

## **The Dialectic of Death in Thomas Clayton Wolfe's Look Homeward, Angel**

**By**

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### **Abstract**

Thomas Wolfe is a prominent American writer whose main concern is the treatment of death from a philosophical perspective in order to find the true meaning of life. He deals with it as attached to time flux which are based on his personal experiences and his insight as a novelist. The inclusion of his drear experience represented by death events in his novel Look Homeward, Angel to convey speculative as well as realistic themes is his major intention. He wields the Hegelian dialectics of life/death and time/fixity to view death as an inestimable part of life. He defines the thing's opposite in order to recognize its deep interpretation. The main aim of the present paper is to examine Wolfe's use of the Hegelian dialectic in Look Homeward, Angel and how he renders his thought about death as a novelist. One of the fruitful conclusions is that the significance of the Hegelian dialectic in this novel appears when he reveals his optimistic outlook of life and replenishing its spiritual value in the mind and soul of man. Through narrating the many death events in a dark, uncertain atmosphere which represents the thesis, his desire for life and survival represents the anti-thesis. As a result, the optimistic outlook of life represents the synthesis as resolved in the appearance of Ben's ghost which reveals Wolfe's interpretation of the true meaning of life as a major theme in Look Homeward, Angel.

**Keywords:** Thomas Wolfe, Hegel's Dialectics, Look Homeward, Angel.

### **Introduction**

Look Homeward, Angel is appreciated as one of the notable novels written by Thomas Clayton Wolfe (1900-38). It established him as one of the most prominent writers of the American South during the early twentieth century. What distinguished this novel from others is Wolfe's endeavor to harmonize the romantic tradition and his clear predilection of embodying his personal experience in this novel like the familial relations, the many death events he witnessed, and the courses he studied at college that inspired him as a man and a writer. It was published in the same year as William Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury* and Ernest Hemingway's *A Farewell to Arms*. Although it does not currently occupy the prestige of those memorable landmarks of American letters, it has never been out of print and continues to drag popular and critical attention. If Wolfe's genius was not enough to sustain a universally acclaimed writing career, it was ample for the creation of a genuine literary achievement. Moreover, while it does not receive much noteworthy critical appreciation at its first edition, Wolfe succeeds in proving his ingenuity as a writer of his age.

Thomas Clayton Wolfe was born in Ashville, North Carolina on 1900. He was the youngest of eight children, two of them died when they were very young. He attended the university of North Carolina when he was only fifteen. He graduated and moved to Boston to complete master of arts at Harvard. Meantime, he started to write plays and short stories to dramatize the American experience during his time. In May 1938, he was medicated in Seattle, with a brain infection from pneumonia. He travelled to Baltimore where he died after unsuccessful operation on September, 15, 1938. Nine years before, he had published his first book and had been uniquely acclaimed as one of the most promising writers of his generation. However, this may be, nine years were all he had in which to realize his promise, and during those years he performed creative effort that would have burdened the full life span of most authors (Aswell, 1968, p. 271). The world that Wolfe creates in this novel is one in which stability and certainty are almost completely absent. The only fixed element in the entire novel is the consciousness of its hero, Eugene, and even that changes and expands as he matures (Rubin Jr., 1955, p. 76). He creates it intentionally to involve Eugene's awareness of change, time and death. As far as Wolfe's reputation after publishing this novel is concerned, John Peale Bishop (1939) states that "[f]rom the time of *Look Homeward, Angel*, he was regarded, and rightly, as a young man of incomparable promise" (p.p. 9-10). One of the dominant themes that Wolfe tackles in his novel and draws the reader's attention is the concept of death due to the clear death events of characters that happen and affect the life of Eugene Gant, the alter ego of Wolfe. Hence, Andrew Turnbull (1967) states:

Wolfe was familiar with the fact of death. Grover's passing, the loss of his college roommate Edmund Burdick, Ben's Sophoclean agony, and his father's long decline—these early experiences had brought it home to him, while his spitting blood at Harvard had heightened his consciousness of his own mortality and quickened his desire to do something overwhelming and death-destroying with the life he had. In the anthology of *English Verse*, he had used in his teaching at New York so many of the underlinings that relate to death, burial, and the swiftness of time (p.336).

Through examining the influences of Wolfe's preoccupation with death rendered as a binary with life, it is found that this influence comes from two intrinsic sources: the death events in his life and his study of the Hegelian dialectic at college. In his book entitled, *The Story of a Novel*, Wolfe (1936) states:

[f]or the first time I realized another naked fact which every artist must know, and that is that in a man's work there are contained not only the seeds of life, but the seeds of death, and that that power of creation which sustains us will also destroy us like a leprosy if we let it rot stillborn in our vitals (p. 67).

In this respect, his efforts to preserve his poetic conception of experience in the face of circumstances that are always threatening to destroy it consist of carious struggles, carried on more sophisticated counterpoint, to achieve some measure of ideal existence by escaping from five main constraining conditions: loneliness, family, hometown, native region, and, taken together, time and death (Hagan, 1981, p. 269).

The other source is his inspiration of a philosophy course in which he studied the Hegelian dialectic philosophy. At the university of South Carolina, Wolfe studied under Horace Williams, a philosophy professor who taught him the basic grounding form of the Hegelian dialectic, in which a concept, or thesis, inevitably generates its opposite, or antithesis, and the interaction of the two produces a new concept, or antithesis (Holman, 1966, p. 194). In addition, he imbibed a form of Hegelian dialectic that makes him recognize all life in terms of opposites

and gave his work the fundamental structure of thesis and antithesis as well as in its more obvious oppositions, such as South and North, female and male, Jew and gentile, mother and father, the web and the rock.

To further account the structure of the Hegelian dialectic, Schnitker (2013) mentions that the "thesis-antithesis-synthesis model is a dialectic method of historical and philosophical progress that postulates (1) a beginning proposition called a thesis, (2) a negation of that thesis called antithesis and (3) a synthesis whereby the two conflicting ideas are reconciled to form a new proposition (p. 978). In his *Encyclopedia of Philosophical Sciences*, Hegel (2010):

Juxtaposes the opposite determinations contained in them as thesis and antithesis and tries to prove both of them, i.e. to exhibit both of them as the necessary results of thinking them through. In the process he explicitly defends himself against the charge that he sought smoke and mirrors in order to perform a spurious lawyer's proof. However, the proofs that Kant proposes for his theses and antitheses must indeed be regarded as mere pseudo-proofs, since what is supposed to be proved is always already contained in the presuppositions that form the starting-point and only through the long-winded, apagogic process is the semblance of mediation produced (p. 95).

Hegel, then, considers literature as dealing with oppositions, between abstract law, legislative, reason, duty, and civic order, on the one hand, and inclinations, sensuous impulses and somatic responses to an abundance of life's many phenomena on the other hand. These oppositions are natural to human life. They function more effectively as a universal component that informs human life than does any logic-governed concept (Eldridge, 2009, p. 7). Wolfe saw his world and himself through an only semilogical application to life of the Hegelian dialectic. He seemed to need to define a thing's opposite before he could comprehend the thing, and to have a naive faith that somehow the meaning was manifest if the opposites were stated. Hence, there is in his work on practically every level—sentence, paragraph, scene, theme, large project—a structure of oppositions (Holman, 1068, p. 29). Furthermore, Wolfe agrees with Hegelian concept of understanding that relates to the essence of the dialectic code as both related to the function of the intellect. Hegel believes that the intellect is the central mover of recognition from whose functioning understanding comes into being. It achieves its functioning only when it gets attached to the dialectic and contains both its divergent components represented by the thesis and antithesis. Thus, if it does so, it will be much deeper and comprehensive, covering all other fields of philosophy:

Understanding is not, of course, limited to systematic metaphysics; it is present in the less systematic reasoning of empiricist philosophers, or in the disjointed dogmas of a philosophy of common sense, of the sound human understanding. It seems plain that Hegel would have regarded practically all British realism, empiricism and analytic philosophy in the present century as a philosophy of the Understanding, and would probably have admired it for being uncompromisingly so (Findlay, 1958, pp. 62-63).

Through writing this novel, Wolfe maintains his adherence to the Hegelian dialectic of death and his conception of understanding as an essential utmost of the reason which is resulted from this dialectic, as synthesis is the logical interpretation of life/death dialectic which defines the meaning of man's existence that Wolfe situates it in the wider spectrum of time. The thematic concern of the novel is viewed on two levels. The first one is the familial-autobiographical mainly based on Wolfe's wretched private experience. The other is the universal devoted to perceive the role of death in recognizing the meaning of life in the modern urbanized society in which man suffers the quandary of the decline of the human and the

spiritual values. As a prominent American novelist treating the concept of death from different perspectives, he intends to reflect the dark aspect of his life in which many death events happened and affected him psychologically. In one of his letters to his mother, he wrote:

I went downtown Sunday night and saw the crowds usher the New Year in. Everyone seemed happy, there was much noise and shouting, but, somehow, the coming of the new year always brings sadness to me. I don't know why. Man is such a mortal, perishable creature, and it seems a little like flaunting the news in his face that he has one less year before he too is dust, with tree roots twined among his bones (Wolfe, 1956, p. 83).

As an inner-realistic writer who is concerned with the social scene of the South during the first half of the twentieth century, Wolfe deals with themes and issues from his own personal experiences and presents them in a universal context wider than those personal experiences. He reveals his inner thought, which is full of grief and sorrow, so as to treat issues related to the core of the Southern social reality. His direct, frank portrayal of characters and events in his novels in general and in *Look Homeward, Angel* in particular inspires him to engage such universal themes as death/life and time/fixity in a form of binary oppositions through which each interprets the other. So, since time relates to both life and death, he maintains to delve deeply to speculate death in order to find a logical interpretation of life in terms of speculating the passage of time. He is not only concerned with the reality as surrounding man in his actual life but also with his inner thought as resulted from this surrounding which is itself attached to time and is mostly his source of suffering and growth as well.

The earlier death event that hovers over Eugene's life and stimulates his awareness towards things is the death of Bob Sterling, his roommate at college whom "Eugene wrote him regularly twice a week, getting in return short but cheerful messages. The one day he died" (LHA, 1957, p. 401). The loss of his mutual friend who was deadly ill deepens his realization of the fact that death is predestined for the manifestation of life. Another pivotal point in the novel is the introduction of Olive Gant who is unable to articulate his frustrations; what is meant in the poem by great forgotten language; and how this interest in language relates to the thematic concerns of the novel and its unity. The discovery of language leads to the birth of the narrator who, prior to the death of Ben exists only in embryo in Eugene Gant who, like his father, could have withered to become a man of death. He deals with words as empty shells. (Bredahl Jr, 1973, p. 48). The narrator's use of language opens a wider space that includes the Gant family and their vision of life, enabling him to tackle the themes of time and death as stemmed from their vision which is revealed in their reaction to Ben's death. Eugene, the hero of the novel, reveals his awareness of the passage of time as a:

combination of fixity and change, the terrible moment of immobility stamped with eternity in which, passing life at great speed, both the observer and the observed seem frozen in time. There was one moment of timeless suspension when the land did not move, ... . Only, these images that burnt in him existed without beginning or ending, without the essential structure of time (LHA, 1957, p. 159).

Eugene's predicament stems from his thinking of 'fixity' as a way getting rid of maturity which is resulted from the continuous passing of time. By the passage of time, life becomes effete for Eugene as he realizes that he has a little choice to stop the flux of time. So "[t]here is no structure, no creation in it, not even the smoky structure of dreams. Come lower, angel; whisper in our ears. We are passing away in smoke and there is nothing to-day but weariness to pay us for yesterday's toil" (LHA, 1957, p. 244). The loss of value in Eugene's life forces

him to have a one-sided that vision makes him speculate death as the only way to get rid of his meaningless life.

Thus, through the time/fixity dialectic, Wolfe tackles the theme of the spiritual deadness that the modern American man lives as his thought is contaminated by the spiritual and moral corruption of the Roaring Twenties. This dark thought gets deepened in him as he speculates "the minute-winning days, like flies, buzz home to death" (LHA, 1957, p. 294). In Eugene's eyes, the merciless and aimless passage of time means only a slow physical death because he loses the aim in his life. As Bishop (1939) furthers, for "Wolfe the rewards of experience were always such that he was turned back upon himself. Isolated in his sensations, there was no way out. He continually sought for a door, and there was really none, or only one, the door of death" (p. 13). For Wolfe, isolation is a result of the change of time. The only outlet to escape this pressure of time is to stop it in his mind and consciousness. In the novel, Eugene attempts to stop the time flux, but whenever he does so, he is shocked by a heartrending death event.

In Eugene's life, each death he witnesses strengthens him to go forward in his life with more endurance and deeper insight. He also becomes aware of the fact that death is not only a physical decline. It is something far beyond this limit. He then realizes the meaning of life through these death events as he feels stronger enough to overwhelm it and attain the true meaning of life and self as well. Ben's death is the prominent event which carries an implication deeper than the physical process. It makes the Gant family realize the true interpretation of life and appreciate the fact that the fatalistic change which is resulted from the passage of time is necessary to maintain man's consciousness to attain that true interpretation. The quoted passage reflects their reaction when seeing Ben's corpse:

Then, over the ugly clamor of their dissension, over the rasp and snarl of their nerves, they heard the low mutter of Ben's expiring breath. The light had been re-shaded: he lay, like his own shadow, in all his fierce gray lonely beauty. And as they looked and saw his bright eyes already blurred with death, and saw the feeble beating flutter of his poor thin breast, the strange wonder, the dark rich miracle of his life surged over them its enormous loveliness. They grew quiet and calm, they plunged below all the splintered wreckage of their lives, they drew together in a superb communion of love and valiance, beyond horror and confusion, beyond death (LHA, 1957, p. 461).

Ben's spirit is yoked with language and both are contrasted to the physical material in which they are entombed. Thus, Eugene perceives new words made up of vital energy. His great achievement and ultimate freedom comes when he begins to see with the illumination of that growing light and then to act, to work with these new blocks, to struggle with the articulation of the new words (Bredahl Jr, 1973, p. 54). Since Ben's life is associated with the meaning of language, his death means a lot to Eugene whom he considers the mutual brother. It puts him in a new arena of strife to seek the self-recognition and escape both the familial and life pressures which both mean nothing to him but an irresistible change resulted from the everlasting flux of time. Thus, according to Reaver and Robert (1962):

"Eugene Gant's existence becomes an emotional combat against death and the pressures denying him psychological freedom. Eugene's unceasing struggle, from the moment of ... the awful dying of Ben, makes us aware that isolation and death amount to the same thing for him" (p. 330).

Symbolically, Eugene strives through the discernment of language after Ben's death to defeat death and find the meaning of life:

We can believe in the nothingness of life, we can believe in the nothingness of death and of life after death-but who can believe in the nothingness of Ben? Like Apollo, who did his penance to the high god in the sad house of King Admetus, he came, a god with broken feet, into the gray hovel of this world. And he lived here a stranger, trying to recapture the music of the lost world, trying to recall the great forgotten language, the lost faces, the stone, the leaf, the door. O Artemidorus, farewell! (LHA, 1957, p. 465)

The death of Ben "confirms for him the inevitable solitude of man's destiny on earth" (Curran Jr, 1973, p. 7). Here, Wolfe coincides between the sadness of the death of Ben and man's everlasting longing for life at once. Similarly, he had a brother named Ben who died of tuberculosis while he was at college (Nowell, 1960, p. 42). He wants to convey the fact that through rendering this death event, he conveys the idea to the Southerners that life is not as miserable as they could imagine; it is hopeful and optimistic if they look at its positive and inspiring aspect from its drear as represented by both spiritual and physical deaths. So, speculating the value and meaning of life cannot be recognized unless he, as a traditional American writer, presents the other dark side that is death.

Historically, during the early twentieth century, America witnessed a rapid technologized growth with a new consumer economy. The South was thus no exception. Asheville and North Carolina were the famous states of investment and development at that time. The South was much slower to accept these new changes. They tried to retain their old traditions which were lost because of these changes in addition to America's entry of World War I in 1917. Peculiarly, Wolfe writes to contribute to revive the lost moral and spiritual values during the early modernism, considering this loss a spiritual deadness. This novel situates him in the historical context of the American culture as he undertakes the task of treating issues related to the American traditions.

As the novel develops, Eugene's relationship with his brother Ben plays an important role in shaping Eugene's thought towards time, life and death. Before his death, Ben is isolated from everybody even his family except Eugene. Through their relation, Wolfe treats the theme of the apprehension of life in the mind of the postwar young generation whose utmost aim is to gratify their physical needs and think carelessly about life. In a dialogue between them, Ben talks to Eugene:

"So, you see you're not the only College Man around here," said Ben with a grin. In a moment, he went on gravely: "You're the last hope, 'Gene. Go on and finish up, if you have to steal the money. The rest of us will never amount to a damn. Try to make something out of yourself. Hold your head up! You're as good as any of them-a damn sight better than these little pimps about town." He became very fierce; he was very excited. He got up suddenly from the table. "Don't let them laugh at you! By God, we're as good as they are. If any of them laughs at you again, pick up the first damn thing you get your hand on and knock him down. Do you hear?" In his fierce excitement he snatched up the heavy carving steel from the table and brandished it (LHA, 1957, p. 373).

In the last part of the novel, the representation of Ben's ghost occupies an exceptional importance. Through the ghost's speech, Wolfe reveals his own understanding of the meaning of life after a sequence of death events. Thus, Eugene decides to coexist with reality to find his true self:

Then Eugene said: "I have eaten and drunk the earth, I have been lost and beaten, and I will go no more."

"Fool," said Ben, "what do you want to find?"

"Myself, and an end to hunger, and the happy land," he answered. "For I believe in harbors at the end. O Ben, brother, and ghost, and stranger, you who could never speak, give me an answer now!" Then, as he thought, Ben said: "There is no happy land. There is no end to hunger. (LHA, 1957, p. 520)

While Eugene realizes the meaning of life after the death of Ben, Wolfe employs the appearance of the ghost in order to conclude the synthesis which results from the life/death dialectics, that is the interpretation of the meaning of life. In this dialogue between Eugene and Ben's ghost, Eugene is longing for doing something noteworthy in his life through seeking Ben's advice. Both the many death experiences and Ben's ghost reveal Wolfe's philosophy as a writer.

Furthermore, he wields two devices through which he initiates Ben's death event and reflects his thought as a writer. First, he initiates the novel with a series of death events, painful experiences and a failure so as to add the suspense up to the happening of the dominant death event of Ben. Second, he employs the stream-of-consciousness techniques so as to establish a deeper area of transfer inside and outside the Gant family and, in addition, inside and outside Eugene's mind and psyche who is the alter ego of Wolfe. It is also used to "convey a sense of that which endures through the constantly changing and successive thoughts and sense impressions ... . Wolfe uses stream of consciousness to great effect in order to represent the mind of old Gant (Curran Jr, 1994, p. 43). The uniqueness of Wolfe's use of stream of consciousness technique lies not only in reflecting the individuality of presenting the mind of the old Gants, but also dramatizes their vision of life through the death events they experience. It also forms a dialectic of the inner reality of the Gants narrated by Eugene and, on the other hand, their understanding of life as stems from that reality which clearly appears in their reaction to Ben's death as calm and silent.

To conclude, Thomas Wolfe occupies an influential position in the modern American fiction. He writes about America regarding himself as an American man living and suffering during the first World War aftermath in all its agony and predicament. He also writes to betray his originality as a writer in order to enrich the art of the modern American fiction, what makes him a unique writer difficult to be classified to which movement or school he relates. He studies Hegel at college and is influenced by his philosophy especially the concepts treating man and literature. Particularly, he adheres to the Hegelian dialectic through writing his novels. This adherence enhances his craft as a writer and deepens the content of his novels in general and *Look homeward, Angel* in particular. He wields the thesis, antithesis and synthesis to treat the concept of death as attached to the flux of time. His influence by the Hegelian idea of understanding as the vivid process of deciphering realism and empiricism enables him to view his realization of the true meaning of life through the representation of death. By presenting many death events, he renders his positive outlook of life on both the personal and artistic levels as a writer who intends to convey a message to the modern American man about the humanistic and spiritual value of life during a controversial era characterized by the decline of these essential values in addition to their forgetfulness of death.

The significance of the Hegelian dialectic in Wolfe's thought lies in his enhancing the positive outlook of life and deepening its spiritual value in the mind and soul of man. By detailing the many death events through an atmosphere hovered by indeterminacy and uncertainty which represents the thesis, his optimistic outlook of life, the synthesis is resolved

in the appearance of Ben's ghost which reveals Wolfe's interpretation of the true meaning of life as a central theme in *Look Homeward, Angel*.

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