Weaving: Establishing Connections between What I Came to Tell You, Thomas Wolfe, and the Old Kentucky Home Boardinghouse

COURSE OF STUDY

English Language Arts

GRADE LEVEL

8th

COMMON CORE STANDARDS

8.RL.2

8.RL.3

8.RL.5

8.RL.9

LEARNING OUTCOMES

Students will:

- Determine a theme or central idea of a text and analyze its development over the course of the text, including its relationship to the characters, setting, and plot; provide an objective summary of the text.
- Analyze how particular lines of dialogue or incidents in a story or drama propel the action, reveal aspects of a character, or provoke a decision.
- Compare and contrast the structure of two or more texts and analyze how the differing structure of each text contributes to its meaning and style.
- Analyze how a modern work of fiction draws on themes, patterns of events, or character types from myths, traditional stories, or religious works such as the Bible, including describing how the material is rendered new.

TEACHER PLANNING

Time Required for Lesson

- Two weeks to read *What I Came to Tell You* (in or out-of-class reading)
- One day for in-class activity

Materials

- Tommy Hay's What I Came to Tell You
- Informational Text: "Thomas Wolfe and His Family" (included in this packet)

• Lap-tops/computers or pencils and paper

Pre-Activities

• Students read What I Came to Tell You

ACTIVITIES

1. At the beginning of the class, pass out the hand-out "Thomas Wolfe and His Family" to each student. Give the students 10 to 15 minutes to read the hand-out closely and encourage them to think about the parallels between Wolfe's life and *What I Came to Tell You* as they do so.

2. Split the class into three groups for small group discussions. Have each group designate a recorder, one who will transcribe the group's thoughts, and have each group designate a presenter who will share the group's findings later. Give each group one of the following discussion topics.

1) Although Thomas Wolfe grew up in Asheville over a century ago, his life as a boy in the city looked similar in many ways to that of Grover Johnston, the **protagonist** in *What I Came to Tell You.* As a group, make a list of these parallels.

2) Describe the **setting** of *What I Came to Tell Yon.* Include a list of those places that appear frequently throughout the book. Make a list, if possible, of the areas in the book that you have been to or know about. (Montford, Riverside Cemetery, the Wolfe House, Claxton Elementary, Mitchell County, Roan Mountain). What is the significance of these places to the Asheville Community and this part of WNC?

3) In both Grover Johnston's and Thomas Wolfe's life, difficult events transpired that challenged them as individuals. List some of those difficult events that occurred in each of their lives. Both Grover and Tom took the trying and emotionally straining events in their world and used them to positive ends. List the ways that Grover and Tom used their difficult times as inspiration to go on and produce and do great things.

3. Commence a class discussion. Have each group presenter share aloud the question that his or her group was given and then share with the class their thoughts, answers, and lists in regards to that question. Allow the rest of the class to respond to each group's topic in an open discussion.

4. If this is a block class, then allow the students to complete the following writing assignment in class. If it is a single-period class, then have them write their story as a homework assignment.

Writing Prompt/Directions:

Both Thomas Wolfe (the non-fictional subject of "Thomas Wolfe and His Family") and Grover Johnston (the fictional protagonist of *What I Came to Tell You*) underwent eventful and in some ways traumatic childhoods. Yet, both of these young men found creative and constructive ways to deal with the hard events in their lives—Thomas Wolfe wrote shorts stories, plays, and novels based on his life and Grover wove elaborate tapestries in the Bamboo Forest. These creative outlets became their coping mechanisms.

Write a one and a half page (hand-written) or one page (12 point font single space) vignette about an individual who endured a tough and trying event and then later used that experience to become a positive influence on his or her community.

Be sure to develop a setting, plot, and theme or central idea in your story. Pull in various writing styles and techniques as you craft your story. Interweave both fictional and non-fictional events, places, and characters, much like Thomas Wolfe did in his novel *Look Homeward, Angel* and like Tommy Hays did in his book *What I Came to Tell You*. Draw on your own experience, as well as the events of those around you.

ASSESSMENT

Group Assessment: Analyze student learning by examining the responses provided by each group to the 3 questions and by listening to the open class discussion. If the students grasped the theme of *What I Came to Tell You,* if they made connections between protagonist Grover Johnston and Thomas Wolfe, if they recognized the setting and places in the book and in the article about Wolfe, and if they were able to indentify the difference between fictional and non-fictional writing and the value of combining the two, then optimal student learning occurred.

Individual Assessment: Read the students' stories to determine if they as individuals grasped the concept of combining fiction and non-fiction to create a powerful story complete with a setting, plot, and characters. Furthermore, examine the theme of each student's paper to see if he or she identified a positive way to cope with the negative events that humans encounter in life.

POST-ACTVITIES (OPTIONAL)

If you are in the Asheville area, plan on taking a field trip or educational outing to the historic places outlined in *What I Came to Tell You*. Visits to these places will make the experiences of Thomas Wolfe and Grover Johnston come to life for your students.

Thomas Wolfe Memorial State Historic Site

- This site maintains the boardinghouse where Thomas Wolfe grew up and that he immortalized in his famous novel *Look Homeward, Angel.* The Visitor Center behind the historic home features exhibits and artifacts related to the Wolfe family as well as a 22 minute film on Thomas Wolfe.
- *Free* for school groups.
- 52 N Market St., Asheville, NC 28801
- 828-253-8304
- www.wolfememorial.com

Riverside Cemetery

- Located in Asheville's Montford Historic District, Riverside Cemetery displays the headstones and monuments of some of Asheville's historic figures including Thomas Wolfe, Zebulon Vance, and O. Henry. It provides an excellent learning opportunity for students studying the city's history.
- 53 Birch Street, Asheville, NC 28801
- (828) 350-2066
- http://www.ashevillenc.gov/ Departments/ParksRecreation/ ParksOverview/ ParksFacilitiesInventory/ RiversideCemetery.aspx

Thomas Wolfe and His Family

I. Look Homeward, Angel

Thomas Wolfe is probably best known as the author of the novel *Look Homeward, Angel* published in 1929. *Look Homeward, Angel* is the story of a young man named Eugene Gant growing up during the early twentieth century. The book, both a critical and commercial success, launched Wolfe's literary career. *Look Homeward, Angel* is heavily autobiographical. In it Wolfe wrote about himself, his family, the boardinghouse where he grew up, and the citizens of Asheville. The town of Asheville was called "Altamont" in the book and the Old Kentucky Home boardinghouse was called "Dixieland".

Look Homeward, Angel was extremely controversial. There were almost two hundred characters in the book and many of them were based on real-life people whom Wolfe did not thoroughly disguise in his text. The book even prompted some Asheville citizens to write Wolfe threatening letters. As a result of the hard feelings between Wolfe and his hometown audience, Wolfe did not return to Asheville until 1937, almost eight years after *Look Homeward, Angel* was published. But by 1937 much had changed. The Great Depression had given people more imperative issues to consider and furthermore, Wolfe's reputation as a great author grew during the 1930s. By 1937, he was a well known and popular author in both the United States and Europe, and he was given a warm welcome by many of the people in Asheville.

II. Thomas Wolfe's Life

Thomas Wolfe was born about two blocks from the Old Kentucky Home at 92 Woodfin Street, where his entire family lived until he was six years old. Wolfe's parents, Julia and W. O. Wolfe, had eight children: Leslie, Frank, Effie, Mable, twins Ben and Grover, Fred, and Tom. Wolfe called his family the Gant family in *Look Homeward, Angel*. As an adult, Tom was a very large man; he stood at 6'6.5" tall, weighed over 250 pounds, and wore size 13 shoes (today, bronze replicas of his shoes lay on the sidewalk in front of the boardinghouse).

Julia Elizabeth Westall, Tom's mother, was born and raised in Swannanoa, North Carolina. She taught school in Mitchell County for about three years before her marriage. William Oliver Wolfe, Tom's father, moved south after the Civil War from York Springs, Pennsylvania. He was a stonecutter by trade and set up his first shop in Raleigh, North Carolina. W. O. eventually moved to Asheville, where he married Julia Westall in 1885. His monument shop stood on a corner lot facing the town square (Pack Square)—the Jackson Building, Asheville's oldest skyscraper, is located on that lot today. The angel statues that Tom's father sold from his shop were the inspiration for Wolfe's famous description of a certain stone angel in *Look Homeward, Angel*. W.O. carved some of the bases of the many angels he sold but the statues themselves were imported from Italy. The title "Look Homeward, Angel" was not inspired by his father's angels. Rather, it comes from the poem "Lycidas" (pronounced "Liss – a – diss") by John Milton –"Look homeward, angel, now, and melt with ruth, and oh, you dolphins, waft the helpless youth."

As a youth in Asheville, Tom attended the Orange Street School and then the North State Fitting School for Boys. It was at his second school that Tom found a source of life-long inspiration in his teacher Margaret Roberts. Mrs. Roberts encouraged Tom to do great things with his writing and the two maintained correspondence for the entirety of Tom's life. When *Look Homeward, Angel* was published, Tom gave Mrs. Roberts a copy and inscribed on the title page "the mother of my spirit."

Just before his 16th birthday, Thomas Wolfe left home to attend college at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. He originally wanted to attend the University of Virginia, but his father hoped that he would become a lawyer, and since he was paying for Tom's education he insisted that Tom go to Chapel Hill. While at UNC, Wolfe became interested in drama and decided to pursue a career in playwriting. After his graduation in 1920, Tom announced that he would attend Harvard in the fall. He earned his Master's degree in Theater Arts and Literature form Harvard in 1922, and continued graduate work at the university until the end of 1923.

Wolfe began his writing career as a playwright, but with little success. His plays usually required numerous actors – sometimes over a hundred – and were often more than four hours long. Because of the size of the plays, no one was willing to put them on stage. During a trip to Europe, Tom finally decided to try his hand at writing a novel and this eventually lead to the publication of *Look Homeward, Angel*. Although Tom owned two typewriters, he preferred to write his manuscripts by hand or dictate to a typist.

Tom's brother Fred was the only other member of the family to earn a college degree. He studied electrical engineering at Georgia Tech, completing his degree after ten years at the university.

Of his seven brothers and sisters, Tom felt closest to Ben, who was eight years older. Ben became an ad salesman for *the Winton-Salem Journal* and *The Asheville Citizen*. During the summer of 1918, Ben developed pneumonia during a flu pandemic and died in an upstairs bedroom at the Old Kentucky Home. Tom was devastated by his brother's death, and later said that is was the most traumatic thing that ever happened to him. Some of Wolfe's most beautiful writing is found in the section of *Look Homeward*, *Angel* that depicts the death of Ben Gant (based on Tom's brother Ben Wolfe).

W. O. Wolfe spent little time in the Old Kentucky Home during Tom's childhood. Instead he stayed in his home at 92 Woodfin Street. When W. O's health began to fail, he moved into the back bedroom at the Old Kentucky Home. He lived there until his death from cancer in 1922, at the age of 71.

On September 15, 1938, Thomas Wolfe died of tuberculosis of the brain at Johns Hopkins Hospital in Baltimore, Maryland. He was not quite thirty-eight years old.

III. The Old Kentucky Home

In 1906, Tom's mother bought the boardinghouse the "Old Kentucky Home" at 48 Spruce Street and moved into the house on a permanent basis. Tom's father hated boardinghouses and thought that renting rooms to strangers was degrading. During those years the Wolfes maintained two residences. W. O. remained on Woodfin Street, while Julia lived at the Old Kentucky Home. Some of the children divided their time between the two houses, but Julia took Tom to live with her permanently at the boardinghouse. As the youngest of the eight children, she insisted that he stay with her. Tom and his brothers and sisters did not like the Old Kentucky Home for several reasons.

Julia Wolfe regarded the house as a place of business rather than a home and her children were often embarrassed by her enthusiasm in recruiting boarders. Tom did not have a regular bedroom in the house; he stayed wherever there was space. At the boardinghouse, there was no division between family and the boarders. Tom lived amongst strangers.

When Thomas Wolfe was growing up, Asheville was already a resort and tourist destination. During the crowded summer months, Julia accommodated as many as thirty people at one time in the Old Kentucky Home, but during the winter she usually had fewer than ten boarders at a time. Julia served meals to her boarders and charged around \$1 for a night's stay and meals. She also allowed people coming in off the street to eat in her dining room. She charged *e*25 for breakfast and her most expensive meal was Sunday dinner at *e*50. Tom's mother spent much of her time in the kitchen preparing meals for the boarders. During the busy season, she hired help from the community. Tom's sister Mabel also helped her mother cook and clean while Tom advertised the Old Kentucky Home by passing out business cards at the train station.

In 1916, ten years after she moved into the boardinghouse, Julia expanded her operation. She added eleven rooms, bringing the grand total to twenty-nine rooms. The house was considered very modern at the time, as it had all indoor facilities and central heating (from a coal burning furnace in the basement). Because the plumbing was poorly designed and facilities were limited, chamber pots and washstands were left in the bedrooms. In order to save money on the construction, Julia designed all the additions to the house herself and she did not install heat in the added rooms, but would just close the rooms off during the winter when she had fewer boarders.

Of the twenty-nine rooms in the Old Kentucky Home, seventeen are bedrooms. Some are very large, but having a large bedroom was not necessarily an advantage. Julia Wolfe rented bed space rather than rooms, meaning boarders sometimes shared rooms with one another. This was a common practice within boardinghouses of the day. Julia apparently rented spaces to all kinds of visitors. Tom described salesmen, school teachers, circus performers, sailors, and tourists coming to the mountains in the summer to escape the heat. Some visitors to Asheville were seeking the area for health reasons because the cool mountain air was believed to help those with respiratory aliments.

The formal parlor of the boardinghouse was a popular gathering place for family members and boarders. In the parlor, the boarders could mingle and swap stories or listen to Tom's sister, Mabel, play music on the piano. A talented musician, Mabel was at one time on the Vaudeville circuit and she toured the south with a friend named Pearl Shope. An enclosed sun parlor off

the front porch gave boarders an additional place to gather, often to listen and dance to music played on the phonograph.

Julia Wolfe operated the Old Kentucky Home for 39 years and she was still renting rooms when she died in 1945 at the age of 85.

Today the house contains over 6,000 square feet of floor space and twenty-nine rooms. Most of the furnishings in the house—now open as a museum and a historic site—belonged to the Wolfes, except for those in the dining room. The furniture in the dining room was lost during a fire in July of 1998. The Thomas Wolfe Memorial is operated by the Historic Sites Division of the North Carolina Department of Cultural Resources and it welcomes visitors such as you!