

# “The Return of the Prodigal: The Thing Imagined”

## Lesson Plan for Teachers 2022

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### **Overview:**

This lesson plan will provide teachers with information about the North Carolina author Thomas Wolfe, to aid the analysis of his short story “The Return of the Prodigal: The Thing Imagined.” It includes a brief outline Wolfe’s life and suggested themes found in his story. This material is a companion to the “Telling Our Tales” 2022 Student Writing Competition. Suitable for classes in grades 4-12.

### **Objectives:**

1. Students will create a work of fiction based on their own personal experiences or the experiences of someone they know.
2. Students will be able to explain how Thomas Wolfe's writing was based on his experiences.
3. Students will be able to identify major themes in the story “The Return of the Prodigal: The Thing Imagined” and connect those themes to ideas from their own lives.

### **NC ELA Writing Standards**

Grades 4-5: W.4.3/5.3- Write narratives to develop real or imagined experiences or events using effective technique, descriptive details, and clear event sequences.

Grades 6-8: W.6.3/7.3/8.3- Write narratives to develop real or imagined experiences or events using effective technique, relevant descriptive details, and well-structured event sequences.

Grades 9-12: W.9.3/10.3/11.3/12.3- Write narratives to develop real or imagined experiences or events using effective technique, well-chosen details, and well-structured event sequences.

### **NC ELA Reading Standards**

Grades 4-5:

RL.4.2 Determine a theme of a story, drama, or poem from details in the text; summarize the text.

RL.4.3 Describe in depth a character, setting, or event in a story or drama, drawing on specific details in the text.

RL.4.4 Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in a text, including words that affect meaning and tone.

RL.4.6 Compare and contrast the point of view from which different stories are narrated, including the difference between first- and third-person narrations.

RL.5.2 Determine a theme of a story, drama, or poem from details in the text, including how characters in a story or drama respond to challenges or how the speaker in a poem reflects upon a topic; summarize the text.

RL.5.3 Compare and contrast two or more characters, settings, or events in a story or drama, drawing on specific details in the text.

RL.5.4 Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in a text, recognizing specific word choices that contribute to meaning and tone.

RL.5.5 Explain how chapters, scenes, or stanzas provide the overall structure of a particular story, drama, or poem.

RL.5.6 Describe how a narrator's or speaker's point of view influences how events are described.

#### Grade 6:

RL.6.2 Determine a theme of a text and how it is conveyed through particular details; provide a summary of the text distinct from personal opinions or judgments.

RL.6.4 Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in a text; analyze the impact of a specific word choice on meaning and tone.

RL.6.5 Analyze how a particular sentence, chapter, scene, or stanza fits into the overall structure of a text and contributes to the development of the theme, setting, or plot.

RL.6.6 Explain how an author develops the point of view of the narrator or speaker in a text.

#### Grades 7-8:

RL.7.2 Determine a theme of a text and analyze its development over the course of the text; provide an objective summary of the text.

RL.7.4 Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in a text; analyze the impact of rhymes and repetitions of sounds on meaning and tone in a specific line or section of a literary work.

RL.7.6 Analyze how an author develops and contrasts the perspectives of different characters in a text.

RL.8.2 Determine a theme 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.

RL.8.3 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.

RL.8.4 Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in a text; analyze the impact of specific word choices on meaning and tone, including analogies or allusions to other texts.

RL.8.6 Analyze how differences in the perspectives of the characters and the audience or reader create such effects as suspense or humor.

#### Grades 9-10:

RL.9-10.2 Determine a theme of a text and analyze in detail its development over the course of the text, including how it emerges and is shaped and refined by specific details; provide an objective summary of the text.

RL.9-10.3 Analyze how complex characters develop over the course of a text, interact with other characters, and advance the plot or develop the theme.

RL.9-10.4 Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in the text; analyze the cumulative impact of specific word choices on meaning and tone.

RL.9-10.9 Analyze how an author adopts or adapts source material in a specific work.

#### Grades 11-12:

RI.11-12.2 Determine two or more central ideas of a text and analyze their development over the course of the text, including how they interact and build on one another to provide a complex analysis; provide an objective summary of the text.

RI.11-12.3 Analyze a complex set of ideas or sequence of events and explain how specific individuals, ideas, or events interact and develop over the course of the text.

RI.11-12.4 Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in a text; analyze how an author uses and refines the meaning of a key term or terms over the course of a text.

RI.11-12.6 Determine an author's point of view or purpose in a text in which the rhetoric is particularly effective, analyzing how style and content contribute to the power, and/or persuasiveness of the text.

### **NC ELA Language Standards**

L.4.4 – L.12.4 Determine or clarify the meaning of unknown and multiple-meaning words and phrases based on (grade appropriate) reading content, choosing flexibly from a range of strategies: context clues, word parts, word relationships, and reference materials.

### **NC ELA Speaking and Listening Standards**

SL.4.1 – SL.12.1 Engage effectively in a range of collaborative discussions with diverse partners on (grade appropriate) topics and texts, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly.

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## **Historical Context & Story Analysis for Teacher Reference**

### **Historical Context**

Thomas Clayton Wolfe was born on October 3, 1900 in Asheville, North Carolina. He was the last of eight children born to William Oliver (1851-1922) and Julia Elizabeth Wolfe (1860-1945). In 1906, just before his sixth birthday, his mother became the owner and operator of the Old Kentucky Home boardinghouse. Soon after, she moved herself and a young Thomas into the house. He later described the experience as being uprooted and separated from “the tumultuous, unhappy, warm centre of his home,” Wolfe quickly felt cheated out of a normal childhood due to the lack of privacy that came with sharing his living space with strangers from all over the country.

Wolfe later used his childhood experiences to create much of his writing material. His first book, *Look Homeward, Angel*, published in October 1929 earned him a reputation as an autobiographical writer. The novel followed the life of young Eugene Gant, whose background and family closely resembled Wolfe's own.

While *Look Homeward, Angel* was well-received in much of the United States and around the world, it was not appreciated by some individuals in his hometown. Asheville residents, including his own family and friends, easily recognized themselves and people they knew as characters in the work. As a result, Wolfe received angry letters from people displeased with the book. He would not dare return home to Asheville until 1937, over seven years later.

Along with his larger novels, Wolfe wrote many short stories which were often published in magazines and periodicals of the day. Because he did not manage his money wisely, the publication of short stories gave Wolfe a more consistent paycheck between the release of his books, and he often used this money to support his many travels around the U.S. and to Europe. “The Return of the Prodigal: The Thing Imagined,” written about 1934, first appeared in print in a collection of short stories called *The Hills Beyond*, which was

published in 1941, three years after Wolfe's death. The story recognizes Wolfe's vagabond lifestyle and his strong desire to return home from self-exile.

Refer to pages under the "History" tab of our webpage at [www.wolfememorial.com](http://www.wolfememorial.com) for more information about Thomas Wolfe, his family, his work, and the history of Asheville.

### **Characters, Setting, Plot, and Themes**

In much of Wolfe's fiction, he portrays the Wolfe family as the Gant family. His fictional name for himself is Eugene Gant, and his mother Julia Wolfe becomes Eliza Gant. The city of Asheville is known as Altamont. In "The Return of the Prodigal: The Thing Imagined," he continues the life of the character Eugene Gant told in his first two books, *Look Homeward, Angel* and *Of Time and the River*. "The Return of the Prodigal: The Thing Imagined," is told from the perspective of two different family members; Eliza Gant, his mother, and the author himself, Eugene Gant. The short story imagines what it is like for Eugene Gant to return home for the first time since the publication of *Look Homeward, Angel*. The story opens with Eugene's arrival back in Altamont one evening in late October. Seven years have passed since his last visit home. He describes various changes he sees to the streets of his neighborhood until he finally arrives on the front porch of his childhood home, his mother's boardinghouse. As he rings the bell and his mother opens the door, he realizes that she no longer recognizes him.

While the word prodigal has multiple meanings, in the title of this story it refers to the idea of someone returning home after a long absence. Other themes evident include observing changes with the passage of time, anticipation, and what happens when we let our imagination run wild.

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### **Procedures**

\*These may be altered for the needs of the class. We know some of your lessons may be taught digitally and online, therefore we developed this lesson plan to be as adaptable as possible. Any classroom handouts referenced below are available to teachers and students as .pdf files via our website <http://wolfememorial.com/for-teachers/student-writing-contest/>.

#### **Step 1: Preparation.**

Print and pass out (or have students download and pull up) the following documents from the Wolfe Memorial website: <http://wolfememorial.com/for-teachers/student-writing-contest/>

- a. Thomas Wolfe's short story "The Return of the Prodigal: The Thing Imagined"
- b. The Return of the Prodigal Vocabulary list
- c. Ideas for Student Consideration 2022
- d. Guidelines and Instructions 2022
- e. Submission Form 2022

## **Step 2: Thomas Wolfe's Story.**

Ask students to read "The Return of the Prodigal: The Thing Imagined" and the accompanying Vocabulary list.

## **Step 3: Story Discussion.**

Review the story with students. Refer to the "Historical Context & Story Analysis for Teacher Reference" section above for support. Remind students that because Thomas Wolfe often used his own experiences in his writing, students can look back at their notes on Thomas Wolfe's life to help draw these connections. Ask students what parallels they noticed between the short story and Wolfe's own experiences and have them write their thoughts/answers. If in the classroom, you may write their thoughts on the board for reference as well, or if teaching remotely have students also take individual notes on other answers. Summarize the story by considering the setting, plot, characters, and theme.

## **Step 4: Activity/Discussion.**

Asks students to reflect on a time or imagine a situation where they encounter someone they've met before, but don't currently recognize. Compare and contrast how this person looks to them now, and how you last remember seeing them. What features are the same? What has changed? What characteristics from this person might you finally notice to help you connect the dots? Have students write a short paragraph and allow them to read their answers to others.

## **Step 5: Assignment.**

Pass out or have students pull up the writing competition "Guidelines and Instructions 2022" and "Ideas for Student Consideration 2022." Go over the writing assignment before wrapping up the lesson. Using "The Return of the Prodigal: The Thing Imagined" as an example, have students write a short story based on one (or more) of the prompts they were given (included in "Ideas for Student Consideration 2022") and by following the guidelines listed on the "Guidelines and Instructions 2022" page. Please let students know they **must also fill out, sign, and submit the "Submission Form 2022" with their stories for any work to be considered** (further submission information found in the "Guidelines and Instructions 2022.")

## **Optional Extension**

\*Pull up, or have the students pull up the slide program on Prezi of "The Return of the Prodigal: The Thing Imagined" by Thomas Wolfe. This will support the activity described below. <https://prezi.com/view/vwIAZNFm6uM62I29JC3w/> [Firefox and Internet Explorer *not* recommended for Prezi]

The presentation highlights pictures of Thomas Wolfe at various ages, the Wolfe family, and more biographical information that parallels themes in Wolfe's writings. The last slide defines the word "prodigal," and asks students to identify Wolfe's use of it.

**Activity/Discussion:**

Use the Prezi slides to introduce Thomas Wolfe and family, his life, and his writings. Students may take notes to help them better understand the story "The Return of the Prodigal: The Thing Imagined."

- A. Refer to the photographs of Thomas Wolfe (there are three at different ages of his life) and ask who within the class knows about him and what he did. Explain that he was an author from the early 20<sup>th</sup> century who was born and raised in Asheville and heavily based his writings on his own life experiences.
- B. Display Wolfe family photos and describe that he was raised by his mother Julia Wolfe, a businesswoman who was eager to make money for the family.
- C. With notes from the Historical Context section above, talk about highlights of Wolfe's childhood and education, and how he avoided his hometown of Asheville after upsetting many locals with his writings. Also mention that aside from his larger novels, he wrote many short stories for magazines and periodicals.
- D. Discuss the various definitions of the word prodigal and how they may relate to this story.

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