

ANALYSIS

Look Homeward, Angel (1929)



Thomas Wolfe

(1900-1938)

“He had been so true to the customary life of his native Asheville (called Altamont in the novel) that the town angrily recognized itself; and he had drawn the Gant and Pentland families of the novel from actual Wolfes and Westalls. *Look Homeward, Angel* is a family chronicle, ranging wide enough to include all the kinsmen and working close enough to show each of them in individual detail. There was a difference between Wolfe and any of the recent novelists who had studied American families in fiction. Instead of writing dryly or cynically, as if to reduce families to the bores and pests it was fashionable to consider them, Wolfe wrote with magnificence. No matter how unpleasant some of the Gants might be, or how appalling, they were not dull. Wolfe in reproducing or creating has not once looked at them with cold disinterested eyes, but with the clannish loyalty in which particular or temporary hatreds cannot bar out a general love. He enjoyed the living reality of the Gants, even if he could not approve their characters.

The avarice of Eliza Pentland the mother (Wolfe’s own mother was Julia Elizabeth Westall) seems a credible obsession. The roaring violence of Oliver Gant the father (Wolfe’s own father was named William Oliver) is gorgeous rather than monstrous. The older Gant is central to *Look Homeward, Angel* as to the later novels....Wolfe was searching for the truth about the physical father of Eugene Gant—or of Thomas Wolfe. The story of Eugene, which Wolfe had set out to tell, must be traced back of him to the father in whom his stormy nature had begun. As to Eugene, he belonged to a type often celebrated in contemporary novels: the talented youth trying to rise from more or less commonplace circumstances. But Eugene transcends the restless type by being its most superb example in his time: perhaps mad but certainly magnificent.”

Carl Van Doren
The American Novel 1789-1939, 23rd edition
(1921; Macmillan 1940-68) 344-45

“Eugene Gant grows up in Altamont, Catawba (Asheville, N.C.), the youngest of six children of Oliver Gant, stonecutter and amateur orator, whose demonic passions both fascinate and terrify Eugene, and whose love of craftsmanship and rhetoric dominate the boy’s character. Eliza, Oliver’s crafty, miserly wife, has frequent quarrels with her husband, and leaves him, while Eugene is yet a child, to operate a

boardinghouse. The other children include Steve, lazy, selfish, and corrupt; Daisy, shy and retiring; Helen, her father's favorite, 'strung on the same wires'; Ben, quiet and intelligent, who becomes a newspaperman, and whose death is Eugene's most poignant loss; and Luke, exuberant and lovable. Eugene, the 'baby' of the family, has a relatively solitary youth, delivering newspapers in the black quarter and becoming acquainted with the town's 'characters.' He reads and memorizes English classics, attending a private school where he receives a limited but more balanced education. At 16 he enters the state university, where he continues to feel lonely and 'different,' but by the time of his graduation makes important personal adjustments to the world, editing the literary magazine, having his first sexual encounters and youthful love affairs, and finally breaking with his family to make what he conceives to be a pilgrimage in search."

James D. Hart
The Oxford Companion to American Literature, 5th edition
(Oxford 1941-83) 444

"*Look Homeward, Angel* (1929) is Wolfe's most famous book and his most typical one; both his merits and his failings are here seen in their sharpest form. The novel is entirely autobiographical: Eugene Gant, the hero, is Wolfe himself, his parents are converted to W. O. and Eliza Gant, his brother Ben remains Ben, Asheville becomes Altamont, and the University of North Carolina (sometimes called Chapel Hill) becomes the State University at Pulpit Hill. Eugene is depicted, however, as a member of a large family: there are two sisters, Daisy and Helen, and three brothers, the dissolute Steve, Luke, and the quiet and bitter Ben. Eugene's early childhood is relatively happy, but his later years are marred by continual family strife.

The moody and unstable father leaves the household intermittently and finally abandons his family for good; Eliza, driven by an obsession for property and security, opens a boarding house. At the age of fifteen Eugene goes off to the University, where he is introduced to the world of ideas and begins to recognize his vocation for the first time. His brother Ben dies; the scene of his death from pneumonia, surrounded by the wrangling of the family and the self-pitying maundering of the father, is the height of the novel and a masterpiece of affective narration. After the death of Ben, Eugene, alienated from his saddened mother, realizes he must break with his family and plunge out into the world on his own."

Donald Heiney
Recent American Literature 4
(Barron's Educational Series 1958) 171

"Many critics believe that this first novel by Thomas Wolfe remains his best. It is autobiography in a thin disguise; Eugene Gant, in appearance, early environment, parentage, domestic surroundings, education, and so on, is Tom Wolfe. Always a voluble writer, Wolfe produced a veritable deluge in this first effort, and at least a little credit for the book's success must be assigned to Maxwell Perkins of Charles Scribner's Sons, who edited the manuscript. The chief credit belongs to Wolfe, however, who made his book a powerful comedy—sometimes affectionate, sometimes satirical—of the life of a sensitive youth coming of age in North Carolina and later in the North."

Max J. Herzberg & staff
The Reader's Encyclopedia of American Literature
(Crowell 1962)

"Although the hand of death is ever upon him, [Oliver Gant] remains a fount of energy: he is the great provider, buying whole hogs from the butcher, and a marvelous gardener: 'The earth was spermy for him like a big woman.' Gant builds roaring fires; his neighbors can tell he is at home by the thick column of smoke from the chimney. He is the source of sexual energy: twice-married father of eight, old rooster frequenting Elizabeth's brothel, pursuer of colored cooks and middle-aged widows, he is held in high esteem even by the Temperance Ladies of the First Baptist Church. To his children he is simply man as hero: 'swinging back and forth in a stout rocker, [he spits] clean and powerful spurts of tobacco-juice over his son's head into the hissing fire.'

Eliza is her husband's antithesis. He disdains ownership, spends lavishly, and talks rapidly. She, on the other hand, saves bits of string; has a 'powerful germinal instinct for property'...[and likes] 'to take her time' [and come] 'to the point after interminable divagations down all the lane-ends of memory and

overtone, feasting upon the golden pageant of all she had ever said, done, felt, thought, seen or replied, with egocentric delight.' Her memory moves over the ocean bed of events like a great octopus. To Gant, and at times to all the rest of the family, she seems to symbolize the immutable. Time and inert matter that will inevitably frustrate man's romantic quest. Yet she, too, is emphatically human as she stands perpetually over the spitting grease, her nose 'stove-red,' her hands chapped with hard work and covered with glycerin, her body 'clothed in a tattered old sweater and indefinable under-lappings.'

Wolfe particularly establishes her humanity in his account of the death of Ben, surely the best prose that he ever wrote. Here is language so accurate that it makes the reader see poor Ben in his last moments, language full of feeling yet seldom sentimental....Wolfe brings the whole family together for the death: Helen contradicting herself, vibrating between rage at Eliza's ineptitude in the emergency and pity because Ben has rejected his mother; senile Gant, weeping in his rocker at the foot of Ben's bed, and employing his old rhetoric not to eulogize his son but to pity himself: 'O Jesus! I can't bear it!...' Helen actually shaking him in fury right in the death chamber... Even when Ben is apparently rigid in death, he asserts his vitality... But this is not all.

Daringly, Wolfe follows the tragic account of Ben's death with a chapter full of eating and of comedy which ends in the funeral parlor of 'Horse' Hines, beside Ben's embalmed corpse. Overcome with pride, Hines explains his artistry, how he has tried to do Ben justice. When Luke finds Ben a trifle pale, Hines whips out a rouge-stick and sketches a 'ghastly rose-hued mockery of life and health' upon the dead grey cheeks.... He managed to pack a very great deal of this 'human life-feeling' into *Look Homeward, Angel*. For this reason and despite countless obvious faults, the novel endures, and Wolfe appears to have conquered his old enemy Time, after all."

Thomas C. Moser
"Thomas Wolfe: *Look Homeward, Angel*"
The American Novel (Basic Books 1965) 216-18
ed. Wallace Stegner

"On its surface it appears to be merely a chronological recapitulation of the experiences of a thinly disguised autobiographical protagonist and the author's attempt to describe the intense and lyric emotion with which his hero recalls these experiences. It begins before the birth of its protagonist, Eugene Gant, continues through his graduation from college, and concludes with his realization that he must find within himself the meaning of his life and his world.... Thus *Look Homeward, Angel* is an apprenticeship novel, recounting the growth of a sensitive boy into maturity, his apprenticeship to the art of living, and how he resolves the problems which haunt the mind of every boy.

But this simplicity of structure is deceptive. The impact the novel has made upon its young readers, of being a record of direct, intense experience, has obscured from many the complexity, the subtlety, and the sophistication with which Wolfe worked to give Eugene's experiences a different and a deeper meaning than the ostensibly simple pattern of his life would indicate. In the book is a complex interplay of Platonism and naturalism, of man caught in a scientifically deterministic world while some segment of himself grasps at meanings which transcend that world and exist in some absolute order. This philosophical interplay gives the book a tone and an intellectual rhythm that belie its seeming simplicity, and to this complexity Wolfe added also an elaborate play of motif based upon certain recurrent images announced in its prologue."

C. Hugh Holman
Introduction
Of Time and the River: Young Faustus and Telemachus
(Scribner's 1965) xii

Michael Hollister (2015)

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