

Look Homeward, Angel
by
Thomas Wolfe

**StoryLines Southeast
Discussion Guide No. 5**

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About the author

Thomas Wolfe attended the University of North Carolina and Harvard University. He died of tuberculosis in 1938 and is buried in his hometown of Asheville, North Carolina.

Discussion questions

Wolfe writes, “. . . Eugene’s brooding spirit was nettled in the complexity of truth and seeming.” What does this mean? How does it characterize many of Eugene’s difficulties?

At the close of *Look Homeward, Angel*, are you left with a feeling of optimism or pessimism? Are we forever strangers in a strange land, separated from one another, unequipped with the language to open ourselves to others or have them open to us? Is life a “groping accident”? How can wonder and glory arise from pain?

Additional readings

Thomas Wolfe. *Of Time and the River*, 1935.
Thomas Wolfe. *The Web and the Rock*, 1939.
Thomas Wolfe. *You Can’t Go Home Again*, 1940.

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In the brief but richly-lived 37 years of his life, Thomas Wolfe wrote four sprawling novels: *Look Homeward, Angel*; *Of Time and the River*; *The Web and the Rock*; and *You Can't Go Home Again*. Together these novels tell one story, the story of Wolfe's life from childhood through early adulthood, but they should not be mistaken as purely autobiographical. They are instead, the mixing of fact with Wolfe's insistent, potent—and very poetic—imagination.

Thomas Wolfe is important in American literary history for his lyrical prose style and his unabashed youthful enthusiasm, a zest for life so intense it transforms ordinary experience into an almost sacred quest for noble and romantic ideals. At the heart of his novels is an age-old theme, says his editor Maxwell Perkins, “. . . the theme that has run through so many great books, such as *The Pickwick Papers* and *Don Quixote*, where a man, young or old, goes hopefully out into the world slap into the face of outrageous reality.”

In *Look Homeward, Angel*, the facts of Wolfe's biography are only thinly disguised. The setting is a small town, “Altamont,” nestled in the Blue Ridge Mountains of North Carolina, unmistakably similar to Asheville, North Carolina, where Wolfe was born and raised. Wolfe's father, Oliver, becomes Oliver Gant in the novel; his mother, Julia Elizabeth Westall, becomes Eliza Pentland. Wolfe's alter ego, Eugene Gant, like Wolfe himself, is the youngest of six children who eventually attends the state university at “Pulpit Hill,” which stands for Chapel Hill.

Although his novels were popular successes, Wolfe's portrayal of his hometown and its residents angered some who saw themselves in his writing, thus raising the question of how freely an author may appropriate the lives of real people in a work of fiction. Wolfe insisted, “A man must use the material and experience of his own life if he is to create anything that has substantial value.” Perhaps the most substantial value of Wolfe's novels is in the myth-making of his life into a distinctly recognizable American experience. “Though he used his life and art interchangeably,” wrote critic Alfred Kazin, “they were, taken together, a reflection of Wolfe's conviction that he himself was a prime symbol of American experience and of a perpetual American ambition.”

Look Homeward, Angel (the title is taken from John Milton's elegiac poem “Lycidas,” implying a theme of loss and grief through time) is a coming-of-age novel in which the central character, young Eugene Gant, undergoes a number of challenges and transformations. They culminate in the sense of manhood he gains by separating from his family and his birthplace and striking out for “distant soaring ranges” of both geography and spirit in a quest for opportunity and a better life—a particularly American ambition. Though the American search for a better life often involves chiefly economic goals, this is not the case with Eugene Gant. He is an idealist, a dreamer, a man of poetic spirit longing for an earthly paradise where he might truly feel at home.

In Altamont, Eugene feels an acute sense of alienation and gnawing dissatisfaction. His family is split between his parents' separate households and contrasting values and dispositions. His father, Oliver, is a self-employed tombstone carver who is pessimistic, angry, violent, and often drunk. Oliver wants his son to become a lawyer and pursue a career in politics. Eugene's mother, Eliza, owns and runs a boarding-house. Eliza is obsessed with money and pinches pennies to invest in a never-ending series of real estate schemes. She fancies Eugene will become a professor, a scholar.

Neither his father's nor his mother's plans for his future suit Eugene. He is “devoured by a vast and strange hunger for life.” Through his childhood and college years, Eugene struggles intensely to clarify for his parents and himself an unarticulated longing in his soul for “voyages” that are unattainable in a home filled with bickering family members who seem at times little more than strangers. The book is subtitled “A Story of the Buried Life” because in Altamont, Eugene feels his soul is buried alive, longing to burst forth to define itself:

[Eugene] knew he would always be the sad one: caged in that little round of skull, imprisoned in that beating and most secret heart, his life must always walk down lonely passages. Lost. He understood that men were forever strangers to one another, that no one ever comes really to know any one, that imprisoned in the dark womb of our mother, we come to life without having seen her face, that we are given

to her arms a stranger, and that, caught in that insoluble prison of being, we escape it never, no matter what arms may clasp us, what mouth may kiss us, what heart may warm us. Never, never, never, never, never.

Eugene undergoes painful disillusionment when his life unfolds less brightly than his wild imaginings. At 16, he falls in love with a woman five years older. She marries another, revealing by letter that even in the midst of her passionate affair with Eugene, she had been engaged elsewhere all along. Eugene's family deteriorates as his mother becomes more distracted by her real estate schemes, his father becomes progressively more addicted to drink, and his favorite brother dies of pneumonia. Bitterness ensues; Eugene walks with a sneer on his lips, masking the hurt of a broken heart.

Out of his pain is born a new “groping within him of wonder, of glory,” rising like an angel out of the body after death. Eugene's true manhood is achieved not just by physical separation from his family, but by the hard-earned love for his family that endures in him despite all his and their failings. With new wisdom, he searches for his soul's quest, not in the world outside him nor in the people beside him, but within himself. “An enormous organ-music sounded in his heart” when Eugene gazed upon the sad wreck of his family and understood “. . . he was part of their loveliness, his life soared magnificently out of the slough of pain and ugliness.”

This is a transcendent vision of the angel—the secret, even sacred being within us all—breaking through the shell of our mortal mask to reveal herself at last. Eugene finds that the ideals he seeks are real, even if unattainable on earth, because he holds them in his heart and feels them deeply. He vows:

And no leaf hangs for me in the forest; I shall lift no stone upon the hills; I shall find no door in any city. But in the city of myself, upon the continent of my soul, I shall find the forgotten language, the lost world, a door where I may enter, and music strange as any ever sounded.