International Journal for Research Trends in Social Science & Humanities
Volume 3, Issue 6
Nov-Dec 2025, PP 1-7

Fragmentary View of Self in Thomas Wolfe's Look Homeward, Angel

Dr. Girisha D
Associate Professor, Dept of English
Govt First Grade College, Tumakuru.

Abstract- The purpose of the paper is to demonstrate the value of an analysis of a fragmentary view of self in Thomas Wolfe's Look Homeward, Angel. The first few years of the protagonist Eugene Gant's life are the focus of the novel, and these years are followed by a near-literal weaving. Apart from the religious order, it includes every experience that the apprentice hero typically goes through. The narrative depicts Eugene Gant's struggle as a young man to support himself from his surroundings, especially to escape his domineering mother. He experiences friction with his siblings during his canonical childhood. The study's structural representations pinpoint the individuals that Wolfe related with during his early years and whose characteristics gave him the fundamental framework for self-construal. His self-perception can be divided into two categories: elaborated and undeveloped. Wolfe's description of his adolescence demonstrated this, even as he became more self-centred.

Keywords- Self, Conflict, Adolescence, Experience, Society.

I. Introduction

Thomas Wolfe is one of the great writers of the twentieth century American literature. Through the genius of his language, rhetoric, humour, and symbolic style, he has shown the human life axis around his own personal experience. As a result, the characters and realistic descriptions in Wolfe's novels emerged as the autobiographical strains. He insisted on having complete creative freedom, which required excess and energy, and he turned his life's traumatic events into art. His art and his life are inextricably linked. His own life's harsh events have shaped his perception of himself.

Most of the Wolfe's writing is based on profound personal experience. Through dramatizing those events in which the authorial self takes centre stage, the process of self-actualization is narrativized. The self is not only acknowledged in all its forms, but it also grows in the network of connections. No one could know his brother, Wolfe claimed. His consciousness was shaped by his experience of solitude and alienation. But it is important to note the paradox: he has a profound grasp of his fellow humans. He has primarily shown his environment through the awareness of his autobiographical self or alter ego, and he has drawn figures largely from reality rather than fantasy. He has produced many characters that are so vivid and fully realised that they live with tremendous vitality because of their interactions and conflicts with the self.

Look Homeward, Angel was written out of a desire to learn and to gauge a young man's level of understanding. Initially written in the first person, the letter "I" would eventually need to be changed to the name "Eugene." If this novel represents life itself, then it can be argued that he has a strong literary talent that allows him to turn friends, family, and acquaintances into a vast collection of exquisitely modelled and shaded

pictures. Wolfe's skill in illuminating basic truths through characters and circumstances is what makes the novel so outstanding. This novel is autobiographical.

Eugene Gant is the sentient centre that allows us to experience the Wolfean world in Wolfe's Look Homeward, Angel. However, compared to his family members, the protagonist is a far less colourful individual. Apart from other supporting characters who gleam with vitality and capture our imagination, it is W.O. Gant, Eugene's father, Eliza, his mother, his sister Helen, and his brother Ben. Eugene is not so much a person as he is a network of sensibilities and a vehicle for communication. He appears to us more like ourselves than someone we are watching.

The protagonist's consciousness, which grew up during childhood, is adrift in time and marvels at its surroundings. His masters were the mountains. Life rimmed them. Beyond development, beyond hardship, and beyond death, they were the cup of reality. They represented his complete unity in the face of perpetual change. In his mind, he saw old faces with haunted eyes. He pictured himself in the cradle, Swain's cow, St. Louis, and death. As the ghost of himself, he briefly tries to reclaim what he was a part of. He was incapable of comprehending growth or change. Sick with terror and the attempt to touch, hold, and grip oneself for a little while, he looks away from his framed baby picture in the parlour.

He was amazed by this strange fusion of movement and fixity, the awful moment of immobility marked with eternity, where life is moving so quickly that both the observer and the observed appear to be stuck in a frozen state. The land, the train, the slattern in the doorway, and he all remained motionless for a single instant of eternal suspension. The everlasting movement seems to have halted, suspended in the timeless architecture of the absolute, as though God had raised his baton sharply above the endless orchestration of the oceans.

Eugene keeps daydreaming. He felt that he was at the centre of everything; that the earth was surrounded by mountains; and that, out of all the chaos and misfortune, the inevitable occurrence arrived at the perfect time to contribute to the sun of his existence. Memories of his early years and the joys and sorrows of family life are displayed in Eugene's consciousness.

His father's image is vividly animated; he is a highly egocentric individual who is driven to make his mark on the dull world. He indulges in verbal abuse of his wife Eliza, with whom he could never find harmony, as part of his many appetites and conflicting wants. By the regular convention of its usage, his erratic and unruly rhetoric had gained some of the movement and directness of classical epithets: his similes are absurd, truly crafted in a spirit of vulgar mirth, and they shake the great comic intelligence that exists in the family, down to the youngest, every day. The children developed a sort of excitement as they waited for him to return in the evening.

Eliza herself had some stimulation from it as she gradually and painstakingly healed from her severe trauma, but she still harbours a latent and unforgiving memory of the past as well as a fear of her drunken spells. Because singularity does not retain life in unwavering commitment, Gant is a great man rather than a solitary one. The children

shrieked with delight as he stormed through the house, unleashing his gathered bolts. He told Eliza that he had first seen her "wriggling around the comer like a snake on her belly" (52) or that he had charged her and the entire Pentlands with malevolent domination of the elements after returning from freezing weather.

Eliza was obsessed with real estate and was afflicted with hyper-acquisitiveness. She lived a life of poverty, abandoned her family, and left Gant's home to operate a boarding house: Eliza perceived Altamont as "the pattern of a gigantic blueprint," (104) rather than as a collection of hills, buildings, and people. She was aware of each piece of valued property's past. When Eliza made Eugene wear shoes that were far too small for him because "it would be a pity to throw away a good pair of shoes," (188) she was frugal. She did, however, occasionally show unusual charity.

In addition to giving money to an unidentified Mrs. Morgan, she also let her stay in her boarding home while she awaited the birth of her most likely illegitimate kid. Eliza preferred men who could be dominated, were gentle and docile, and were housebroken. She treats a small, unemployedd man with a moustache well. He was never concerned by Eliza's financial concerns.

Wolfe's early recollections of his mother and father's relationship left him feeling insecure and uneasy. The character of his father, played by W.O. Gant, is blatantly animalistic. He would frequently visit the taverns and then the town's brothels, where his sons had to pick him up, much to the relief of the bunch of shaky, worn-out prostitutes. His daughter Helen, who condoned, encouraged, and promoted the old man's indecencies, was a staunch loyalist to him after he leered lecherously at the gorgeous female borders of Eliza's Dixieland.

We witness Gant conversing with the sophisticated, wealthy brothel keeper, "Queen" Elizabeth. He asks politely, "How are all the girls, Elizabeth?" after her girls. (222). Elizabeth had gone to purchase a monument to adorn a young prostitute's tomb, and she decided on an angel statue. Old memories are evoked by the encounter: "'It's been a long time, Elizabeth,' he said" (222). Even if their relationship is illicit, Gant and Elizabeth's affection is heartwarming. There was nothing like this between Gant and Eliza. Gant reverts to a reminiscence of the past, past occurrences, and the relentless passage of time that would eventually overtake the transience of human existence: "where now? where after? where then?" (223)

The author's identity is evident in Look Homeward, Angel as it follows a journey of development from childhood to youth. He must endure the shame and fatigue of becoming a newspaper route-boy, distributing papers in the town's black neighbourhoods far before sunrise. He was extremely persistent in pressuring his defaulting subscribers to pay. It was during the retrieval efforts to fetch his father back from the brothels that Eugene first encountered the dark world of easy women. He now has direct contact with Ella, but he tries valiantly to break free of her suffocating, nude grasp. Newspaper subscriptions that are overdue are never paid. It is when he surprises his depraved brother Steve with one of Eliza's borders that he has his first and most heinous experience of sex consciousness.

Steve represents the horror that Wolfe discovered in deeper family ties. He is a character who is nearly unbearably repulsive and who is unlit by any spark of the charity that is so prevalent elsewhere in Wolfe's writing. At the age of fifteen, Eugene engages in sexual activity with a charming and discrete young waiter at a hotel. Eugene has to give up all of the medals he earned in school because he has nothing else to give Miss Brown in another incident involving Eliza's border. "It is the principle of the thing, not the money," she stated (392). He so pledged his medals to her in instead of cash. "I'll give them to my own son when I get home if you don't redeem them," Miss Brown warned. His age is eighteen. He is twice as wide and "nearly as tall as you" (393).

Eugene jerked his head away, experiencing a sense of incestuous contamination that made him white with sickness and fear. When he goes on a raucous adventure with his friend Jim Trivett, a self-proclaimed corruptor of chastity, at the university, he retches violently and gets venereal disease: "No more of him, he felt, could be lost" (343). It is the slip-up, the loss of happiness and purity. However, Eugene's most memorable adolescent relationship was with Laura James, which caused him a great deal of psychological distress. Eugene is sixteen years old, while Laura, another of Eliza's boarders, is twenty-one. Eugene was severely injured and bleeding after being subjected to one of W.O. Gant's exploding alcoholic serenades.

Laura dressed the wound and nursed him lovingly. They became closer as a result, and at Laura's charming provocation, Eugene declared his love. Eugene and Laura develop a passionate relationship. Eugene's possessive frenzy and passionate outbursts explode when Laura gently pleads that she is an adult woman who may get married. It is interesting to notice that nearly all of Eugene's relationships were with considerably older women. Later, when Wolfe takes Webber's position and his alter identity, we find the final relationship with a thirty-five-year-old woman named Esther Jack, although George Webber is only twenty-five. Mrs. Aline Bernstein is eighteen years older than Wolfe. Wolfe's admiration for Oedipus as "one of the greatest plays in the world" (351), as well as his apparent love to older women, "wreaked upon him the nightmare coincidence of Destiny," (351) were the results of a deep psychic preoccupation.

Laura was drawn away by inevitable fate and left with the promise of returning early, but instead she sent a letter revealing the terrible reality. Following his split with Laura, Eugene turned to Irene Mallard, another older woman, for solace while she taught him how to dance. Laura is the anodyne for the wound, yet the youngster would pout anytime the bank president, Randolph Gudger, approached until the wealthy man left. Eugene feels oppressed by his separation from Laura, experiences his first significant crisis as an adult, and becomes extremely inebriated for the first time in his life. When his family begins to bug him, Eugene, exhausted, collapses over Ben and Luke, sparking a furious altercation. He accuses his brothers of excluding him from their lives. Finally, he informs them, he is free of them all and owes them nothing.

Eugene is the estranged self imprisoned in an existential reality. Though all attempts at escape must inevitably end in death, he is trying to exercise his decision. Ben and Eugene's relationship is so close-knit that they have clashed and yet loved one another. For Eugene, Ben is like a guardian angel. It makes sense why Ben's passing is so significant to Eugene, and his frenzied remark, "By God!" is therapeutic. "That's one

thing Ben doesn't have" (467). He will no longer be required to drink his mother's coffee. Eugene searches for Laura James, still plagued by her recollection. He accepts a position at Newport News as a "checker" when his finances run low. Before one of the checkers befriends him and pulls him together, he gambles his income, goes hungry, gets sick, and nearly dies. He gives up the search when he finally feels free of Laura.

Time and death are interwoven in one strand. The protagonist's self-consciousness, which develops from childhood, includes death. Ben's twin, Grover, passes away in St. Louis from typhoid, and at midnight, four-year-old Eugene is sound asleep. Bob Sterling, his flatmate at the university, had heart trouble. "Nothing could be done about it" (401) describes his fate, and his mother brought him home. Then he passed away painlessly one day. The widow came back two weeks later to collect the boy's possessions. She gathered the clothes that no one would ever wear in silence. A stout woman in her forties, she is. Eugene folded every pennant that was on the wall. She turned to go after packing them in a valise.

'Here's another,' said Eugene.
She burst suddenly into tears and seized his hand.
'He is so brave,' she said, 'so brave. Those last days.'
- I had not meant to - Your letters made him so happy. She's alone now, Eugene thought. (401)
We get to witness Eugene as he is to Bob Sterling through this silent episode, and his sensitivity causes him to see past Bob's death to the permanent loneliness that awaited Bob's mother after his passing.

Death is such an unavoidable occurrence; it gets closer every minute of a person's existence, but they cannot predict when they will arrive. When young people are well, this unrelenting approach is disregarded, but when a disease is incurable, death becomes a serious possibility that causes both bodily and mental suffering. Eugene will always remember W.O. Gant's prostate cancer diagnosis, his wailing agony, his life-or-death experience, and everything else.

The hybrid of his mother's and father's selves, Eugene had been raised amid the division of family strife. It was impossible for Gant and Eliza to be happy together, and Gant was furious when Eliza moved out to her boarding house. However, as he lies dying, Gant bridges the gap of miscommunication to honour Eliza's culinary prowess. Eugene discreetly takes part in this moment of beauty, which is made exceptionally difficult by the presence of Helen, the only person who could keep Gant under control during his drunken outbursts and who had had more power over him throughout her life.

Eliza flees, crying uncontrollably, and repeatedly recites her deceased husband's compliments, which elevated her to a pedestal and destroyed her daughter Helen. And like her mother, Helen has a great deal of empathy for Eliza. The death of Gant is a real possibility that is hinted at both Look Homeward and Angel and made real in Of Time and the River.

Eugene is shown in Look Homeward, Angel, devastated at Ben's passing. Eugene was suffocated by the anguish and harshness of death as Ben lay like a decaying corpse. Ben became enraged and pitied at the same time as the swarming family whispered outside the door, wandered around pointlessly, and fed on Ben's strangulation. All the family members engage in blaming and posturing. The sole person who had cared for and nursed Ben, Mrs. Pert, is the target of Eliza's rage. Mrs. Pert gets expelled from Dixieland because she loves Ben.

Eugene, who saw the scene unfold, puts his feelings into words. No one is more painfully aware of the many issues that come with growing up than Eugene, whose mother attempted to maintain control over him and refused to acknowledge him as anything other than her child. Eugene requested permission from Eliza to teach him to drive the car she had purchased well into his seventeenth year. "Whoa! You're my ba-a-a-by, so why? Her answer is" (351). Eugene might have been inspired to turn to alcohol as a way to cope with his mother's stifling influence or his father's example.

But as Eugene discovered the hard way -after being arrested and imprisoned for driving while intoxicated with friends - drink is not godhead. His family mocks him because he grew up, squandered time and money at Harvard, and ends himself behind bars. With a chuckle, Helen introduced Eugene to Eliza in a formal manner, saying, "Here's your Harvard lad ... How do you currently feel about your child?" (399). A suppressed and unexpected colour sensation erupts in a torrent of humiliation and degrading feelings while confined in a cell with a Negro. And that emphasises how serious his error was. The stranger who dominates Eugene from within has made him ill with terror.

Because Eugene desired to be a playwright and his family believed he was queer, he had to endure their criticism. His family gazed at him with anxious questions in their eyes as he eagerly awaited the publishers' answer to the plays he had sent them. To them, his fervent aspirations and guarantees of the enormous success he would get from composing plays appeared futuristic and far-fetched. Eugene is devastated when a letter eventually arrives apologising for turning down the play. He believed that everything had been lost, that he had been living in a fool's dream for years, and that he had finally been brutally awakened to the fact that he was a naked fool who had never had any talent and no longer had any hope. He felt like a madman who had wasted his money and lost years of valuable life that could have taught him some work that was in line with his abilities and the lives of regular men.

Eugene now believed that he had been too big an idiot to comprehend that his family had been horribly and brutally correct in everything they had said and felt. He has a terrible, depressing, and all-encompassing sense of failure and devastation. Eugene's classroom experiences further alienate him when he gets hired as a teacher at the School of Utility Cultures. Here, he tries to instil a love of literature in thick, ugly, and derisive heads - mostly Jewish heads, as his deep-seated anti-Semitism assures him - but he never had a word of praise, a sentence of thanks, or a syllable of commendation. Abe Jones, for example, felt that Eugene's teaching was inadequate and that he was not getting his money's worth because the gray-faced Yiddish inquisitor hung doggedly at his heels, and the more he gave, the more Abe wanted.

Eugene's conflicted interest and aversion to Jewesses are shown by another observation of him in class. They had the absorptive quality of a sponge and the power of a magnet. The end of each class left him desolate, gutted, drained, and with a sense of sterility, loss, and defeat. Their dark flesh had the quality of a merciless tide that not only overtook and devoured but withdrew with a powerful sucking glut of all rich deposits of the earth it fed upon. In Look Homeward, Angel, Wolfe is supposed to have found solutions to the problem of flux through myth, unity with the buried life, and creativity in the case of the self. The realisation of the commonality of experience and the sense of belonging to the earth's big family overcome the problem of flux that stands in the way of the interaction between the self and society.

References

1. Danald, David. Look Homeward: A Life of Thomas Wolfe. Little Brown, 1987.
2. Davis, Ruth. "Look Homeward, Angel." The Saturday Review of Literature, 1946, pp.13-14.
3. Lamont, Elizabeth M. "The Exile's Story: Similarities of Theme in Thomas Wolfe's Look
4. Homeward, Angel and James Agee's A Death in the Family." The Thomas Wolfe Review, Vol.15, No.1, 2010, pp.54-62.
5. Nowell, Elizabeth. Thomas Wolfe: A Biography. Doubleday, 1960.
6. Phillipson, John S. Thomas Wolfe: A Reference Guide. Boston Hall, 1977.
7. Rohan, Joanne Joy. "Reconciliation of Opposites: Excess and Deprivation in Thomas
8. Wolfe's Look Homeward, Angel." The Thomas Wolfe Review, Vol.36, No.1.2, 2012,
   pp. 37-44.
9. Rubin, Louis D. Thomas Wolfe: A Collection of Critical Essays. Prentice Hall, 1973.
10. Wolfe, Julia E. "Look Homeward, Angel." The Saturday Review of Literature, 1946, pp.31-
11. 32.
12. Wolfe, Thomas. Look Homeward, Angel. Charles Scribner's Sons, 1929.