as being acted upon by all the accumulated impact of one's experience, informing the collective unconscious that conditions experience. In addition to these two time
elements, there was a third one, which was conceived as being time immutable, the time of rivers, mountains, oceans, and the earth, a kind of eternal and unchanging universe of time against which was projected the transience of man’s life, the bitter briefness of his day.

A direct extension of the inevitable flow of time is death. Death is another recurrent theme in Wolfe’s works. Death seems always to hover over the mutable world. In his childhood, Wolfe experienced the death of a brother that moved him deeply. In “No Door”, he recorded his feelings after his father’s death:

My father was dead, and now it seemed to me that I had never found him. He was dead, and yet I sought him everywhere, and could not believe that he was dead, and was sure that I would find him ... October has come again ... I have come home again and found my father dead ... and there was time ... time ... time ... where shall I go now? What shall I do? October has come again, but there has gone some richness from the life we knew, and we are lost. (1987: 79-80)

Death has always troubled him deeply even when it did not affect him directly. The lynching of a Negro by a mob; an incident of suicide in a Brooklyn street; a death in the Civil War; a death through a street accident; the death of a beggar from a fall; an accidental death of a high-rise construction worker; a peaceful death where a man’s heart just stops
beating as he sits on a bench in a subway station; the death of a Japanese sculptor; the resigned death of a cheated husband in a train; the reported death of an young prostitute, whose grave is to be decorated with the statue of an angel; these are all death-related incidents found in the teeming pages of Wolfe which made him so much emotionally involved that they became subjects of his work.

Although a distinguishable and distinct theme in Wolfe’s writing, death cannot be isolated from the totality of psychic experience that he wished to present. Death is connected to the passage of time, it is associated with the sense of isolation and alienation. Death as a theme is often used to expose the callousness and hypocrisy of city dwellers (“Death the Proud Brother”). Sometimes it reflects mankind’s potentiality for barbarity (“The Child by Tiger”). Death often occurs as a feeling of the dark mystery of the world, coming quietly, gently, in the guise of a messiah, allowing respite and reprieve, releasing man from his suffering. In Wolfe’s words: “Proud Death, wherever we have seen your face, you came with mercy, love and pity, and brought to all of us your compassionate sentences of relief and release” (1987: 64).
One of Wolfe’s central themes is alienation. To be an American is to be lonely and isolated and restless, moving beneath vast skies. The barriers that are erected around the individual effectively shut him off from all communication. One of Wolfe’s most successful short stories is “No Door” (quoted above) where the characters grow out from home and find that they cannot go back home again. This idea is further developed in his Look Homeward, Angel. There was an obsessive search for communication and communion in Wolfe’s works. He said: “Naked and alone we came into exile. In her dark womb we did not know our mother’s face: from the prison of her flesh have we come into the unspeakable and incommunicable prison of the earth” (Prologue to Look Homeward, Angel, 1929). For Wolfe, all human experience seeks “the great forgotten language, the lost lane-end into heaven” (Holman, 1975: 26). Out of the transcendental glory of childhood, we are gradually hemmed in by the growing prison-house of the world, the lustre and glory of life are tarnished, and we are forced away from communion.

It was inevitable that the centrality of loneliness and separateness, or alienation, in Wolfe’s life and in his writing, were coupled with social
problems. Human suffering fostered in him a sense of the evil in the world and had given a tragic quality to his writing. His very method of placing opposites side by side led him to a fragmentary cosmic view. The understanding of the American South as laid up in defeat and suffering, that bore the scars of an unthinkable inevitability coloured Wolfe’s world with an existential veneer. He discovered himself in it; his creative Romantic impulse very often gave in to existential brooding. As Jaspars maintains: “We find existence as the unreflecting experience of our life in the world. It is immediate and unquestioning, the reality which everything must enter so as to be real for us ...” (John Macquarrie, 1986: 68). This attitude is part of the heritage of all Southerners, even in the liberal area of the South of America where Wolfe grew up, as C. Vann Woodward observed: “Nothing about its history is conducive to the theory that the South was the darling of divine Providence” (Holman, 1975: 34).

Alienation was at the core of Wolfe’s personal world. He was haunted and anguished by it. This gave him a sense of passage of time and made him feel defeated. His short and restless life and the immensity of his feelings did not move in one desired direction. Obviously, the finer
realizations of art and life, instead of falling into order, were scattered and dispersed. This had created the disjuncture between his critical statements and his creative practice. *The Story of a Novel* (1936) is an important theoretical work in which Wolfe delineates the process of the making of a novelist. However, this work remains an account of a struggling artist caught up his own ambivalence. As his works have been intensely autobiographical, it may be said that the sense of ambivalence, which has been central to his genius and which moulded his psyche, has been very much a part of his growing up which he was never able to transcend. His attachment to his mother, his adoration for, yet hatred towards his father, his mother’s rejection of his father, and the series of broken relationships he went through with other men and women, are psychologically significant in the disruptive and fragmentary totality of his life. Thus, any meaningful study of Thomas Wolfe cannot overlook the psychological dimension of his works.

In Wolfe’s work, his vision of time is always associated with the sense of being alienated, or of being isolated. In *Of Time and the River*, he
tries to enumerate concrete memories which, taken together, make up for the remembered past of America:

All of us are driven on forever and we have no home. Therefore, it is not the slow, the punctual sanded drip of the unnumbered days that we remember best, the ash of time; nor is it the huge monotone of the lost years, the unsweltering schedules of the lost life and the well-known faces that we remember best. It is a face seen once and lost forever in a crowd, an eye that looked, a face that smiled and vanished on a passing train. (1935: 155)

He describes the way in which the past almost forcibly enters the present for him: “always when that lost world would come back, it came at once, like a sword thrust through the entrails, in all its panoply of past time, living, whole, and magic as it had always been” (in Holman, 1975: 29). Wolfe describes this emotion of pain very effectively from which comes the sudden hunger for a lost and almost forgotten aspect of life. He succeeds in giving us this sense of the onward rush of time and the death of the morning’s golden joy, an awareness of the price that is paid before the years of philosophic calm can arrive. Since this feeling is very much a part of youth, its pain, and inarticulate melancholy, Wolfe speaks with sardonic authority to the young and to the old chiefly through their memories of having been very young. Realizing that there is no escape
from time, Wolfe muses in *The Web and the Rock*: “Time is a fable and a
mystery ... it broods over all the images of earth. Time is collected in great
clocks and hung in towers ... and each man has his own, a different time.”
(1939: 626).

While most of his distinguished contemporaries like Faulkner,
Fitzgerald, Lewis and others have praised him, the academic critics were
critical of his achievements. These opinions proved that the ambivalence
in his works has allowed such extreme responses. Holman, however, has
offered an objective critique of his genius.

His (Wolfe’s), like almost everything about life and his art,
had two elements that were in opposition and a third that
tended to reconcile the opposites. (1962: 1)

Whether Wolfe is able to reconcile the opposite worlds into a
synthesis or into an integrated vision is debatable. But the pulls of opposite
poles are too pronounced in his works. Like Whitman, Wolfe attempts to
make his self a cosmic one to devour everything. In most cases, it has
remained only an attempt not being successful in synergic practice. The
disjuncture between the intended objective and the actual realization of it
apparently points at the ambivalence at different levels of Wolfe’s creative
endeavour. This thesis can be supported by Wolfe’s own statement in *The Story of a Novel*:

> It may be objected, it has been objected already by certain critics, that ... I have ... an almost insane hunger to devour the entire body of human experience to attempt to include more, experience more, than the measure of one life can hold ... (1936: 46)

The word has for Wolfe unique, almost divine powers and it fascinated him for its enchanted rhythms and cadences. Language was the magic key he sought to unlock the mysteries of life. To discipline the intemperate excesses and translate the ravenous experiences into art have been a struggle between the man of feeling and the man of reason. And Wolfe could not make up his mind. He could not make a choice. He was torn by ambivalence.

Rhetorical ambivalence in the works of Thomas Wolfe is self-evident. It is a reflection of his worldview which is all-inclusive for he wanted to project a totality of experience, a consciousness and identity of America. But the methods he adopted of juxtaposing opposites, are very much rooted in the projection of a paradoxical, fragmentary self-awareness. His attempt closely resembles what Virginia Woolf advocated:
The novel should not imitate objective life by means of a plot, but should present the "luminous halo" or "semi transparent envelope" of consciousness, the unsequential and perhaps irrational form in which life is really experienced.

(Quoted in Ellman & Fiedelson, Jr. ed., 1965: 12-13)

Wolfe's style is an example of the struggle to discipline the intemperate excesses. He is at the same time intensely lyrical and objectively realistic. As style represents the man, Wolfe's style also reflects his own ambivalent self. The stylistic inconsistency reveals the fact that contrary impulses are at work simultaneously. His rhetorical employment not only creates an ambivalent disjuncture between thought and feeling, but also between lyrical and prosaic description in the same piece of writing.

It has also been leveled against Wolfe that there is no sense of proportion in his writing, that the sight of a rusty iron railing evokes as much emotion in him as the death of his father, an absurd and even monstrous lack of discrimination. But if such is the reaction, why not acknowledge it? And from the standpoint of an artist, why not use it? Many respected critics, Yvor Winters among them, seem to believe that there exists a kind of limiting factor that says that one event, one subject,
one involvement must be superior in importance to another, that certain emotions are legitimately the result of certain events and that there is some kind of inflexible criterion that determines this, some standard that we can discover and use. Winters assumes that there is or should be a definite proportion between what is observed and experienced and the emotional reaction it invokes, a kind of law, a totalitarian censor.

It should be obvious that if a limit were to be applied to exuberant spontaneity and inclusiveness it would clamp a mechanical dead hand on true individual responses to real emotions and personal truths. From this it follows that all creativity which pretends to depend on authenticity of reaction, actually lives by the ambivalence of our understanding/misunderstanding.

Much of the criticism of Wolfe’s work has centred around his seemingly uncontrolled and formless exuberance. It has become almost a critical truism that he possessed great talent but little control over language with limited awareness of the demands of the plot. There is a sensuous recall that is nearly total having almost a shocking unwillingness to subject his material to critical elision. Although rhetorical ambivalence as a
proposition is, like life, a bright book of contradictions, it speaks to us about the very nature of Wolfe’s art, the fact remains that there had been a persistent effort to move beyond, an aspiration reaching out to the infinity.

This thesis titled Life as Art: A Study of Rhetorical Ambivalence in Thomas C. Wolfe’s Fiction is divided into the following chapters:

In the very first chapter, the ‘Introduction’, the conceptual framework of the study is introduced with a short biographical history of Wolfe. The second chapter – ‘Life as Art: The Wolfean Ego on Trial’ takes into account Wolfe’s own statements on life and art, contextualizing his vision in the aestheticist perspective. The following chapter – ‘The Putter-Inner: Time and Existential Alienation’ examines the modernist positions vis-à-vis Wolfe’s own views. Both time and alienation are important foundational concepts of modernism. Wolfe’s responses to these concepts are very important for relocating him in the proper perspective. The fourth chapter – ‘The Democratic Dream: Self, Society and Nation’ sees the constant displacement of the subject in a process of negotiation. Negotiation takes place through the subject’s awareness of self, society and nation. The fifth chapter ‘Rhetoric of Ambivalence’ explores
ambivalence as the very foundation of creative activity. As there cannot be any complete statement regarding either ambivalence or rhetoric, the study has attempted to examine the issue from different perspectives. Thus in the conclusion it is asserted that Wolfe is both a romantic and a classicist in his sensibility and creative endeavour. The pre-modern, modern and post-modern symptoms are very much present in his work. He, therefore, could be called a proto-postmodernist, having created possibilities of plural reading of his works.

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