

Theme of Alienation in Thomas Wolfe's *Look Homeward, Angel*

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Abstract

This paper explores Thomas Wolfe's acute loneliness through the portrayal of Eugene Gant, the protagonist of the novel, Look Homeward, Angel. He is portrayed as grappling with the problems of his life, who attempts to escape from a feeling of loneliness. The novel deals with the memory of his homeland, the American South's struggle for existence, and his longing for a spiritual home. The novel's major characters Eugene Gant, Steve, and Ben experience intense loneliness. Every man's central and unavoidable experience has always been loneliness. Man alienates himself from the universal existence as well as from social and familial circumstances. This reflects the plight of human survival. According to Wolfe, the experience of loneliness is neither strange nor curious, but it is an unavoidable one.

Keywords: Loneliness, Homeland, Experience, Memory, Survival.

Introduction

American novelist Thomas Clayton Wolfe was active in the first half of the 20th century. Wolfe produced numerous short stories, dramatic works, and novellas during his brief life, in addition to four long novels. He is renowned for fusing autobiographical writing with wildly inventive, poetic, rhapsodic, and impressionistic prose. Although filtered through Wolfe's sensitive, intellectual, and hyper-analytical perspective, his writings vividly reflect American culture and the mores of the time. He began teaching English as an instructor at New York University in February 1924. In 1926 began writing the first version of an autobiographical novel titled *O Lost*. The narrative, which evolved into *Look Homeward, Angel* fictionalize his early experiences in Asheville, and chronicles family and friends. The original manuscript of *O Lost* was over 1100 pages (3,33,000) long, and considerably more experimental in style than the final version. *Look Homeward, Angel* was edited by Maxwell Perkins.

Thomas Wolfe's hometown of Asheville, North Carolina, which is fictionalized as the state and town of Altamont, Catawba, serves as the backdrop for the story. Although it is in the Southern region of America, it is very different from the majority of the South. The simple people of the South no longer anticipate tall red pillars and black musicians performing on a four-stringed instrument. Real estate buying and selling activity become frantic. The corporate world teems with people. They all revere the South's materialism. The worship of the golden calf diffuses as becoming wealthy is seen as a sign of one's success. The thirst for the material life, spiritual poverty, and narrow-mindedness are brought about.

Through the hot streets of that town seethed the toughs, the crooks, the vagabonds of a nation-Chicago gunmen, bad niggers from Texas, Bowery bums, pale Jews with soft palms, from the shops of the city, Swedes from the Middle-West, Irish from New England, mountaineers from Tennessee and North Carolina, whores, in shoals and droves, from everywhere. For these the war was a fat enormous goose raining its golden eggs upon them. There was no thought or belief in any future. There was only the triumphant Now. There was no life beyond the moment. There was only an insane flux and re-flux of getting and spending. (671)

The belief in God is banished covered with a cloak of secular. As Eugene is told "it pays to be a Christian." "It helps you in a business way. They come to know you and respect you. You won't get far in this town, Gene, without them" (143). Eugene feels out of place in his hometown of spiritual dryness since he can't locate his spiritual home or the oasis of love. The house that formerly served as his harbor's soul is no longer a parking spot in his heart. Eugene views his house as a cage he must escape a location where he is isolated from the outside world and enjoy family attention. His father works as a stone cutter.

He built his house close to the quiet hilly street; he bedded the loamy soil with flowers; he laid the short walk to the high veranda steps with great square sheets of

colored marble; he put a fence of spiked iron between his house and the world. Then, in the cool long glade of yard that stretched four hundred feet behind the house he planted trees and grape vines. (214)

Eugene is a man who loves life. His safe haven is his house. He carefully shapes it with his hands. Beyond the room “the grape vines, tough and barren, writhed about the house like sinewy ropes while inside the “warm rooms where one...” (65). This should have been a image of contentment, but Gant’s eccentricity raises concerns. “The strange figure of Oliver Gant casts its famous shadow through the town. Men heard at night and morning the great formula of his curse to Eliza” (34).” He breathed over them all his hot lion-breath of desire and fury: when he was drunk, her white pursed face, and all the slow octopal movements of her temper, stirred him to red madness. She was at such times in real danger from his assault: she had to lock herself away from him” (364).

Gant returns the night afore Eugene is born, this time inebriated and determined to beat Eliza. The calmness in the house is destroyed by Gant. Eliza is a ruthless and stingy woman, primarily concerned with her financial well-being and is essentially oblivious to her family. “Eliza was not content with her husband’s trade: there was no money in death. People, she thought, died too slowly” (34) She’s willing “to rent out a part of her home” (81) to earn money. Eliza gets a boarding-house and “took Eugene with her” (190).. The family splits up into two groups. The regular dynamics and structure of family life undergo long-term alterations. The kids move back and forth between the two houses, losing the feeling of a permanent life. Eugene moves to Dixieland as his new home, but he is unable to locate his heart’s final resting place there. “There was no place sacred unto themselves, no place fixed for their own inhabitation, no place proof against the invasion of the boarders” (179). He has loses his sense of warmth and comfort in Dixieland, which is for him a lost home. Eliza accepts anybody who wants to board without giving the kids’ healthy development any thought in order to generate money. Eliza is too preoccupied to care for the family. When “Ben had been desperately ill, with pneumonia in both lungs”, “Meanwhile, Eliza talked incessantly about real estate, bought, sold and traded” (William Van 270). It is challenging to maintain a home without love, especially when Gant’s condition deteriorates. But in these situations, Steve is incredibly crude and only thinks about getting his part. “They were snarling like curs over one bone their little shares in the money of an unburied dead man who lay, with low moanings of disease, not thirty feet away” (800). The home Gant constructed with writhing grape vines is now abandoned and owned by a new person. This represents the complete breakdown of the family. The Gant family describes themselves as having lost their house and never having truly meaningful homes. They are unable to find support, warmth, and food at the home where they reside. They are homeless people.

Gant is perceived by the locals as being weird, enigmatic, and challenging to relate to. Nobody wants to know the family, and nobody is particularly familiar with their lives. Gant frequently exhibits strange behavior, “memorized each accent of the noble rant, and strode

muttering through the streets, with rapid gestures of the enormous talking hands” (16) Steve is a disruption, an alcoholic, and he lazes around every day. “But Helen, small thin fury, held on relentlessly” (458). Luke talks too much and constantly seeks approval from others. Ben is “a stranger, and as he sought through the house, he was always a prowler to find some entrance into life, some secret undiscovered door—a stone, a leaf, that might admit him into light and fellowship” (277). Eliza's only purpose is to gather possessions. She is helpless to rescue herself as she plunges into the depths of passion. Her responsibilities as a wife and mother are skewed. She talks business all day long while working. She can use less of the real estate she invests in on a daily basis. Eliza makes a valiant effort to save.

She would fret loudly if a light was kept burning in the house, saying that ruin and poverty faced her. She seldom ate unless the food was given to her; she went about the house holding a cup of weak coffee and a crust of bread. A stingy careless breakfast was the only meal to which Luke and Eugene could look forward with any certainty. (83)

Eliza and the family seem to be separated by a wall, and their connection is deteriorating. This family is very lonely, and their loneliness causes them to become distorted. Gant and Eliza are more alone than most individuals. Both are unable to communicate. Eliza uses chattering, money, and real estate, whereas Gant uses eloquence, profanity, binge drinking, and achalasia. Both are unable to communicate their sentiments, forget the language of love, and are unable to transfer their own emotions. The eloquent speeches Gant gives do not improve his relationship with his family. Eliza uses a businessman's voice when communicating to the children. As Eugene returns from school, Eliza would “send him out on the streets at once with *The Saturday Evening Post*. ‘It won't hurt you to do a little light work after school’” (232). Eliza longs to be loved and understood, but because her pursuit of fortune creates an impassable barrier between her and the family, she must endure a life of solitude.

Gant becomes lost in the solitude as a result of disillusionment, and he is unable to escape. He was drawn to a carved angel when he was fifteen, “a cold and nameless excitement possessed him. The long fingers of his big hands closed. He felt that he wanted, more than anything in the world, to carve delicately with a chisel. He wanted to wreak something dark and unspeakable in him into cold stone. He wanted to carve an angel's head” (15). But his wish is not fulfilled. When Gant is unable to carve the angel, it indicates that he is no longer able to articulate the emotions in his heart. In order to release his anger and frustration, he drinks wine, fights with his wife, and immerses himself in passionate pursuits in an effort to forget his emotional misery. Finally, he even sells the angel to Elizabeth to be used as a gravestone for a prostitute. This represents his dreams being completely dashed, leaving him with an unhealable heartache. Since then, he barricades himself inside a cage of regret and anger.

Ben doesn't find his spiritual home until he passes away. He is an isolated individual who doesn't fit in well with the surroundings. He is not rewarded for the love he shows in this cold world, and all his efforts are in vain. He is constantly in close proximity to the ruthless door of fate. Ben struggles to locate a place to call home. He is unable to locate his spiritual home. He experiences a sense of loneliness, restlessness, and joylessness as a result of losing his own and his spiritual home. When a person's spiritual foundation and place of solace are lost, he is rendered helpless. His innermost thoughts are completely hopeless and depressing. There is nothing for his delicate, helpless spirit to lean on. As noted by Albert Camus, "In a universe suddenly divested of illusions and lights, man feels an alien, a stranger. His exile is without remedy since he is deprived of the memory of a lost home or the hope of a promised land" (7) Ben's condition deteriorates and he succumbs to consumption as a result of Eliza's carelessness. Ben never manages to find love in his lifetime, yet the paradox is that "Death was like a lovely and tender woman, Ben's friend and lover, who had come to free him, to heal him, to save him from the torture of life" (732). The fact that everyone in the family is indifferent besides Ben causes Eugene's grief over Ben's passing to completely sever the bond between them. Eugene must find his emotional sustenance in love because he is profoundly disappointed in familial love after witnessing his parents' callousness. He tells the woman that she loves him a lot "Laura! My dear! My sweet! Don't leave me alone! I've been alone! I've always been alone!" (98). However, Eugene's love is fleeting. The girl marries someone else and returns to her homeland. The truth of her engagement is kept a secret from Eugene. Eugene is trapped in a lonely world by the vain affection and love.

The Gant's is a lonely place for everyone. They are unable to locate a place where they can rest their souls, a sense of home in their long-lost motherland, or their spiritual home in the present. Furthermore, since God is absent from their environment, they have nowhere to rest their souls. This results in a feeling of loneliness because there is no home to stay, no one to rely on, and no place to settle down. The characters' feelings of life are experienced amid this loneliness. It reflects the writer's considerations and concerns on human existence. "Novelists are neither historians nor prophets. They are explorers of the existence" (Milan 56). Their isolation is caused by the circumstances, not merely by the fact that they live in a materialistic society, don't have warm families, or are in a noisy atmosphere. Humans are unable to escape their sensation of loneliness in the deepest sense. They are by nature continually seeking the assurance of life, the unavoidable causality and logic between events, and the need to have control over their own lives. The world they live in, however, is weird; the truth is quite the contrary. The world is ruled by contingency and existential uncertainty. Gant is acutely aware of how odd and isolated humans are in this planet when he considers his own existence. Eliza suffers the worst wound of her life as a result of Grover's passing. She experiences a peculiar and helpless feeling for the first time in her life. Human beings are helpless and insignificant in the face of fate, pushed around by this enormous hand. Ben looks for it all his life, but finally gives up. He cannot figure out how to enter through the door of fate. Ben never quite understands what life is. Humans are powerless to control their own fate

and must always be brutally devoured. Eugene is acutely aware of the stark contrast between the ever-changing nature of existence and the inexorable march of time. He believes that life is incredibly brief and frail. Loneliness develops on its own.

People in this strange planet can only fight each other if there is no God. People's lives are dominated by loneliness. Life is by its very nature lonely. Living in a family without warmth and a social setting that emphasizes the pursuit of material goals both contribute to a greater sensation of loneliness. All the characters in the book struggle with this loneliness and make vain attempts to overcome it.

“Gant, a fallen Titan, staring down enormous vistas of the Past, indifferent to the world about him; Eliza, beetle-wise, involved in blind accretions; Helen, childless, pathless, furious-a great wave breaking on the barren waste; and finally, Ben-the ghost, the stranger, prowling at this moment in another town, going up and down the thousand streets of life, and finding no doors” (LI Zhengrong 88).

Their lonesome trek depicts the endless emptiness and misery, highlights the grim color of fate, and also expresses a sense of loss for life in the author. But despite the setback, man sees from Eugene the writer's hidden glint of hope. Eugene feels lonely as well. He experiences loneliness due to lack of affection and emotional connection, loneliness as a result of being misunderstood, and loneliness as a result of being alone in a foreign environment. But unlike the other characters in the book, he does not succumb to loneliness. He embodies a kind of attitude devoted to living the ideal life via his loneliness. Even though he is alone, he can still appreciate its beauty. “As that Spring ripened he felt entirely, for the first time, the full delight of loneliness. Sheeted in his thin nightgown, he stood in darkness by the orchard window of the back room at Gant's, drinking the sweet air down, exulting in his isolation in darkness, hearing the strange wail of the whistle going west” (289).

Conclusion

As Eugene confronts the obscene outside world, he eventually breaks free from his loneliness. His own experience gives the book a certain warmth-a type of spirit to combat the isolation tenaciously seek the spiritual home. This constant quest demonstrates man's fortitude and importance in surviving in the unfamiliar planet. The substantial wall that separates people and cannot be crossed is loneliness. Additionally, it serves as a strong obstacle for the brave to erect a place of worship. The spiritual home is shielded by this lonely barrier.

Wolfe depicts his philosophical viewpoint and understanding of life in his own special way. He believes that current reality in ludicrous man is unsure of his origin and destination. Everyone feels alone and out of place. Every character in *Look Homeward, Angel* experiences a strange sense of alienation and loneliness. Family relations play a big role in Wolfe's writing. They make the pervasive loneliness very real.

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