



The Search for an Ideal Woman in Thomas Wolfe's Novels

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Abstract:

Thomas Wolfe belonged to the period (1900-1938) which is remarkable for the changes it brought in both the society and the literature of the United States. During the twenty years between the two world wars, the Americans passed from exuberance to complete dejection. The problems of loss of selfhood and insecurities led young writers to strike on their own in search of sustenance. Wolfe decided to use his own experiences as the material for his fiction. One of the most significant aspects of his novels is his attitude towards women. In all his works his dissatisfaction with women, beginning with his mother, is evident. Throughout his brief life, Wolfe struggled with bouts of bitterness against his mother and searched for that tenderness and unconditional love which, he felt, was missing from his life. In his novels, his male protagonists fall in love but only to be disillusioned, and women entice, love, and finally betray by falling short of their expectations. It is fascinating to trace the journey of Wolfe with the focus on the women characters in his novels, as it brings us to a better understanding of the man whose prejudices against women led him to a futile search for a perfect female in his life.

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No other writer has been more honest in either accepting his faults or in expressing his views and prejudices as freely as Thomas Wolfe. His notebooks and other materials provide ample insight into his ways of assimilating his experiences inside and outside America. In his notebooks, he not only recorded the sights, sounds, and other details of the many facets of life but also gave long descriptions of the types of people he came across, their behaviour at various times of the day and different places, the distinct speech patterns of the people from different origins and groups and significant events from his life. Every detail which could give his fiction a "ring of reality" (Braswell, 148) or point to the complexity and vitality of life, was recorded by him.

In R.S. Kennedy's opinion:

"The notebooks reflect the experience both trivial and valuable of a writer's life... [and] show Wolfe in a variety of moods' from the heights of exuberance to the glooms of despair, from intense and irrational anger to rollicking good humour (Critical Essays, 149)

Wolfe's experiences were indispensable as they were the basis for his fictional enterprises. All his major experiences, both personal and vicarious were transformed by him into art. The fictionalization of the events of his life was, for him, a rediscovery of the self. This gave him a better understanding of himself and the life around him. Despite the differences which critics have pointed out from time to time between his life and that of his protagonists, it is easy to draw parallels between them as both Eugene and George follow the pattern of Wolfe's own life and give similar responses. As Bella Kussy points out:

Wolfe himself becomes inescapably part of the picture; he cannot remove himself without falsifying it. His "subjective approach, therefore, is not to be seen as an egotistic author's intrusion into his material,

but as a necessary technique for - dealing with the artistic problem of comprehending and communicating the "real" life experiences of other human beings. (323).

Wolfe's prejudices and complexes played a significant part in shaping his views in his life: He was labelled as a sort of "literary Nazi" and in Leo Gurko's opinion presented "a hot mixture of energizing, mysticism, egocentrism, antisemitism, anti- Negroism, anti-feminism"(Decade,31). in his personality. Although he tried to curb his prejudiced views by adopting a humanistic approach in his novels, his early prejudices against women, Jews, and Negroes which stemmed from his southern background, were evident in his novels.

The fact that Wolfe's mistress Aline was a Jew, made him doubly conscious of her shortcomings. He saw Jews as a money-making race, fond of luxury and good things in life and indulging in them with a gleeful self-content. He often reminded Aline of this and otherwise too persisted in calling her 'My Jew', something that his protagonist George does to his mistress Esther in *The Web and the Rock*. Wolfe's picture of the Jewish opulence in the novel and George's reaction to it reflected Wolfe's dislike of the ways of the rich Jewish community. In *Of Time and The River*, his use of words such as "painful Jewish... intellectualism" (30) or "cruel crowing Jewish mastery"(511) hinted at his prejudice against them. But despite his racist tendencies, he was able to extend his sympathy to the Jewish race in Germany and gave a deeply moving account of a Jew trying to escape from his country in *You Can't Go Home Again*, thus reflecting his broad concern for humanity.

More deep-rooted were his feelings of anti-feminism which grew from the unusual circumstances of his childhood and his mother's extreme possessiveness towards him. He was deeply obsessed with a mother- complex. Although he presented the theme of a search for a father in his novels, the mother figure dominated the narrative in one way or the other. In *Look Homeward, Angel* Eliza Gant, the mother of the young hero Eugene, is projected as a "symbol of all American materialism".(Carpenter 159) Eliza with her knack for property dealing, her greed for money, and her quintessential southern traits represents the world that her son Eugene hates. Disgusted with his mother's obvious materialistic tendencies, Eugene feels that her boarding house is "a smothering Sargasso" (Angel 244) in which his mother is "going to strangle and drown".(Angel, 365)

Besides Wolfe's mother, the figure that dominates two of his later novels - *The Web and the Rock* and *You Can't Go Home Again*, is Esther Jack. Wolfe presented her as an embodiment of beauty and wealth, innocence and maturity, art, and sophistication, thus transforming her into a symbol of the "eternal feminine". (Kennedy 353) For George, she becomes a child, mate, and mother - all in one. On the one hand, she threatens his world as she belongs to the strata of society that he wants to escape from, and on the other, she inspires him and feeds him with her love and energy. The relationship between Esther and George in *The Web and the Rock* is presented in terms of the struggle between the artist man and the mother woman, rather than as a simple affair between two human beings. It was a similar struggle that takes place between Eugene and Eliza in *Look Homeward Angel*. Both the women representing mother earth try to chain down the artist but the need for spiritual isolation is as strong in George as in Eugene and Esther's possessiveness only prolongs the struggle and leads it to an ugly end.

As Pamela H. Johnson points out: "The bellowings, the howlings, the jeers, the rolling and abusive endearments [by George] seem to evidence some permanent and inalienable dissatisfaction"*(84) in the author's personality. Wolfe's frustration and dissatisfaction with women in his life, including his mother, seemed to be responsible for the unreasonable behaviour of his protagonists toward the other sex. Although he presented sensitive female characters like Eliza, Margaret Leonard, Esther, and Helen, his dealings with the other sex was either confused, high-handed or prone to violence. Even his other significant women characters, whether it is Margaret Leonard in *Look Homeward, Angel*, or Aunt Maw in *The Web and the Rock* - play the role of surrogate mothers in the protagonist's life. The declining

moral values and the horde of loose women around him did not let him respect a woman and the fact that his mistress Aline was a respectable married woman contradicted his old-fashioned ideas about love and made it difficult for him to respect her either. This disgust was handed down to his protagonists and often made them think of women as 'whores'. Whether it is Eugene's romance with Laura James or George's relationship with Ann or Esther, there seems to be a lack of tenderness on Wolfe's part, and both his protagonists Eugene and George are unable to react normally in the moments of physical intimacy.

Wolfe's anguish at his inability to express the tender emotions of love expressed itself in his puzzlement: "Why am I always ashamed and afraid to write a love scene? (Donald,167)" One of the causes for this inability was also a deep-rooted southern sense of male superiority and an artistic dissatisfaction that abhorred the pettiness that women like his mother represented. It is reflected in George's resentment against his aunt, in fact against the whole female race, in *The Web and the Rock*:

And all because you are a woman, with a woman's niggard smallness about money, a woman's niggard dealing towards her servants, a woman's selfishness, her small humanity of feeling for the dumb, the suffering, and afflicted soul of man-and so will: fret, fume, and fidget now, all flustered and undone, to call me forth. (42)

Such antagonistic views were too deep-rooted in Wolfe's personality to be discarded easily but he did try to do so. His fine portrayal of Margaret Roberts as Margaret Leonard in *Look Homeward Angel*, his acknowledgement of the nobility of Helen's soul, his sympathetic handling of Eliza's character in *Of Time and River*, and most of all his conscious effort to play fair while describing his affair with Aline, through George and Esther in *The Web and the Rock* reflected his desire to overcome these views which he realized were unfair and the product of his insecure past. As a man and an artist, he was constantly trying to change and refine his views. Once in a letter to a prominent Asheville citizen, he wrote (8 July 1935) :

I am a man who, whatever errors he may have made, has tried to grow, and learn and increase in strength and wisdom and humanity and who would have grown beyond malice and resentment in the end. (Letters,476)

His claim was substantiated in his posthumous novel. *You Can't Go Home Again* which is his most balanced and mature work. Like his protagonists, Wolfe also progressed from being a self-centred egotist to a socially conscious artist. *You Can't Go Home Again* is an illustrated chronicle of the writer's search for his true role as an artist. As Muller points out: "The progress of the novel is a recapitulation of all the meanings of Wolfe's lifelong pilgrimage." (Muller,125). The profundity of his vision was reflected in his protagonist's views who become a spokesman of the American conscience. By rejecting love, wealth, and fame, he reaffirms his integrity as an artist and his determination to strive for the betterment of mankind, proving his nobility as a human being.

Again, Wolfe's own experiences came in handy as he brought his artistic journey to the end. The passionate affair of George and Esther which reflected Wolfe's own and was brought intensely alive in *The Web and the Rock* came to an end in *You Can't Go Home*. In the earlier part of the novel Wolfe presented Esther as an ideal partner; "Had he not been beside her at the launching of the ship? Had they not been captives together among the Thracian faces?... All these were ghosts –save she! And she – devouring child of time ... alone remained immortal and herself ..." (237) but this ideal image comes crashing down as George realizes that Esther as a high-society lady belongs to the world that Jack, her husband has built. He as a stock-market speculator is the main representative of this money-obsessed world. The growing realization that love is not enough for him strengthens into belief as George finally understands the inadequacy and corruption of Esther's world and flees from it. In presenting Esther's

idle, rich world, Wolfe exploited his experiences with Aline and the memories of her past that she had shared with him. Through her he had come to know about the immediate past of New York City; it was used in his brilliant projection of the city life in the same way as his mother's memory was used by him to bring alive the southern past.

Interestingly, the real satisfaction in his relationships came from bonding with males, especially the father figure. The steadying influence of Maxwell Perkins on Wolfe's life was greatly responsible for his success as a novelist. His strong relationship with Perkins made it almost necessary for Wolfe to present it in the novel, The ideological differences which he felt lay between him and Perkins and were responsible for the breaking of their relationship were explained by Wolfe through George's relationship with Fox Edwards, his editor. By rejecting Fox's ecclesiastic views which stand in contrast with his abiding optimism, George emerges as a victor. But as far as women were concerned Wolfe's protagonists fail in their relationships and in their quest for perfection lose the love of various females in their lives. Thus, Wolfe's desire for perfect love and understanding from the women in his life was doomed from the beginning as it stemmed from his deep-rooted prejudices against them and also led his protagonists to a meaningless quest, ending in disappointment and dejection.

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