WOMEN IN THE LIFE AND WORKS OF THOMAS WOLFE

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WOMEN IN THE LIFE AND WORKS OF THOMAS WOLFE

THESIS

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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I. INTRODUCTION</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>II. THE MOTHER</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>III. OF TIME, THE RIVER, AND WOMEN</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IV. THE PROMISE OF ESTHER</td>
<td>53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>V. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS</td>
<td>75</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Thomas Wolfe was a novelist who attempted to capture the entire world in the written word. The success of his attempt has been appraised very differently by the critics and worshipers of Wolfe. Although some feel that he failed miserably, others contend that he was very successful. Wolfe's critics say that he has tried too hard to grasp a great deal more than any one man is capable of holding, thus causing some of his characters and scenes to appear incredible and overdone. Others say that Wolfe managed to catch just enough of the hopes and aspirations common to all men to warrant himself a prominent place among great American writers. Perhaps William Faulkner expressed best what the admirers of Wolfe feel:

I never said that Wolfe was the "greatest American writer of modern times," I said, and this was several years ago, that among his and my contemporaries, I rated Wolfe first because he had tried hardest to say the most—a generalisation [sic] made rather in conversation than as a public statement. . . . I still support the statement, of course. Man has but one short life to write in, and there is so much to be said, and of course he wants to say it all before he dies. My admiration for Wolfe is that he tried best to get it all said; he was willing to throw away style, coherence, and all the rules of preciseness, to try to put all the experience of the human heart on the head of a pin. . . . He may
have been "the greatest American writer" if he had lived longer.¹

Despite what some might call the waning of Wolfe's critical star since his death, the facts are that his novels have continued to be popular into the 1960's. Early in the 1950's the novels of Wolfe increased in circulation more than any other novelist's works from the 1930's.² Too, 55,000 copies of his Look Homeward, Angel were sold in 1967.³ It seems that some of Wolfe's work does seem to "speak for and to each rising generation"⁴ in America.

Aspects of Wolfe's writing methods have long been lauded and criticized. Diverse themes and unifying elements have been found in all of his works. One of the most popular motifs in all the novels is the search-for-a-father figure, which is supposedly based on Wolfe's own relationship with his father. However, even a good idea about a literary work can be overstressed and over-emphasized; perhaps this is true of the search-for-a-father theme.

There is another so-called search theme in the novels. Wolfe's protagonists seem to be searching for the perfect woman, while running from the many imperfect ones which they


²Ibid., p. viii.

³(Author not given), "Home-Grown Giant," Time, XCI (February 9, 1968), 95.

⁴Walser, p. viii.
encounter. In fact, this escape from and search for women is the substance for much of the structure of Wolfe's four novels. In all of them women portray vital roles: Eliza Gant of *Look Homeward, Angel*, Ann of *Of Time and the River*, and Esther Jack of *The Web and the Rock* and *You Can't Go Home Again*.

Wolfe begins *Look Homeward, Angel* with the theme of escape. Eugene Gant is trying to loosen his mother's grasp on himself. The search for the perfect woman is also early apparent. Eugene attempts to found good relationships with women, but his attempts have devastatingly unhappy results. He is often disappointed by the women he meets; his youthful dreams of a perfect woman are never fulfilled. In *Of Time and the River* Eugene continues the futile search; however, the goal is never reached in this phase of Eugene's life. The novel does end with a substantial promise of love for Eugene. He meets an unusual woman who appears to be his ideal, a perfect woman. In the final two novels, Wolfe changed his protagonist from the immature, tall Eugene Gant to the more mature, simian George Webber. The love promised Eugene is accepted by George; and he and the woman, Esther Jack, have a wild, fierce, and impassioned love affair. Nevertheless, George cannot abide for long the consuming love which, he feels, Esther has for him. The theme of escape again becomes important, and George must
cut all ties between himself and Esther. Wolfe's protagonist again has to reject a woman because she requires too much from him. It seems that, in the four novels, Wolfe presents a cycle in which his protagonist must move. At various stages of this cycle, the male seems to need a woman; and at other times, the female is repugnant to the man. The male protagonists have to escape from the clutches of their women after they have enjoyed their embraces. These men seem to have almost ambivalent feelings toward women. In other words, George and Eugene both cannot decide upon a definite idea of women.

Like many men, Thomas Wolfe loved and detested women. His novels are proof of this. The biographies are often helpful in ascertaining why he presented women as he did in his fiction. We cannot say that Wolfe was a proponent of woman's rights, but he was attracted to independent women. Perhaps he really disliked many of his female acquaintances because they made him feel inadequate. Man tends to inflate his ego by forcing inferiority upon a female.

Andrew Turnbull has written well of Wolfe's affairs with certain women. Thomas Wolfe explains much about Wolfe as a man and not only as an artist. Turnbull has used many of Wolfe's personal notes (never published before) and personal interviews with Wolfe's acquaintances in this

favorable but thorough biography. He devotes a complete chapter to the Wolfe-Bernstein love affair, and the treatment of this relationship makes the book valuable to students of Wolfe.

Since involvement with women is a major structural element in Wolfe's novels, one would naturally suspect that the author also was entangled with women. This is basically true, but one must remember that his fiction does not always correspond exactly with the facts.

Be it remembered that Wolfe wrote autobiographical fiction, not literal biography, and it is wrong to equate his fiction with his life. Only the broad patterns presented in the novels are related to actual facts; persons and specific occurrences often are exaggerated and distorted.

The fictional women, like most of Wolfe's characters, can generally be traced to actual persons. This is true for the major female characters: Eliza Gant, Esther Jack, Laura James, and the rest. However, Wolfe often departed from the truth for dramatic effect. For example, in Look Homeward, Angel Eugene Gant falls deeply in love with Laura James before he learns that she is about to be married to an older man. The shock of this news is devastating to Eugene. In real life Laura James was a young lady, Clara Paul, who once stayed with her younger brother at Julia

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6Ibid., p. 325.
7Ibid., p. 326 (note six).
Wolfe's boarding house. Wolfe knew all along that Clara was about to be married, and his mother, although she may be an unreliable judge, felt that he had only a case of puppy love. In *Look Homeward, Angel*, however, Eugene's love for Laura is convincingly portrayed as deep and shattering. The basic facts are true, but Wolfe has added his own sensitive and creative touch to them. Similarly, Wolfe adds the artist's touch to the other love affairs in the four major novels.

This chapter is a brief introduction to the following four chapters of the thesis. The women in Wolfe's novels and their importance to first Eugene Gant and then George Webber are discussed in the next three chapters. Chapter II deals with the mother-figure, Eliza Gant of *Look Homeward, Angel* and other important women. It is concerned with Eugene's rebellion against his mother's possessiveness and his orientation into the world of sexual relationships. The destruction of the perfect love dream is discussed. In Chapter III the concern is with college-age Eugene's search for meaning in life as well as a woman to share it with him. Eugene travels from Altamont to a northern university town, but most of the women he finds are silly wenches and cold prostitutes. After college Eugene travels to Europe where the foreign women are appealing but not inviting. In

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Europe Eugene falls in love with an American girl, but his dreams are rudely shattered when she confesses to him that she loves a man who is a homosexual. Chapter IV is primarily a discussion of George Webber's love for Esther Jack. (Webber is the later prototype of Eugene Gant in Wolfe's last two novels, The Web and the Rock and You Can't Go Home Again.) The development and disintegration of their love is related to George's growth as a writer. Chapter V is a conclusion of the thesis, including recommendations for further study.

In all of the chapters the central topic is the view which Wolfe had of womankind. Primarily, this view is discerned and evaluated from Wolfe's fiction. But there is an important concurrent theme which should be kept in mind, the theme of the creative person's struggles to become a producing artist. From the beginning of Look Homeward, Angel to the last of You Can't Go Home Again, the motifs of the Künstlerroman emerge in varying degrees. In some ways, Wolfe felt the woman was an enemy to the creative spirit of the artist. Thus, the ideas about womankind are often directly related to the ideas concerning the developing artist.

Julia Wolfe once alluded to what might have been the reason her son almost became a woman-hater. Talking about Tom, she said, "it would have been so much better for Tom if he had found somebody [to love and marry] later on in
life—maybe he wouldn't have taken such an awful trip west." Thomas Wolfe could not find the perfect woman for himself; so he was unable to really give himself fully and genuinely to any woman. Mrs. Wolfe's statement, taken on the literal level, simply is a mother's lament for her son's unhappy life and untimely death. On the figurative level, it might be taken to mean that Wolfe had two choices in life: he could devote his life to writing and creating, or choose a wife and settle down to a comfortable life as an instructor of English. If Wolfe had made the latter choice, he would not have had to make that fatal, unhappy trip west which is for poets only. Wolfe had the same choice that a contemporary poet once described.

I shall be telling this with a sigh
Somewhere ages and ages hence;
Two roads diverged in a wood, and I—
I took the one less traveled by,
And that has made all the difference. 10

Although the inclusion of this stanza might seem to be a melancholy beginning for the thesis, it is included to explicate the two paths which Wolfe had to choose from: the artist's way, or the married man's comfortable life. Possibly, Wolfe wanted to take the easy way out; but his own egocentric self made the unhappy but honorable life of the artist his only real choice.

9Ibid.
CHAPTER II

THE MOTHER

Interaction between males and females in the novels of Thomas Wolfe is superficially normal; however, there are often lurking problems in these relationships which prove to be almost irreconcilable. Wolfe is well known for his ability to create extremely credible characters, both male and female. No two better examples exist than W. O. Gant and Eliza Gant, the fictional counterparts of the parents of Wolfe. Wolfe's men, W. O. Gant particularly, are of stupendous physical and spiritual size and remind one of mythological gods in their intense love for life. In many of the passages of Look Homeward, Angel, W. O. Gant appears to be blessed with godlike powers.

All that he touched waxed in rich pungent life: his Spring gardens, wrought in the black wet earth below the fruit trees, flourished in huge crinkled lettuces that wrenched cleanly from the loamy soil with small black clots stuck to their crisp stocks; fat red radishes; heavy tomatoes. The rich plums lay bursted on the grass; his huge cherry trees oozed with heavy gum jewels; his apple trees bent with thick green clusters. The earth was spermy for him like a big woman.¹

Gant has powers almost beyond that of ordinary beings, and he is the mainstay of the family in Wolfe's first novel.

The family was at the very core and ripeness of its life together. Gant lavished upon it his abuse, his affection, and his prodigal provisioning. They came to look forward eagerly to his entrance for he brought with him the great gusto of living, of ritual.\(^2\)

This Gant represents the extremely vital section of the family in many ways. To his young son, Eugene, Gant is the burlesque actor who flings kerosene on a flaming fire, who consumes alcohol in huge quantities, and who eats as if his entire body is one giant stomach. It seems that there is nothing which the great Gant cannot do or accomplish. The long journeys to California and New Orleans, the time-consuming binges, and the endless quotations from literature are all facets of this fantastic male character, from his early manhood to his fiftieth year.

However, all male characters presented by Wolfe do not achieve this sort of strength. On the contrary many are weak, for example Steve of the first novel, and Starwick of the second. Too, the protagonists of the novels, Eugene of the first two and George of the third and fourth, are not able to withstand the hardships of life. Also, later on in the novels, W. O. Gant is not so strong as the early image of him would indicate. It is undeniably true that Wolfe ascribes to Gant the abilities and capacities of five normal men. However, Gant is one of the first family

\(^2\)Ibid., p. 51.
figures to be consumed by death, a death that is anything but heroic or, to use a familiar term, gargantuan. Suddenly, Gant is portrayed as a sniveling, senile, and childish man drowning in self-pity. He cannot even listen to his son's plans for college.

"Oh Jesus. . . . I don't want to hear about it," Gant began to sniffle in a whining tone. . . . "Why must it all be put on me. . . . sick and old as I am? . . . If he wants anything let him ask his mother for it. . . . It's fearful, it's awful, and it's cruel that you should afflict a sick man in this way." He was sniffling petulantly and his chin, on which a wiry stubble of beard was growing, trembled and shook like that of a whining child.3

W. O. Gant submits to the wearing processes of life. His fantastically vital being has been sapped by a cancerous death. There are other examples in the novels of males who do not have the strength and power to live. Starwick is one person who one assumes will not make it, since there are so many allusions to the dark end fate has in store for him. Eugene's brothers, Grover and Ben, are not destined to exist for long.

In contrast to the male characters who die relatively young under the guns of life are the female characters. Eliza Gant, Helen Gant, Laura James, Else Von Kohler, Ann, and Esther Jack all have a strength for enduring life which those ephemeral males cannot grasp.

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3 Thomas Wolfe, Of Time and the River (New York, 1935), p. 85. (The ellipsis marks are Wolfe's.)
The prototype of the Wolfean strong woman is none other than the Eliza Gant of the early novels. It is generally agreed that Eliza Gant is very nearly a direct representation of Thomas Wolfe's mother, Julia Elizabeth Wolfe. One needs only to read the sections in the novels about Eliza, the story entitled "The Web of Earth," and The Marble Man's Wife by Hayden Norwood, to realize the great affinity between Mrs. Wolfe and "Miss Eliza."

There are many likenesses between the fictional Eliza Gant and the real Julia Wolfe. Not only are these similarities physical, but each woman has a peculiar relationship with her son. Julia Wolfe influenced Tom greatly. Her fictional counterpart, Eliza Gant, is important in Thomas Wolfe's literature. Often Eliza is central to a story or novel because of her affinity with her son Eugene.

Although Eliza is important to her son, most readers and critics will assert that there are other more influential persons in his life. Margaret Leonard, Eugene's school teacher, is often said to be a spiritual guide for him. Mrs. Leonard was modeled after Tom Wolfe's school teacher, Margaret Roberts, whom many call the "the mother of Wolfe's spirit." Then there are others who say that W. O. Gant is

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the character who inspires his son the most. Gant certainly

does have much influence over his son in Look Homeward, Angel.

In contrast to W. O. Gant and Margaret Leonard, who

nurtured the boy's appetite for literature, Eliza Gant's

influence upon her son is often construed as detrimental.

Most readers maintain the somewhat harsh view given of

Eliza in the first novel. Her materialistic bent is usually

underscored by readers, critics, and Wolfe; and a love of

property seems to be her ultimate emotion. In Look Homeward, Angel she is often contrasted in a poor light with W. O.

Gant.

For him [Gant] the house was the picture of his

soul, the garment of his will. But for Eliza it was

a piece of property, whose value she shrewdly appraised,

a beginning for her hoard.5

Similarly, Mrs. Leonard tries to develop Eugene's love of

art while Eliza wants him to learn to be a magazine salesman.

Eliza wants to aim her son toward a life in business and

not toward the profitless life of the artist.

Thus, the pattern is set for Eliza; and it is difficult
to get any other image of the woman except that she was a

hoarder. In Hayden Norwood's subjective interviews with

Julia Wolfe from which he wrote The Marble Man's Wife, the

author assumes that the popular ideas about Eliza's materialism

in Look Homeward, Angel can be applied to Julia; he repeatedly

gives descriptions of Julia's niggardliness which sound suspiciously like something Wolfe might write about Eliza. He reports of Mrs. Wolfe in a florist's shop where she would buy flowers for Tom's grave:

Mrs. Wolfe wandered about the shop expressing dissatisfaction with the prices. Finally she selected a plant and commenced haggling with the clerk about the price.6

Julia is presented as a dickering old woman; and, to most people, this forever will be a part of her character. Beside her husband or Margaret Leonard, Eliza comes off second best as a spiritual leader for her son. John Terry, in the prologue to the book which he edited, Thomas Wolfe's Letters to His Mother, describes the difference between the real mother and son.

But mother and son differed in their sense of values. Mrs. Wolfe was deeply impressed by wealth and social power. Tom evaluated people by their intrinsic spiritual value. ... Mrs. Wolfe had no bones about her respect for money and power. She was extremely opportunistic in her outlook. She planned to get rich herself, and she positively threw away nothing; she was one of the string saving type.7

Critics usually agree with Terry's attitude toward Julia and Eliza. Although Gant is a raving, drunken maniac at times, although he demands that Eugene must become a lawyer and politician, and although he is capable of extreme forms

6Norwood, p. 35.
of cruelty to his wife, the reader and critic will adamantly assert that he really is a nice fellow who spiritually guided his son. Mrs. Leonard, too, comes off much better than Eliza.

Although John Terry seems to underscore Julia's materialism, he does recognize that there was more between mother and son than meets the eye. Terry points out their unique relationship:

"His mother he did not have to seek. She was always with him; he had her constantly in mind. In letters, he wrote her a detailed record of his life. . . . Mrs. Wolfe exercised great influence over Tom. He wanted her to believe in him, to sympathize with his ambition as an artist. She responded fully and stood by him in his greatest needs, financially and spiritually. She gave him strength. He said she was like a force of nature, heroic in character."

Like Julia, Eliza not only sticks by her son in his escapades and troubles, but she helps finance his trips to Europe with gifts of money. Eliza has her hands full with such a son and family to contend with. There is a likeness between this woman and the Negro matron of Faulkner's The Sound and the Fury. Truly, one can say of both Eliza Cant and Dilsey that "they endured."

That Julia Wolfe furnished her son with more than financial support in furthering his career as an artist should be no surprise to anyone who has read any of Wolfe's works.

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8Ibid., p. xxxii.
mountain tales, which probably were derived from the storehouse of his mother's memory. The prime example is the fine novella "The Web of Earth." Julia Wolfe once said that she gave the "background for 'The Web of Earth' . . . but that was fiction about the murderer coming here." In this novella Wolfe has taken various of the stories told him by his mother and has woven a fine tale of them. Richard S. Kennedy points out that "Wolfe's heritage from his mother was a mixed blessing." He goes on to say that the almost total recall of things past, which both Julia and Tom Wolfe had, was a boon and a hindrance to the young artist. Like his mother, Tom could remember exactly how something had occurred in the past, but the "multiplicity of detail" often caused the unrestricted flow of rhetoric for which he is often criticized.

The heritage which Wolfe received from his mother was not all bad in any sense. From her, Wolfe was provided with a measurable proportion of his artistic abilities. Specifically, one facet of that heritage is that portion of the artist's spirit which has mystical connections with the spiritual or supernatural worlds. Spiritual beings

10 Norwood, p. 105.
12 Ibid.
play an important part in several of Wolfe's works. The angel of the first novel becomes a vital spiritual figure.

With a strong rustle of marble and a cold sigh of weariness, the angel nearest Eugene moved her stone foot and lifted her arm to a higher balance. When Eugene sees the angel move, he is startled and indicates his wonder to his dead brother's ghost. Ben's ghost remarks to this that "there's no law against an angel lifting its arm if it wants to." What Ben utters to his startled brother is certainly an axiom in Wolfe's literature. There is no law which restricts the unnatural occurrence there. The basis for Wolfe's interest in the supernatural can be directly traced to the influence of his mother and her mountain background. Julia Wolfe's relatives, the Penlands and Westalls, were mountain folk; and many of their superstitions and supernatural beliefs appear in Wolfe's literature. Much of his art is based upon the "folk art of those he had known in the mountains of the South." Probably much of it was transmitted to Tom through his story-telling mother. Kennedy points out that Julia Wolfe aroused in her children an interest in the realm of the irrational-popular superstitions, prophetic senses, visions, voices from nowhere, mental telepathy, and the like.

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13 Look Homeward, Angel, p. 515.  
14 Ibid.  
15 Floyd C. Watkins, Thomas Wolfe's Characters (Norman, 1957), p. 82.  
It is a well-known tale that almost any spiritualist or prophet who came to Asheville found himself welcomed, sooner or later, into the Wolfe household.\textsuperscript{17}

It is true that the "inner flaming . . . clairvoyant Scotch soul"\textsuperscript{18} of Julia had a great effect on the works of her son. One remembers the Pentland family of the novels and their curious abilities and actions, often quite mystical. There is the Pentland prophet of doom, Uncle Bacchus, who "figgers hit's \textit{the end of the world} due about June 11, 1886."\textsuperscript{19} Then there is the strangely gifted idiot, the youngest brother to Eliza, who is full of "lapping idiot grins" but who can "draw from a violin music that had in it something unearthly and untaught."\textsuperscript{20} We see in this brief description a slight similarity to that idiotic-looking college freshman, Eugene Gant, who leaps around and cries his goat-like cries to the heavens but who could also draw beauty from the depths of his genius. It seems that something edifying can be distilled from the mystical and unusual.

Julia Wolfe, like Eliza, was able to distill a meaning from her spiritual and supernatural experiences. In Norwood's \textit{The Marble Man's Wife} we see some of her mystical experiences:

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{17}\textit{Ibid.}
  \item \textsuperscript{18}\textit{Look Homeward, Angel}, p. 49.
  \item \textsuperscript{19}\textit{Ibid.}, p. 8.
  \item \textsuperscript{20}\textit{Ibid.}, p. 13.
\end{itemize}
experiences which she probably told to her son and which turned up later in his literature. To see a relationship between Tom Wolfe's art and his mother's belief in the supernatural, one only needs to read "The Web of Earth." Norwood records that Mrs. Wolfe told him of hearing the mystical words, "Two--Two--Twenty--Twenty," and that she felt as if she were being squeezed by spirits when she heard them. These words are central to the plot of the main story of the novella, "The Web of Earth."

It is apparent to anyone, including Julia Wolfe herself, that her family was unusual. She says of them,

they're kind of psychic. Father used to come in and say his dual self was walking beside him. . . . I'm that way, too. It's usually when my health's run down a little. I've got a little book that tells the reason people can't communicate with the spiritual world--says they eat too much, they belong to the earthy.

When Mrs. Wolfe says that people belong too much to the earth and cannot communicate with the spirits, one immediately recalls that oft repeated phrase of Wolfe's, "of wandering forever and the earth again." Certainly, Wolfe is not too earthy to fail to understand the abilities of the spirit to soar. In fact, there is a direct linkage between the Wolfe of the spiritual world and the Wolfe of the artistic world.

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\(^{21}\) Norwood, p. 104. \(^{22}\) Ibid. \(^{23}\) Of Time and the River, p. 2.
The many examples of Mrs. Wolfe's inclination towards the mystical can be related to her son's literature. As Floyd C. Watkins has noted in his book about Wolfe's characters, "Mrs. Wolfe's own symbolism ... is primitive and omnipresent." For example, he says that she felt a sort of spiritual reverence for the month of October in which four of her children eventually died. Even a casual reader of Wolfe is quite aware of the manifold references and allusions to October and the mysticism which surrounds the month. For example, upon the death of Ben, Wolfe writes,

In that enormous silence, where pain and darkness met, some birds were waking. It was October.

October is that month of the year in which the peculiar, the uncanny, and the disquieting things of life assail the Wolfes. Wolfe entitles a chapter of The Web and the Book "Dark October," in which George's abandoned lover, Esther, sadly recalls the happiness she and George once had. This month is that time when one can romantically or sympathetically view life with that sort of glowing sorrowfulness with which past things are often recalled.

Mrs. Wolfe's spiritual feelings were probably inherited by her son in many subtle ways and are, therefore, important.

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24 Watkins, pp. 79-80.  
25 Ibid., p. 80.  
26 Look Homeward, Angel, p. 465.
in ascertaining her influence upon him. She tells of dreaming the circumstances surrounding her sister's death shortly before the sister died, later verified in fact.\textsuperscript{27} She tells of seeing the spirit of her father when he was still alive.\textsuperscript{28} These tales and others much like them must have had a great influence on Tom. A reader of his second novel, \textit{Of Time and the River}, can clearly recall that Eugene sees visions of his father's spirit, just before he dies, and of his already deceased brother, Ben.\textsuperscript{29} Such related incidents tend to indicate that Julia Wolfe and Tom thought a great deal alike.

The preceding paragraphs are intended to show the physical and spiritual relationship which existed between Tom and Julia Wolfe. Their relationship is directly related to that of Eugene and Eliza Gant. The tie between the fictional mother and son is perhaps more important than any other liaison which the boy had. However, Eliza really is portrayed as a mother who stifles the growth of Eugene's artistic spirit. Although it is true that Eliza is portrayed as a materialistic person, she really is not the great depressant that Wolfe might have us believe. As one critic has pointed out, Wolfe was able to keep "his deep sympathy and love for his mother mainly hidden in the first novel."\textsuperscript{30}

\textsuperscript{27}Norwood, pp. 90-92. \hfill \textsuperscript{28}Ibid., p. 96.  
\textsuperscript{29}Of \textit{Time and the River}, p. 200. \hfill \textsuperscript{30}Watkins, p. 60.
This almost seems to be an understatement in view of the treatment of Eliza.

The mother is presented nearly each time as a discouraging influence on her son's aesthetic spirit. Everything about her is foreign to the nature of the artist. She lives in a barn-like boarding house and steps about in a dingy old sweater. Her thoughts seem to be only of materialistic gain. With this impression of the woman, one soon senses that she is a depressant to her creative son. It would seem, as in Hawthorne's "The Artist of the Beautiful," that the female is an enemy to the artist.

We are frequently told by Wolfe and his critics that Eliza tried to keep her baby boy a real baby as long as she possibly could. Baby Eugene is portrayed from his earliest days as needing to escape from something or someone.

He was in agony because he was poverty-stricken in symbols: his mind was caught in a net because he had no words to work with. He had not even names for the objects around him; he probably defined them for himself by some jargon, reinforced by some mangling of the speech that roared about him, to which he listened intently day after day, realizing that his first escape must come through language.31

It is significant that W. O. Gant is with Eugene when the child first says "moo" to the neighbor's cow.32 Also, it is Gant who brings Eugene some "alphabet books, and animal

31 Look Homeward, Angel, p. 30.
32 Ibid., p. 32.
pictures, with rhymed fables below." Gant reads to Eugene "passages from Shakespeare" and other famous literature. Thus the father aids in the development of the artist as a young boy.

However, what is one to think of the mother of the artist? Where is she in this jig-saw puzzle of the formation of an artist? She is really nowhere in the fictional account. Unless, that is, she is the someone Eugene must throw off on his road to creativity. Eugene's father is the creator, and his mother is the hoarder. The father is the image of the life-lover, and the mother is the life-suppressor. Wolfe probably was unfair. For example, in Look Homeward, Angel W. O. Gant is said to have had an ability to get vegetables and fruits to grow. Symbolically, he is Adam in the Garden. In reality Mrs. Wolfe was the parent who could make any plant grow by placing it in the earth. Wolfe gives no such ability to the fictional counterpart of Mrs. Wolfe. This implication by Wolfe that his mother hadn't a "green thumb" may be taken in the symbolic sense.

It was in Eugene's fifth year that Wolfe uses the escape metaphor to show Eugene's disobedience of his mother; he sneaks away from her to enroll at school. In this scene

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33 Ibid., p. 41.
34 Ibid., p. 50.
35 Norwood, p. 1.
a reader is able to grasp something of the mystical alliance between the boy and the mother which he felt it necessary to sever.

School began the slow, the final loosening of the cords that held them together, but as she saw him slide craftily out the gate one morning in September and run at top speed to the corner where the other little boy was waiting, she did nothing to bring him back. Something taut snapped in her; she remembered his furtive backward glance, and she wept. And she did not weep for herself, but for him: the hour after his birth she had looked in his dark eyes and had seen something that would brood there eternally.36

In this case, the parallel with young Wolfe is clear. Julia Wolfe says,

He being the baby I kept him a baby. . . . I think he has written up that he slept with me until he was a great big boy. He wasn't weaned until he was three and a half years old.37

Mrs. Wolfe goes on to tell that her baby "was getting away" from her when he finally had to have his long curls cut because of lice.38

The restrictions which Julia Wolfe placed on her son probably account for the treatment of Eliza Gant in Look Homeward, Angel. Her attempts to keep the apron strings intact perhaps caused Tom to resent her greatly. However, in Tom's letters to his mother one sometimes sees his real feelings. As he tells her of his sensations concerning her

36 Look Homeward, Angel, p. 66.
37 Letters to His Mother, p. xxii.
38 Ibid., p. xxiii.
upon his brother's death, we feel another aspect of the mother-son relationship.

And the boy of eighteen sees and knows for the first time that more than a son is dying, that part of a mother is being buried before her,—life in death, that something which she nursed and loved, something out of her blood, out of her life, is taken away.

This passage is almost duplicated in the fictional account of Ben's death. The feelings are those of a young boy who sympathizes with his mother when she is ousted from the death chamber of her son by the dying boy. Although Eugene is deeply sorry for Eliza, the significant thing is that he and the reader realize her failure to her children. By her son's rejection of her, Eliza's inadequacies are emphasized. The mother of Look Homeward, Angel is not a flattering portrait.

The relationship between the father and mother of Eugene Gant is not what a sociologist would term beneficial for the rearing of a child. True, there is a sort of love in the family which is deep and fervent. However, this is the viewpoint of a man who has left the atmosphere of his home and, in reminiscing, senses the deep emotions which were there, but which were well camouflaged. This hidden love for each other which most of the Gants harbored is vividly seen in the interaction between various members of the family. Perhaps the hiding of love which Eugene

39Ibid., p. 51.
witnessed and experienced in his early life is partially to blame for later problems which arise when he tries to love another human being.

The Gant love sometimes appears so great that it is almost inexpressible except in terms of adolescent slaps and casual insults. Ben loves his brother Eugene and shows it by cuffing him, mussing his hair, or buying him something to wear and roughly giving it to him. Another example of rough-love is the treatment which Helen gives to her father. At times her harshness to him is almost inexplicable; then one remembers that it is an expression of her great love for him. She displays the same hate-love for her little brother, and he is probably just as baffled as any reader about the totally different attitudes of his sister toward him. She affronts him when she catches him reading with:

You little freak—wandering around with your queer dopey face. You’re a regular little Pentland— you funny little freak, you. Everybody’s laughing at you. Don’t you know that? Don’t you? We’re going to dress you up as a girl, and let you go around like that. You haven’t got a drop of Gant blood in you—papa’s practically said as much— you’re Greeley all over again; you’re queer.  40

Pentland queerness sticking out all over you.

With such hateful harangues, Helen drives her brother until she literally stomps on him or until he loses "faith in love and goodness" and batters his head against the

40 *Look Homeward, Angel*, p. 117.
Then, in a rapid turnabout, the sister will have vented her anger and will lavish loving embraces on the ill-treated child.

Now she could drain herself cleanly in a wild smother of affection. She would seize him, struggling and screaming, in her long arms, plaster kisses all over his red mad face, soothing him with hearty flattery.

This emotional love of the siblings which is expressed in an ambivalent manner is somewhat like the unusual love which existed between the parents of the family—a complex subject which will be touched on only briefly here. Almost the only normal thing concerning Eliza and Gant's relationship is their first meeting. Eliza meets him when she sells him a magazine subscription, and they have a typical courting scene. However, when they are later married, they have no honeymoon; and Eliza still refers to her husband as "Mr. Gant." The children are obvious proof that the parents did manage to get along at times, but the relationship of the couple is hardly more than physical. The lasting image of their unhappy affair comes through the eyes of young Eugene who senses and feels the division between them. When he first sees his father fondling his mother affectionately before the children, Eugene is embarrassed and

shame gathered in him in tangled clots, aching in his throat; he twisted his neck about convulsively, smiling desperately as he did later when he saw poor buffoons or mawkish scenes in the theatre. And he was

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41 Ibid.  
42 Ibid., p. 118.
never after able to see them touch each other with affection, without the same inchoate and choking humiliation; they were so used to the curse, the clamor, and the roughness, that any variation into tenderness came as cruel affectation.

It is no accident of art that Wolfe has his fictional counterpart, Eugene, come into the world on the dwindling end of a four month alcoholic spree by his father. The boy is brought into the world on the evening his drunken father threatens to murder his wife with a fireplace poker. Eugene, symbolically, is the product of two extremely different parents who love him in their own ways beyond measure. The relationship between Wolfe's protagonists and women is the focal point of this thesis. Probably, much of the trouble these characters had in finding the suitable woman may be traced to the early problems Tom Wolfe saw between his parents.

43 Ibid., p. 53.
CHAPTER III

OF TIME, THE RIVER, AND WOMEN

Eugene Gant has romantic failures early in life, and many of the worries of his life are related to these failures. Eugene's introduction to the subject of sex is not very pretty. The boy's earliest source of knowledge about sex and women is the usual older schoolmate who teaches him to sketch "tropical natives with sagging breasts and huge organs" in his schoolbooks. From this typical public school orientation to the facts of life, Eugene progresses to a more morbid idea of what sex is really all about. First, he falls in love with his fourth grade teacher, who, he imagines, desperately loves his pure heart. Later, the "love" which he hears of is the four-letter word type. When Eugene sees his despicable brother, Steve, as he sprawls on their father's bed with a slovenly woman, he is greatly repulsed. The boy also is aware of his father's illicit relations with a white boarder and a Negro maid. He learns something about the Southern attitude toward sexual activities when he delivers newspapers in his home town. As a newsboy, Eugene learns much about the local house of prostitution where racial

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Look Homeward, Angel, p. 75.
barriers are disregarded by the Southerners. All of this only causes Eugene to feel that the world has "turned hag" 2 if love is really as it appears, unwholesome and purely physical. There is no more fascinating, yet repulsive, scene than Eugene's visit to the Negro prostitute's house. For the young boy, the idea of romantic love still is quite real. It is ugly reality which does damage to the romantic ideas which Eugene has. When he resists the prostitute, she clasps him to her body and sings out, "Jelly Roll! Je-e-e-ly Roll!"; and the overwrought boy charges out of the ramshackle house only to hear the "rapid wail of sinners" from a nearby church. 3 Eugene's development as he learns of several types of illicit sex roles is emphasized repeatedly in Look Homeward, Angel. Wolfe presents Eugene as he retches violently after his first actual relation with a prostitute, as he awkwardly attempts to make love to the waitress Louise in Charleston, and finally as he almost finds fulfillment in his relationship with Laura James.

The Laura episode of Look Homeward, Angel is one of the most poignant parts of the novel and is extremely important in Eugene's development, or lack of it, as a total human being. Laura corresponds to Eugene's idea of the way a lover should be. Although Eugene realizes that Laura is not pretty, he seems to feel that she is too perfect to touch.

2Ibid., p. 199. 3Ibid., p. 253.
She was a virgin, crisp like celery—his heart shrank away from the pollution of his touch upon her. . . . She lifted her lovely face to him, pert and ugly as a boy's; it was inhabited by a true and steadfast decency. . . . All the young beauty in the world dwelt for him in that face that had kept wonder, that had kept innocence, that had lived in such immortal blindness to the terror and foulness of the world.4

To Eugene, Laura is a pure and clean-hearted little girl who has not reached the adult world yet. The Eden myth surrounds their brief but real love for one another. In the relation of an afternoon picnic, Wolfe is almost too extravagant with the sexual imagery. He mentions the "huge raw turret of a cement reservoir," a "foaming hawser" of water which roars from a pipe, and "a man . . . mowing with a scythe."5 The image of Eden is explicit. Eugene and Laura are frightened by a snake, but he tells her that snakes "won't hurt you."6 On the picnic, they find a little valley not unlike the Garden of Eden. Yet, an actual Eden cannot be inhabited by Wolfe's modern Americans. This blissful picture must be marred by something. The paradise is destroyed when Eugene learns that Laura is about to be married to another man, and she is not completely the innocent little girl it would seem. It is uncertain if the loss of Laura really upsets Eugene as much as his reaction may suggest.

4Ibid., p. 363.
5Ibid., pp. 375, 375, 377.
6Ibid., p. 377.
He says that he will never forget Laura, and it seems that he almost relishes the memory of their enchanted love which can never be taken from him.

Ghost, ghost, come back from that marriage that we did not foresee, return not into life, but into magic, where we have never died, into the enchanted wood, where we still lie, strewn on the grass. 7

Eugene's frustrations with females are quite relevant to his (and George Webber's) problems in the later novels. Most of the women who appear in the lives of Wolfe's protagonists are, in various ways, obstacles which are necessary to the men. However, there is one woman who does not fit into this category. This is Margaret Leonard, the school teacher who first inspired Eugene to write. It is Mrs. Leonard who first seems to take note of Eugene's abilities and causes him to direct his efforts toward literature. She is delighted in her ability to know and understand boys.

She did not have knowledge. But she had a wisdom. She found immediately a person's quality. Boys were her heroes, her little gods. She believed that the world was to be saved, life redeemed by one of them. She saw the flame that burns in each of them, and she guarded it. 8

Although Margaret Leonard does see the fine nature of Eugene's soul and kindles his artistic spirit rather than stifles it, she is still female and has her inadequacies. She sees only the "dominant color ... not always ... the shadings" 9

7Ibid., p. 380. 8Ibid., p. 254. 9Ibid.
in the boys she teaches. Still, she is able to feed Eugene the romantic nature of her own soul; and, simultaneously, the poems of great artists are given to him.

Mrs. Leonard is an integral character in the growth of Eugene's künstler spirit. For her, "the wine of the grape had never stained her mouth, but the wine of poetry was inextinguishably mixed with her blood." She is a "kindred spirit" to Eugene, but she does not aid his growth in the real world of women. As a matter of fact, she may have influenced Eugene's ideas about romantic love and the perfect woman. That is, Eugene sets up a romantic idea of woman early in life and this has a great deal to do with his later frustrations about women. Perhaps Mrs. Leonard's over-romanticized view of the world has had much greater influence on Eugene than it might appear. Although it is a parody of romantic, Hollywood love, Eugene's sentimental rendering of a love scene is not distant from his version of the perfect love.

"It is death, Veronica," he said, "and now I may speak."
"Yes, Bruce," she answered softly.
It was the first time he had ever heard her use his name, and his heart thrilled to it.
"I love you, Veronica," he said, "I have loved you since I found your almost lifeless body on the beach, during all the nights I lay outside your tent, listening to your quiet breathing within, love you most of all now in this hour of death when the obligation to keep silence no longer rests upon me."

\textsuperscript{10}Ibid., p. 255.
"Dearest, dearest," she whispered, and he saw her face was wet with tears. "Why didn't you speak? I have loved you from the first." 11

And Bruce-Eugene and his Veronica are gloriously saved from death by a gallant destroyer which sends the murderous natives running. However, their troubles are not over. Bruce-Eugene is afraid that Veronica's wealthy father will never accept a vagabond for a son-in-law. Veronica reassures him that she will never leave him no matter what the consequences, and he draws her "rapturously to him and, for the second time, but this time with the prophecy of eternal and abundant life before them, their lips met in sweet oblivion." 12

The point in bringing out this intended parody on love is the fact that Eugene Gant (or George Webber) scarcely goes past this conception of the love relationship. That is, his concept of love is that of the roses and violin sort. At least this is the type which he seems to desire. His actual experiences with loving leave him cold, unsatiated, and almost unloving.

In the second novel by Wolfe, Of Time and the River, the ultimate goal of the artist figure, Eugene Gant, is "to find a father, not merely the father of his youth, but the image of a strength and wisdom external to his need and superior to his hunger, to which belief and power of his

11 Ibid., pp. 87-88.
12 Ibid., p. 89.
own life could be united."¹³ Much has been written by the author and his critics about this so-called search-for-a-father theme. However, there are other implications in the novel that indicate that the search for "strength and wisdom"¹⁴ entailed not only a father figure but the right sort of woman also. This is not meant to imply that Eugene, Wolfe, or the reader believes or should believe that it is possible for the artist to always find such a woman somewhere. However, to live the fullest life, the artist and man must form a liaison with a suitable, good woman.

The idea of the woman in the novel is explained by Wolfe in a letter to John Wheelock. Wolfe says that in this novel woman represents the "fixed principle, the female principle—the earth again. . . . They want love, the earth, a home, fixity."¹⁵ Women represent the opposite of the males as "wandering seems . . . to be more of a male thing, and the fructification of the earth more a female thing."¹⁶ Indeed, Wolfe intended, before much of the book's material was edited, to devote a much longer portion to the "female thing."¹⁷ Thus, he thought that the enduring presence of women should be felt in the novel.

¹⁴ Ibd.
¹⁵ Letters, p. 235.
¹⁶ Ibd., p. 243.
¹⁷ Ibd.
Coming from parents who were "temperamental opposites," Eugene Gant already knows about difficult marriages. His experiences with love in his childhood and adolescence in Altamont and Pulpit Hill have left him curious to see if all the world is as his own world is. As young Eugene stands on the railroad platform, preparing to leave for Harvard and the other world, he is accompanied by two stereotypes of the Southern woman with whom he is well acquainted. One is his mother who

was somehow above and beyond a moral judgment... her life was somehow beyond these accidents of time, training, and occasion, and the woman was as guiltless as a child, a river, an avalanche, or any force of nature whatsoever.

...the face of a woman whose spirit had an almost elemental quality of patience, fortitude, and calm.

The other woman is almost the opposite to the mother in her demeanor. She is Eugene's sister whose

face... was large, high-boned, and generous and already marked by the frenzy and unrest of her own life. At moments it bore legibly and terribly the tortured stain of hysteria, of nerves stretched to the breaking point, of the furious impatience, unrest and dissonance of her own tormented spirit.

These two examples of Southern womanhood are extremely vital, but neither vitality is really the type which could nourish Eugene. There is love in them, but it is a harsh love which

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19 Of Time and the River, pp. 4-5.
20 Ibid., p. 5.
is not easily discernible and is not extremely nourishing. Eugene is not an "unsexed papal singer,"\textsuperscript{21} and he must symbolically leave behind the two types of Southern women. His search is the search for a different sort of vital woman who can return his love.

Eugene's flight from his mother, in keeping with the myth of Orestes and Clytemnestra, is not taken without an effort to stop him on the part of the mother. She breaks down in tears as the train approaches, but Eugene will not be trapped by her sort of devouring love and goes on with the departure. This is a symbolic murder of the mother figure. As Sydney Halpern notes, "the hero is the one who slays his mother either in a symbolic form or physically destroys the one who gave him birth."\textsuperscript{22} Eugene fulfills this duty of the hero as he destroys at least part of his mother by the departure from her.

At Harvard University the young Faustus finds his glorious daydreams turned into reality in the forms of thousands of unread books, in his new friend Francis Starwick, and in the cold mystery of the northland. The work in the drama shop with Professor Hatcher keeps Eugene happy and


\textsuperscript{22}Sydney Halpern, "The Mother-Killer," \textit{The Psychoanalytic Review}, LII (Summer, 1965), 73.
busy. However, the certainty of impending fruition and fulfillment is not accompanied by any elations about the Northern women. Spring comes to the land, and "there was the rustle of gingham by day and sober glances; then, under low eaves and starlight, the stir of the satiny thighs in feather beds, the white small bite and tigerish clasp of secret women--always the buried heart, the sunken passion, the frozen heat."\(^23\) For some inarticulate reason some of the women of the North hold little fascination for the young boy. Many of them are like the "ageless and embalmed"\(^24\) ticket agent, untouched and untouched, who sits in her glass cage and watches the crowds. A few of the Northern women are alluring. They are like the "ripe brainless blondes with tender lips and a flowery smell," or the "slow-bodied girls from Kansas City," or "the girls with shapely arms who stand on ladders picking oranges."\(^25\) However, there are some who are different from the others but still are unapproachable. They are the ones named "Neilson, Lundquist, Jorgenson, and Brandt" who are "immense and lovely girls, with the grip of a passionate bear."\(^26\) And still there are other more desirable types. There is the aging

\(^{23}\) Of *Time and the River*, p. 137.


\(^{26}\) *Ibid.*
waitress "on Tremont street, a woman quiet, decent, and
demure in manner, who wore faintly on her lips continually
the most sensual, tender, and seductive mystery of a smile." 27
This woman is no longer young and beautiful, but she haunts
the boy's mind and causes him to love the thought of her.
He knows nothing about her, but this is part of her beauty.
To Eugene, this woman is "a creature of queenly beauty,
delicacy, intelligence, and grandeur of the soul—and every
obstacle of cold and acid fact that interposed itself between
him and his vision he would instantly destroy by the wild
fantastic logic of desire." 28

Eugene is viewing the ideal which he sees in the
waitress in much the same way he viewed Laura before he
found out that she would soon be married. Both of the women
are much less in reality than Eugene feels that they are.
He made a mistake by scrutinizing Laura too closely, and
he plans to keep his distance from the waitress and maintain
the romantic ideal. In a sense, Eugene is becoming like the
boy whom he views from a train.

On the corner, just below the window of his
berth there stood a boy of eighteen or twenty years.
The boy was tall . . . he stood there indecisively.

. . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . .

Meanwhile a young prostitute . . . strolled over
to the corner . . . looking around with an innocent
and yet impudent look, appearing not to look directly
at the boy or openly to invite him, but plainly
waiting for him to speak to her. 29

27 Ibid., p. 153. 28 Ibid. 29 Ibid., p. 473.
As the boy stands there dumbly, another man, who is well-dressed and smart looking, propositions the whore and takes her away with him. The young boy stands there alone in humiliation and scowls fiercely before he stamps off into the darkness. Symbolically, this is explicative of Eugene's relationships with women. He would like to have liaison but procrastinates too much and loses out.

The Northern women are unlike the Southern women, yet they are much like them as far as Eugene is concerned. That is, he is seemingly unable to ever become really close to one woman of either region. His aunt Louise jokes him about finding an independent-thinking New England girl, and Uncle Bascom grimly warns him to leave the Yankee women alone. However, the advice and warning are not to be needed by Eugene, who really intends to leave all women alone. Even when he takes his uncle's advice and visits the family of Genevieve Simpson, Eugene is not impressed by the girl's ability at the violin, her good figure, or anything about her. Rather, he harshly and bitterly taunts the whole family with monstrous lies about his family and the South. This facet of Eugene's character is difficult to fathom. He would like to seduce Genevieve, but his glee over lying to her family causes him to forget any romantic notions he once had. Why does he so completely reject the goodness which is in the Simpsons and laugh cruelly at their plight?
Perhaps it is because he realizes that Mrs. Simpson and her
daughter would like to snare him in their plans for Gene-
vieve's future. Eugene has no such plans, for he knows that
any liaison with Genevieve would imprison him for life.

Eugene's graduation from Harvard and his trip back to
his home only prove the thesis of one of his later works—
you can't go home again. At home, Eugene is restless as he
awaits the letter which would bring the acceptance of his
entrance into the artist's world. The letter never comes,
and he must accept an instructor's position in a metropolitan
university.

This period of Eugene's life contains no great reve-
lation concerning the female. Prior to this time and during
it, Eugene's view of womankind is obscured by his own
romantic ideal of womankind, and deteriorates because of
the actions of many of the women he has known. During the
first college semester, the young teacher becomes disgusted
with the Yankee Jews who scowl at him with "grawling, mock-
ing, swarthily jeering faces."30 These faces belong to the
wise ones like Abe Jones. Also they are the faces of the
lovely and insolent young Jewesses, as Wolfe calls them,
who talk brazenly to one another while Mr. Gant tries to
discuss Shakespeare or Donne. It is the Jewish females

30Ibid., p. 420.
whose physical properties seem to swarm over Eugene and
submerge him in sensuality.

The potent young Jewesses, thick, hot, and heavy
with a female odor, swarmed around him in a sensual
tide, they leaned above him as he sat there at his
table, pressing deliberately the crisp nozzles of
their melon-heavy breasts against his shoulder,
slowly, erotically they moved their bellies in to
him, or rubbed the heavy contours of their thighs
against his legs; they looked at him with moist red
lips through which their wet red tongues lolled
wickedly, and they sat upon the front rows of the
class in garments cut with too extreme a style of
provocation and indecency . . . they exposed the
banded silken ruffle of their garters and the ripe
heavy flesh of the underlegs.31

The intense preoccupation with the Jewish females of modern
America is probably just another of Eugene's and Tom Wolfe's
interests in the different sorts of women--Negro, white,
Jewish, and what have you. As in the case of many other
things, Eugene forms an opinion about the Jewish women and
then scrutinizes them closer and changes his ideas. As he
gets to know Abe's family better, he is able to see the
strength and endurance of the American Jewish female. It
is the mother of Abe who becomes important symbolically to
Eugene and to the image of womankind in the novel.

The face of the old woman might have served . . .
as the painting of the female everywhere--not the
female with her ephemeral youth, her brief snares of
hair and hide, her succulent burst of rose-lips and
flowing curve--but the female timeless, ageless, fixed
in sorrow and fertility, as savage, as enduring, and
as fecund as the earth.32

31Ibid., pp. 478-479. 32Ibid., p. 492.
In the mother of Abe, Eugene senses that strength of
the pioneer women of America. He has changed somewhat his
idea of the Jews. However, to say that he has seen strength
in the American woman, Jewish or any other, does not neces-
sarily mean that he sees this fortitude as a virtue. Perhaps
Wolfe senses this strength with the same disdain that the
foreigner has for the assertiveness of American women. Too,
Wolfe's view of older women is often much more favorable
than his view of younger women. When Eugene meets the very
elite females of America at Joel Pierce's Hudson River
home, he feels uneasy in their powerful presences. He senses
in their voices something "assertive, arrogant, and inci-
sive"\(^{33}\) that makes them more indelible in Eugene's memory
than the men around them. Wolfe can embrace these women
little better than Eugene as the latter hugs Rosalind, one
of the elite females, in a "clumsy, helpless fashion."\(^{34}\)
This is merely one of the instances in which Eugene is
rendered helpless and inarticulate by women. Almost always,
he is the sort of male who would disrupt Miss Telfair's
world of Dresden china and antique clocks.

Eugene Gant is unsatisfied with what he perceives in
the faces of American women. Many times Wolfe affords the
reader with a view of the American prostitute with her

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\(^{33}\)Ibid., p. 504.

\(^{34}\)Ibid., p. 553.
"dyed hair of straw-pile falseness," and "a false, meagre, empty, painted little whore's face." This image of the cheapened female is, to a certain extent, Eugene's view of the American female. Thus, when he quits his teaching position and makes his great escape to Europe, he is not only searching for a different land; he is looking for a finer type of woman than the ones he has seen thus far in life. Tragically, the boy-hunter will not find what he is seeking in the old countries. The world of women transcends the national boundaries of man. Ultimately, Eugene will be forced by his own desires to consort with more American women while he is in Europe.

The European women who meet Eugene's eye are frequently cold and harsh in their bearing. Mrs. Coulson, Eugene's landlady in England, is good looking, brisk, worldly, and seems much like those Americans whose aloofness and crispness make them appear unloving. The response to a man from this sort of woman is symbolically shown in Edith Coulson, the daughter of the landlady, when she greets Eugene for the first time.

The girl looked at Eugene for a moment with her hard bright glance, thrust out a small gloved hand, and shook hands briefly, a swift firm greeting.

The adjectives in this brief descriptive passage loudly affirm Miss Coulson's distinct separation from men such as

\[35^{\text{Ibid.}}, \text{p.} \, 596. \quad 36^{\text{Ibid.}}, \text{p.} \, 621.\]
Eugene. Yet, Eugene later goes against his better judgment and tries to get Edith to go with him back to America. This is completely foolhardy, and he knows before she answers that she will reject his offer with the "bright armour of her young eyes." Edith's case with Eugene is rather difficult to understand. Eugene knows that anyone's attempt to seduce Edith would probably not be in vain; however, he does not want to do this. When he does at last make his sincere offer of love to her, is it not surprising that she turns him down? Perhaps Edith has been unloved so long that she has become invulnerable to even a sincere attack.

From the foggy, sodden, old terrain of England, Eugene treks on in his quest to France, the land known for its amorous men and women. The names of the French resound in Eugene's mind, for "their names were countless as the sands upon the shore--and in the end, their names were only names and names and names--and nothing more." This is only part of Wolfe's own dislike of France and Frenchmen which he gives to the character Eugene. Wolfe once compared the interest which Paris held for him with the interest Sauk Centre would have for him. The only women in France that

Eugene notices are the prostitutes who are described much like the ones he has already seen in New York.

It is an old Harvard buddy, Francis Starwick, who stops Eugene from leaving France in despair. This friend also keeps Eugene from working on his book, and he introduces Eugene to two American women who represent two types of womanhood: Elinor, who laughs easily and makes Eugene feel comfortable, and Ann, who sullenly refuses to enter in the frolics of her three friends. Yet more and more Eugene is drawn to the latter and is repulsed by the former as he gets to know both women better. Both represent the fixity of the female which attracts and repulses Eugene. Soon, the active assertion of Elinor's will over her friends becomes apparent as she "takes charge of everything." On the other hand, Ann remains smoulderingly docile and becomes Eugene's "dark Helen" whom he will love desperately.

At this point in Eugene's life, it would seem that a woman could be allowed to become "an obstacle to man's spiritual aspirations if he allows her to influence him." Eugene would allow this "Amazonian figure" of a woman to win him and master him. Ann represents the goodness in the

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40 Of Time and the River, p. 691.  
41 Ibid., p. 695.  
43 Of Time and the River, p. 705.
fixity of the earth, and she could call Eugene back from his wanderings. He is inarticulate when he is around her, and he cannot stay away from her. Too, he cannot write but drags around the cafes and bistros with the three friends in Paris. Eugene's art is suffering, but his need for love is partially relieved.

The culminating scene depicting Eugene's love for Ann is as terrible as the final scene between him and Laura James. In many ways the scenes parallel each other. After weeks of drinking together, traveling together, and spending nearly all their waking hours together, the four friends are about worn out with each other. Eugene and Ann have never expressed any overt action which would prove their love or dislike for the other. Only Eugene is known to love Ann.

How long he lay asleep there on the floor he did not know. But he was wakened by the sound of her voice—a sullen monotone that spoke his name... It was repeated again and again... until he knew there was no doubt of it, that he was no longer asleep...

He sat up like a flash and put his arms around her. He was beside her... and he hugged her to him in a grip of speechless, impossible desire: he kissed her on the face and neck... he kissed her again and again on the face, clumsily, thickly, with that wild impossible desire, and with a horrible feeling of guilt and shame. He wanted to kiss her on the mouth... he wanted her more than he had ever wanted any woman in his life, and at the same time he felt a horrible profanity in his touch, as if he were violating a vestal virgin, trying to rape a nun.44

44. Ibid., p. 755.
This reluctant feeling on the part of Eugene to touch the girl is soon replaced by angry efforts to seduce her, and then he apologizes profusely. The very nonsense of Eugene's position in relation to Ann is underscored again when she breaks down and tells him that she is in love with Starwick—who is not interested in her at all and whose homosexuality is becoming more and more obvious. Eugene's dream turns again to dust in his mouth. The impossibilities of both his love of Ann and her love of Starwick make this a very tragic scene.

The rest of the European tour is marred by Eugene's downcast feelings over his loss of Ann. He cannot work and takes the fast trains in an effort to quash the idea of fixity which he almost accepted. He meets and becomes acquainted with the old countess of Orleans, who warns him to beware of the "bad women" of France. Yet this woman snares him in a carefully planned net and tries to use his American citizenship to help her position among her town folk. The old woman appears after the train ride to Orleans and is the earth again to Eugene. Like Antaeus, Eugene must stay on the earth, at least at times, to survive.

However, Eugene suffocates among the timeless females of the earth. He soon offers his supplications to Rhea, the recreative maternal spirit of the earth. Eugene sees a

\[45\text{Ibid.},\ p.\ 819.\]
young French girl who seems to embody the idea behind the mentioning of Rhea.

She was small, plump; her figure was erotically seductive; she raised her head . . . and he saw that in her neck, a warm, slow pulse was beating—slowly, slowly, richly, warmly beating. She turned her eyes, which were gray and smokey with cat-like potency, and looked at him, smiled drowsily, and slowly crossed her heavy legs with a slow, sensual sliding of warm silk.46

This girl, a shining, emerald green river, and the cooking in an inn are all that Eugene can recall of the town of Lyons as he hurtles away from it on a fast bound express.

Shortly before the end of Of Time and the River, Wolfe juxtaposes several images which convey his ideas of what sex is all about. One is not overwhelmed by any sense of optimism by these depictions and their meanings. The first is the symbolic representation of the female as Rhea again. As Eugene watches the ships in the water, he sees

again . . . the faces of the lovely women, and . . . the lights of love and passion in their eyes, and again he felt the plangent and depthless undulance, the unforgettable feeling of the fathomless might of the sea beneath a ship; a wild cry was torn from his throat, and a thousand unutterable feelings of the voyage, of white coasts and sparkling harbors and the creaking, eerie cries of gulls, of the dear, green dwelling of the earth again, and of strange golden cities, potent wines, delicious foods, of women, love, and amber thighs spread amorously

46 Ibid., p. 880.
in ripe golden hay, of discovery and new lands, welled up in him like deathless song and certitude.\textsuperscript{47}

Then, after this rather exotic image of the woman and what she means to Eugene as an artist, Wolfe effectively returns to the harsh realities as Eugene is confronted with Starkwick, Elinor, and Ann at an accidental meeting in a cafe. The world rocked before him as if shattered by the force of an explosion: all the life seemed to have been blown out of him, and he sat staring at them, blind, numb, hollow, emptied to a shell.\textsuperscript{48}

Finally, to cap off the shocking realization of what women really are, Eugene is confronted with another glimpse of unwholesome sex roles—the two priests and the prostitutes. To Eugene, this "indecent comedy"\textsuperscript{49} of the priests flirting with the whores causes the world to turn even more sour.

However, \textit{Of Time and the River} does not end on the note of unsavory sexual relationships. Rather, the last chapter, entitled prophetically "Faust and Helen," is extremely optimistic. Wolfe begins the chapter in a symbolic fashion with the "English ship" approaching "the coasts of France . . . with the strange, looming immediacy of powerful and gigantic objects that move at great speed."\textsuperscript{50} The ship is a symbol of Eugene's passage to India. The vehicle

\textsuperscript{47}Ibid., p. 884.
\textsuperscript{48}Ibid., p. 886.
\textsuperscript{49}Ibid., p. 890.
\textsuperscript{50}Ibid., p. 903.
on which he is to sail the seas of wandering is this ship, a symbol of the ageless and powerful female. The ship is referred to as "she" over and over again. Wolfe says that he is "proud of that ship and of man, who built her, who is so small because he is so weak." The ship is the woman of the world as Eugene sees her and needs her.

She lay there, an alien presence in those waters; she had the reality of magic, the reality that is so living and magnificent that it seems unreal. She was miraculous and true—as one looked at her, settled like some magic luminosity upon that mournful coast, a strong cry of exultancy rose up in one's throat: the sight of the ship was as if a man's mistress had laid her hand upon his loins.

It is no accident that the glorious ship is an American ship that is a "visitant from a new world." Also, about to board the ship is the woman for whom all the descriptive language of the ship's meaning has really been meant. It is Esther Jack, the perfect woman Eugene has waited for so long.

A tall and sensual-looking Jewess, she was seated on a pile of baggage, smoking a cigarette, her long legs indolently crossed; indifferently, with smouldering and arrogant glances, she surveyed the crowd.

After Eugene sees the sensual lady, Wolfe becomes downright melodramatic.

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51 Letters, p. 245.
52 Of Time and the River, p. 905.
53 Ibid., p. 906.
54 Ibid., p. 907.
He turned and saw her then, and so finding her, was lost, and so losing self, was found, and so seeing her, saw for a fading moment only the pleasant image of the woman that perhaps she was, and that life saw. He never knew; he only knew that from that moment his spirit was impaled upon the knife of love. From that moment on he never was again to lose her utterly, never to re-possess unto himself the lonely, wild integrity of youth.\textsuperscript{55}

In her Wolfean novel about the affair between herself and Thomas Wolfe, Aline Bernstein, the biographical model for Esther Jack, writes of their first clutches on the ship.

He folded her in arms like the arms of some steel machine, his hands went quickly and bruised her, he clutched her legs, thighs, and breasts, he tore at her dress and tried to pull it away . . . she wondered about the girl he was running away from . . . and then she did not care . . . her blood was racing, her heart pounding like mad.\textsuperscript{56}

This scene on the ship is indicative of the promise of Esther, This intriguing woman will become extremely important to George Webber in the later novels. It would seem that Eugene has finally found his perfect woman.

\textsuperscript{55}\textit{Ibid.}, p. 911.

CHAPTER IV
THE PROMISE OF ESTHER

After Thomas Wolfe completed Of Time and the River, he had less than four years to live. In this time he wrote in rough form the manuscripts for two more extensive novels, to be named The Web and the Rock and You Can't Go Home Again. In writing these last novels Wolfe attempted to do something quite different from his earlier work.¹ Edward C. Aswell, the last editor to work with Wolfe, claims that the reasons for the changes included the author's own desire not to embarrass his family further with any more clearly autobiographical writing; also, Wolfe did want to re-approach his own childhood from another angle which was to be found in the different "terms of a new character."² This signifies, of course, the birth of George Webber and the discarding of Eugene Gant. Undoubtedly, Wolfe's decision to re-name and re-build his protagonist was influenced somewhat by an important essay which appeared in 1936. Bernard de Voto's "Genius is not Enough,"³ which appeared shortly after Wolfe's

²Ibid., p. 230.
publication of The Story of a Novel, is a direct challenge to Wolfe's inability to create a work of art from the artistic placenta of his genius.\(^4\) Also, de Voto charged that the novels were so autobiographical that they were scarcely fiction.\(^5\) Perhaps it is because of de Voto's criticism that Wolfe decided to change the superficial aspects of his future novels so they would not resemble his own life so accurately.

In a letter to Thomas C. Aswell, Wolfe outlined his intentions in transforming Eugene Gant into George Webber.

The protagonist—the central character ... is im-
portant now because the author hopes he will be, or illustrate in his own experience, every one of us.

. . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . .
. . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . .
. . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . .

This is a book ... of discovery, hence of union with
life, not a book of personal revolt, hence of separation
from life. The protagonist becomes significant not as
the tragic victim of circumstance, the romantic hero
in conflict and revolt against his environment, but as
a kind of polar instrument round which the events of
life are grouped, by means of which they are touched,
explained, and apprehended, by means of which they are
seen and ordered.\(^6\)

\(^4\)Turnbull, p. 249.  \(^5\)de Voto, p. 4.

\(^6\)Letters, pp. 713-714.
With this rather mature thought in mind, Wolfe began his final works. He succeeded in fulfilling his intentions to a degree. Although George Webber is born, the protagonist of the later novels still remains a Gantian Wolfe in a monkey's clothing.

The beginning chapters of The Web and the Rock are not of great importance in a study of womankind in Wolfe's novels. That is, Wolfe is primarily interested in presenting the thoughts of a boy and adolescent in the South of the early 1900's. Although the characters are different from those of Look Homeward, Angel, both books offer quite similar appraisals of a Southern childhood. Many of the characters in The Web and the Rock share characteristics with counterpart persons in the earlier novels. For example, George Webber's Aunt Maw is obviously a re-working of Eliza Gant. The women are described in a similar fashion many times.

Aunt Maw's world came from the lonely sea depth, some huge abyss and maw of drowning time, which consumed all things it fed upon except itself--consumed them with horror, death, and the sense of drowning in a sea of blind, dateless Joyner time.7

How many times in Look Homeward, Angel is Eliza Gant described with metaphors of time? Anyone who has read the book knows that she is often equated with agelessness and time. Although Eliza Gant and Aunt Maw are quite similar, the latter character's

relationship with her young male ward is handled differently from that of Eliza and Eugene. Aunt Maw becomes the universal female as she antagonizes the freedom-minded boy with her petty tasks. The boy's complaint against her sort of woman has an appeal to almost any man or boy.

It is that women in the early afternoon are dull, and dully ask dull things of us; it is that women in the afternoon are dull, and ask us always for a little thing, and do not understand! 8

Any boy would rather rest, as young George does, on his stomach in the spring grass and watch the world pass on the street.

Wolfe includes several excellent vignettes of boyhood friends to George Webber. The most successful and memorable of these characters is Nebraska Crane. This boy is the typical leader of the gang. He is one of the "most satisfyingly real characters" 9 created by Wolfe. Nebraska is indicative of Wolfe's intention to create totally fictitious people in his new novel. Edward Aswell holds that Nebraska is based on no actual acquaintance of Wolfe. 10

Although the first chapters of The Web and the Rock include some of Wolfe's best writing, it is in the last portions that woman really becomes integral. In the last chapter of Of Time and the River, Eugene Gant receives a promise of

8Ibid., p. 30. 9Aswell, p. 216.
10Ibid.
love from a wealthy Jewish matron. It is not until well into The Web and the Rock that George Webber, as a continuation of Eugene Gant, is allowed to accept the offer of love by becoming a friend to Esther Jack. If a reader can see the obvious continuation of the Wolfean protagonist from the earlier novels to the later ones, this is not a disturbing occurrence.

The meeting between Esther Jack and George Webber is quite different from that rapturous first embrace of Eugene and Esther. Wolfe obviously has matured, and the representation of George as a facet of himself in a love affair is indicative of his achieved maturity.

Monk's first impression of her was of a woman of middle age, of small but energetic figure and with a fresh, ruddy, and healthy face. If his own mental phrase at the moment could ever have been recaptured or defined, he would probably have described her simply as "a nice-looking woman," and let it go at that.  

The woman is described almost as if she were being described by another person than the author of Look Homeward, Angel and Of Time and the River. Wolfe's view of womankind has altered somewhat.

However, the first meeting of the future lovers is not really an adequate foreshadowing of the relationship which they are to have. Shortly after that mature appraisal of Esther, George realizes that he will never again be able

"to see that woman as perhaps she really is." It seems that George will suffer from the same illusions which Eugene Gant had earlier about women.

After George and Esther return from Europe on the same ship, George longs to see her once again. However, she does not call him or come to see him; and he is bothered by this enough to write her a letter in which he expresses his admiration of her.

It was one of those pompous, foolish, vainglorious letters that young men write, that seem so fine when they write them, and that they writhe over when they recall them later.

George's need for someone to love him is indicative of the artist's need for something other than his work. Wolfe is expressing here the need in his own life for someone to love and to be loved by. As any Wolfe scholar knows, Esther Jack is the fictional counterpart to Wolfe's own mistress, Aline Bernstein.

It is relevant to a discussion of The Web and the Rock to study the Wolfe-Bernstein relationship on which the Webber-Jack affair is based. The novel is a "fictionalized account of the most important relationship of Wolfe's adult life." This is true because this is the only satisfactory liaison

12 Ibid., p. 296.  
13 Ibid., p. 300.  
14 Turnbull, p. 96.  
which Wolfe had with a woman for any amount of time. Aline Bernstein was an arty and rich Jewish matron, the daughter of a theatrical father and a homebody mother. By the time Thomas Wolfe met her, she had been married for fifteen years to a wealthy broker and had already become a respected set designer in the theatrical world of New York City.

It is Aline's role in Thomas Wolfe's life and the influence that she had upon him that is most important in a study of Wolfe's relationship with women. One critic says that Aline is "cast in the hexamorous role of mistress, cook, mentor, patron, mother, and muse" to her lover in the fictional representation of her. Esther Jack is proficient in each of these duties; however, it is as muse and mother-figure that she is really most important.

In the role of the poet's muse, Esther is a source of ideas and an inspiration to George. George quizzes her many times for anecdotes from her New York childhood. She is a believer in George's artistic abilities from the first. It is from her that George receives most of the stimulating pressures which motivate him to write the novel. Esther Jack brings "order to the chaos of George's life and sets him upon a regular schedule of work that would . . . yield results."

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16 Turnbull, pp. 98-99.  
17 Ibid., p. 99.  
18 Reeves, p. 280.  
19 Ibid., p. 291.
As a maternal figure, Esther really meets most of the requirements. She is fifteen years older than George and has children of her own. Esther's attitude toward George is completely sympathetic and is not unlike the protective feeling which is usually associated with a mother's love. Wolfe even applies the maternal image to Esther. As she is described, he points out her horn-rimmed glasses which gives her "delicate face a motherly appearance." Indeed, the brisk movements and peering glances which are characteristic of Esther are quite like those actions when performed by Eliza Gant, the mother of Eugene Gant in Look Homeward, Angel. The Wolfean hero has searched through two novels for the perfect woman. Always he has been disappointed for one reason or another. The affair between Esther and George promises in its early stages to become a nearly perfect love. Perhaps it is because Esther can perform for a while the double roles of mother and lover of George.

Esther Jack is an important person to George for many reasons. To a reader of The Web and the Rock, the real importance of Esther is that she causes a transformation in George during their relationship. Before their love affair, George is an extremely immature young scamp. During and after the love George is not a much better person, and one probably would dislike such a person as a personal acquaintance.

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However, there is some change in him. At least during the liaison there is a hint that George will begin to realize his role as an artist more realistically. It is another sort of understanding that George must come to first, the knowledge that someone must think that he is worth something. In other words, someone must need and love George. When George feels that he is special to someone, he must change.

A miraculous change had been effected in Monk's life, and, as so often happens, he was scarcely aware at first that it had come. He did not see at first the meaning that Esther had for him. It was not merely the fact of romantic conquest that had wrought the change; in its essential values it was probably this fact least of all. Much more than this it was . . . that for the first time in his whole life he mattered deeply, earnestly, to someone else.  

This paragraph is indicative of the first transformation which George undergoes. True, the same old immature ideas appear; but they are toned down considerably from those amorous wailings of Eugene Gant. Still, the egocentric nature of George's love for Esther will eventually undermine their relationship.

While George is away from Esther he is able to write "furiously every moment he could snatch from his duties at school." This desire and ability to write continuously seems to be nourished by the interval periods of loving Esther and eating her fine meals. Too, Esther is able to bring his soaring spirit back to the realities of earth.

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21Ibid., p. 362.  
22Ibid., p. 363.
Thomas Wolfe was able to portray a second level character in *The Web and the Rock*. This marks a departure from the strictly first level autobiographical writing of the early novels. Wolfe was able to use Esther Jack as an aware character who viewed the world somewhat differently from his first level protagonists who really were facets of his alter ego. It sometimes seems that Esther might have written some sections of this novel in which she talks about herself. When she describes her life, it is as vivid as when Wolfe expresses his own emotions through Eugene or George. Life, says Esther,

sometimes [means] the design of the elevated structure across the street where a station is, and sometimes it's the smell of bolts of new, clean cloth, and sometimes it's the way you feel when you make a dress—you can feel the design go out of the tips of your fingers into the cloth as you shape it. Wolfe has been able to transfer his own sensitivity for life to a character other than the central character.

The plot of this novel centers mainly upon the love affair and the publication problems with George's first novel. The role of Esther as George's muse has already been discussed; however, this role is sensed most clearly by reading the actual day by day existence of George and Esther. The ecstatic joy of the two lovers is often apparent.

23 Reeves, pp. 282-283.

She would meet him late at night sometimes, after she'd gone to a gay and brilliant dinner party, or had given one herself, and here, too, she would be flushed with happy energy, charged with gaiety and good spirits, full of news. And now the world she brought to him was no longer the world of morning work and business; it was the great world of the night, a golden world of pleasure, wealth, distinction, talent, and success. She was charged with it. \(^{25}\) still sparkling with its brilliance and its joy.\(^{25}\)

Vitality, the love of working, and devotion are three gifts which Esther brings to George. He seems to thrive on her very presence. However, the persecution complex which worried Wolfe is present within George Webber. Mistrust and suspicion of one lover by the other has many times been the downfall of them. George is jealous of Esther's acquaintances in the theater. The eventual falling out between Esther and George is foreshadowed. George is never very happy when he is around Esther's other friends. This is a manifestation of George's selfish interest in Esther. To share her with anyone or anything else is impossible! However, when Esther shows the least bit of possessiveness toward him, he is angry and does something to prove his independence. When Esther accuses him of ogling a girl in a market, he harshly tells her, "I'm free," and "you have nothing to do with it now. I'll do as I please."\(^{26}\) The barb in Webber's mind concerning Esther's imagined unfaithfulness to him is apparent early in their love. Shortly after he first accompanies her to the

\(^{25}\)Ibid., p. 370. \(^{26}\)Ibid., p. 426.
theater, he worries about her "somber moods"\textsuperscript{27} in which, he imagines, she is dreaming of a past lover. These unimportant doubts about Esther are indicative of the final break. That is, George wants to possess Esther completely; but he does not want to be even partially possessed by anyone. George wants a one-way love affair. He expects complete devotion and honor from Esther, but he is not mature enough to realize that he must give a portion of himself to have such an arrangement.

This reaction against the possessive nature of women in regard to their men becomes an important theme. Wolfe explores the idea concerning male artists and the women who live off of them (as Wolfe probably viewed the relationship). The very title of this novel, \textit{The Web and the Rock}, is connected to this theme. The "web" is symbolic of the floating, creatively beautiful world of artists (men only); and the "rock" is symbolic of the solid, durable, timeless female. George finds in Esther a woman who is well-founded on her native earth which is "that swarming and immortal rock on which she trod."\textsuperscript{28} George Webber must have at least a bit of the earth; however, he must not be too confined to earth to become a writer. To become too entangled with Esther would mean the forfeiture of his aspirations to write. It sounds contradictory to say that George must escape from the

\textsuperscript{27}\textit{Ibid.}, p. 345. \hspace{1cm} \textsuperscript{28}\textit{Ibid.}, p. 365.
woman who has encouraged him to write so he will be able to write. But this is the viewpoint of Thomas Wolfe in *The Web and the Rock*. It seems that George needs Esther to get him started; however, he must leave her protective custody if he is to progress. Wolfe offers a pathetic example of a man who does not loose himself from the grasp of a female. This man is Stephen Hooker, the gentile friend of the Jack family. He leads a completely colorless life and seems depressingly sterile to George. The description of Hooker is both sympathetic and haughty.

He had lived a hermit's life, incurred by filial devotion to his mother. He was remote, detached, amorous of all the rich life of the senses, with his iron brain knowing what joy was without the power to feel it.  

George has broken the ties between himself and his mother-figure. He has sewn himself to Esther as if she were his mother. Therefore, he realizes that he, too, may face the same fate as Stephen Hooker.

It is at the home of a friend to Esther that George sees another example of man's tendency to affix himself to something stable. At Frank Werner's apartment George is very impressed by the warmth and beauty of the place with its extensive library and expensive furniture. George contrasts his immature desires at the time with his knowledge at a later date.

For it still seemed to him that the life of the creative man should represent an achievement into this kind of security. It still seemed to him that the mature artist could, in a life like this, achieve an escape from—he would have called it a triumph over—the savage conflicts of the world, the harsh and violent grappling with reality. With the ignorance and the hope of youth, the warm and cozy little light that such a house as this suggested... the kind of life an artist ought to have. His untried youth was not able to understand... that man's conflict with the force of reality is unceasing, that life is an ordeal to which a true man must expose and steel himself with an ever-increasing fortitude, that for the artist most of all in this hard world there is no security, that he... must draw his nourishment from stone, win through glory and his soul's salvation... and that there is for him no comfortable retreat behind green shutters and warm lights as long as life waxes in him and endures.30

This realization expressed in this paragraph concerns not only a secure dwelling, but it concerns the shutters of comfort which Esther can shut over the artistic spirit of the man. The love and smothering interest which she has for him would seem to suffocate the necessarily wild part of him.

In his own vain manner George is actually saying that within him lies the potentiality that will enable him to become a great artist. If certain things do not hamper him, George believes that he will become a famous and wealthy writer. Of course, the fatality rate of aspiring artists is exceedingly high because of circumstances which keep them from becoming great. George seems to be crusading for the male artist which, he feels, is a dying breed in the modern

world. In his estimation, the male artist is the only truly fine creator. Rosalind Bailey is an example of the poor state of art in the 1930's. Rosalind is described as "virginal and girlish"\(^{31}\) even though she is at least forty years old. However, at a party Rosalind has a petty argument with a man who has allegedly called another woman the most beautiful woman in the world. This conceited and vain lady is the most famous poetess of the period. The state of letters is certainly poor if Rosalind is the supreme creator of the age! George sees Rosalind and realizes,

She was at once the idol and victim of the time that had produced her. One of those people who live to witness their own immortality, she was assured of it, and she did not know how fast and fleeting was her fame.\(^{32}\)

George, and Thomas Wolfe, are out to do battle with the female usurpers in the field of art. This is a fight against the decrease of male writers. In a mournful tone, Wolfe writes,

There had been a time on earth when poets had been young and dead and famous—and were men. But now the poet as the tragic child of grandeur and of destiny had changed. The child of genius was woman now, and the man was gone.\(^{33}\)

When George speaks of man's stolen position as the artist, one must not forget that Esther Jack, too, is an artist.

\(^{31}\)Ibid., p. 448.  
\(^{32}\)Ibid., p. 449.  
\(^{33}\)Ibid., p. 450.
George soon begins to find fault with everything that Esther does. The strain of wondering whether or not the novel will be bought and published has much to do with the touchy feelings between the two lovers. Wolfe devotes pages and pages to describing the violent arguments which disrupt their lives. The quarrels are spaced among short moments of bliss when the two are in love and happy. In his frantic struggle to free himself from Esther, George is unfaithful to her. He does so consciously because

The fault was in himself, and his growing knowledge that, for him at least, love was not enough, and that a love which made him so dependent on her, which made him feel, without her, hopeless, helpless, and a thing of no account, was, for such a man as he, a prison of the spirit—and his spirit, needing freedom, now began to hurl itself against the bars.34

In his rebellion against Esther, George is often extremely cruel to the woman. He attacks Jews only to cause pain to Esther. He screams out to her that "every God-damned one of you [Jews], man or woman, will crawl upon your hands and knees—yes!—creep and crawl and contrive until you have a Gentile in your clutches."35 Before his manuscript is accepted, George harshly accuses Esther of causing him to believe that he could write. Moreover, she is the primary cause of his failure. She and her wealthy Jewish patrons of the arts share in a "conspiracy of death [that] was the

34 Ibid., p. 451.
castration of the spirit of a living man."\(^{36}\) Esther remains tearfully constant to George throughout the ordeals. Wolfe includes a very funny scene of reconciliation between them. Although the humor is obvious, there is a deeper meaning to the scene. The situation is when Esther placates angry George by describing the appetizing "good food"\(^{37}\) which she might cook for him if he allows her to stay. Of course, George likes to eat and cannot resist drooling at the mention of the food. He succumbs completely to her and forgets his anger. He is attempting to completely free himself from the female influence; however, he is caught by Esther, who appeals to his greatest desires. The man's stomach has rebelled against the artist's conscience.

The quarrels between George and Esther become steadily more violent and the gulf widens. In the final arguments, George confronts Esther with the evilness of her role as his mistress. He graphically describes to her the "common street and house and gutter whore,"\(^{38}\) an analogy to Esther's role. He curses and reviles her at every turn. The illusion of her power over him completely dominates his thoughts. Once in a conversation, George brings up what can be understood as the theme of the lost paradise of youth. He tells Esther in a brief moment of calm,

\(^{36}\)Ibid., p. 499.  
\(^{37}\)Ibid., p. 469.  
\(^{38}\)Ibid., p. 518.
No woman, young or old, that I ever knew, was wholly glorious; nor was love. The whole record is streaked and spotted as I never dreamed that it would be. The shining city of my youth and dream is a warren of grimed brick and stone. Nothing shines the way I thought it would--there is no Perfection. And instead of the proud Gibson girl of childhood fancy, I met--you.39

Although George is not supposed to be a mature Eugene Gant, one can almost directly relate Eugene's early loves to the preceding statement by George. Eugene's affairs with cheap women, prostitutes, and untrue lovers indicate that he, too, never met a perfect woman.

Shortly before George decides to depart for Europe, he explicates one major reason for the necessary split-up between himself and Esther. He has lost his "wild goat-cry of pain and joy and ecstasy."40 This cry, like the one which Eugene Gant had, is directly related to George's ability to view the world as an artist and to create. He attributes the loss of the cry to Esther. In some way she has stifled it. He must rid himself of her to recover the cry of his youth.

The ultimate outcome of the intense arguments between the lovers is a break. This parting comes when George decides to travel to Europe where the "wide ocean . . . [can] wash away the last remaining vestiges of their life together."41

You Can't Go Home Again is the least important of Wolfe's novels in an evaluation of the influence of women

39 Ibid., p. 483. (The ellipsis marks are Wolfe's.)
40 Ibid., p. 559.
41 Ibid., p. 568.
This novel is simply a continuation of the George Webber story begun in *The Web and the Rock*. That is, the former novel begins with George's return from the trip to Europe on which he embarked in the latter novel. He is, of course, the same man as before but there are some noticeable changes. First, the novel on which he has worked so hard has been published. Second, his attitude toward Esther Jack is changed considerably. The old ecstatic joys and the fierce fights have disappeared. They are replaced by a more mature evaluation of Esther. Wolfe's treatment of her is quite different, also. She becomes a more credible figure as he presents her proceeding through an average day in her life. George Webber does return to Esther after he comes back from Europe. However, their relationship is doomed.

The position of women has steadily deteriorated from the beginning of Wolfe's writing to the last. Esther Jack is important integrally only in the second book of *You Can't Go Home Again*. George and Esther have only a social relationship. The primary scene is a party at the Jack residence. Among all of these party-goers, George finally comes to the decision to completely sever his attachment with Esther. At the party, he questions,

*Could he as a novelist, as an artist, belong to the high world of privilege without taking upon himself the stultifying burden of that privilege? Could he write truthfully of life as he saw it, could he say*
the things he must, and at the same time belong to this world of which he would have to write? Were the two things possible? Was not this world of fashion, and privilege the deadliest enemy of art and truth?42

This world which the artist cannot exist within is the world of the city, of formally dressed party-goers, and of hostesses like Esther.

At Esther’s party, various characters are brought before George. Nearly all of these people are undesirable in George’s view. Esther brings Lily Mandell to meet George. Esther says that she loves Lily and George “best in the whole world,”43 and she wants them to become friends. However, George perceives a “note of protest”44 in Lily Mandell’s voice when she is forced to greet him. He feels that he is being rejected because he really does not fit into their society. George observes the decadence of the society which he once aspired to join. Amy Carlton is an example of the decadence in the society female. This young woman has the “tragic look of lost innocence in her face.”45 She is a woman whose promiscuity has made her almost a prostitute of the upper classes. George watches the horde of young men who follow her about “like a pack of dogs trailing after a

43 Ibid., p. 208.
44 Ibid.
45 Ibid., p. 204.
bitch in heat."  

Wolfe purposely presents corrupt sexual roles to underscore the rottenness which he feels is extant in the society class.

A cathartic device is used to signify George's separation from Esther and her friends. This device is the fire which breaks out in the apartment complex where the party is. Prior to the fire, George only begins to feel his unfitness. The fine description of the fire can be applied to the cleansing fire which rages through George's soul.

Deep in the honeycombs of the rock the lights burned green and red and yellow, silent in the eternal dark, lovely, poignant as remembered grief. Suddenly, all up and down the faintly gleaming rails, the green and yellow eyes winked out and flashed to warning red.  

Emphatically, Wolfe begins the chapter entitled, "Love is not Enough," with the sentence, "the fire was over."  

George and Esther manage to be alone together after the other guests have left; however, there is an "air of finality about everything."  

George has come to an important decision.

For he had learned tonight that love was not enough. There had to be a higher devotion than all the devotions of this fond imprisonment. There had to be a larger world than this glittering fragment of a world with all its wealth and privilege. Throughout his whole youth and early manhood, this very world of beauty, ease, and luxury, of power, glory,

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46 Ibid.  
48 Ibid., p. 243.  
47 Ibid., p. 238.  
49 Ibid., p. 248.
and security, had seemed the ultimate end of human ambition, the furthermost limit to which the aspirations of any man could reach. But tonight, in a hundred separate moments of intense reality, it had revealed to him its very core. He had seen it naked, with its guards down. He had sensed how the hollow pyramid of a false social structure had been erected and sustained upon a base of common mankind's blood and sweat and agony. So now he knew that if he was ever to succeed in writing the books he felt were in him, he must turn about and lift his face up to some nobler height.

George Webber divorces himself from women forever when he leaves Esther. He is leaving her to allow himself to write more and better works.

You Can't Go Home Again deals mainly with George's travels in Europe, his work with Foxhall Edwards, and his growth as a writer. Women really play a small role in the last half of the novel. George has slight affairs with Else Von Kohler and a woman named Dorothy; however, these are not at all important. The search-for-a-father theme which so many critics read into all of Wolfe's novels is more apparent in this novel. The treatment of Lloyd McHarg and particularly the sections on Edwards are related to the "father" myth. However, the impossible dream of the Wolfean character, which is to find the perfect woman somewhere, remains unrealized to the end.

50 Ibid., p. 249.
CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Conclusion

Thomas Wolfe's view of womankind does not indicate that the author had any great understanding of the female mind. Through his novels the view which he takes is consistently that of an adolescent, an immature adolescent at that! Wolfe presents many sorts of women in his fiction, but his reaction to all of them is characteristically the same. Wolfean protagonists demand complete devotion, solid protection, and moral support from females. Likewise, they seldom offer much in return for their demands. Luckily for Wolfe and his protagonists, the women whom they meet are magnanimous enough to offer all of these admirable qualities without expecting anything in return. Yet both George and Eugene are so selfish and mistrustful of their women friends that a permanent liaison with any woman is impossible for them. One can expect such an attitude in Eugene Gant when he is still a youngster. However, it is disappointing to find such an attitude in him after he attends college. More disturbing are the same adolescent feelings which are also in George Webber, who is middle-aged and supposedly intelligent.
Perhaps the blame for the attitudes of George and Eugene can be placed on Thomas Wolfe. He possibly had similar feelings for women. Some of the strongest characters in the novels are women. It is, unfortunately, probable that Wolfe did not perceive this strength. He did not understand actual women with whom he lived and loved, and it is not surprising that he misunderstood those women he created.

 Appropriately, well over the last half of *You Can't Go Home Again* is concerned only with George Webber, the novelist. Webber travels about Europe meeting literary men and assimilating material for future novels. There is very little said about women; actually, no major female character appears. The conflict which has been within George since his birth is not there. One of the two forces in Wolfe's life has overcome the other. Wolfe once described these two forces in this way:

> By "the earth again" I simply mean the everlasting earth, a home, a place for the heart to come to, and earthly mortal love, the love of a woman, who . . . belongs to the earth and is a force opposed to that other great force that makes men wander, that makes them search, that makes them lonely, and that makes them both hate and love their loneliness.\(^1\)

In the last chapters of *You Can't Go Home Again* this conflict is dead or dormant in George Webber. Perhaps this is the only conclusion which can be drawn from Wolfe's presentation.

\(^1\)Letters, p. 239.
of the conflict between the desire to create art and the desire for security with a woman. One force or the other must be victorious; they cannot co-exist. At least, they have not been able to exist simultaneously for George Webber.

Recommendations

Much intensive research could be done concerning Thomas Wolfe's relationships with women. Julia Wolfe (and her fictional counterpart) is a good subject which would probably yield interesting results for a more detailed study of her. The likenesses between mother and son are manifold, as can be seen throughout his fiction. The interest which both Tom and Julia had in mystical and supernatural occurrences is an intriguing topic. Julia Wolfe could be the starting point for a study of Wolfe's uses of the supernatural. Certainly, the extensive use of dreams and visions in the novels is related to Julia Wolfe's personal experiences.

Since there is a continuity between Eugene Gant and George Webber in their attitudes toward women, there logically should be more parallels between the two protagonists. The similarities and dissimilarities in attitudes, concepts, and actions could constitute the problem for a thesis. From such a study as this, the success or failure of Wolfe in altering his protagonist in 1936 could be properly determined. The results of this might indicate
whether one can logically utilize both protagonists to discuss their creator's attitude toward his world and its inhabitants.
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