

Part 1: Thomas Wolfe and *Look Homeward, Angel*

Prep Time:

10 minutes copying *Look Homeward, Angel* excerpt.

Materials:

Narratives about Thomas Wolfe, his family and his book *Look Homeward, Angel*.

Links to online resources about Thomas Wolfe listed above.

Attached Excerpt from *Look Homeward, Angel*

Attached List “Grave Stone Symbolism”

Procedure:

1. Share the narrative About Thomas Wolfe, his family and his *book Look Homeward, Angel*.
2. Discuss the life of Thomas Wolfe using links to online resources. Further information can come from your own research.
3. Distribute the excerpt from *Look Homeward, Angel*.
Ask students to read the excerpt from *Look Homeward, Angel*, focusing their attention on the angels and ghosts in the passage.

Narratives:

Thomas Wolfe, his family and his book *Look Homeward, Angel*.

“I don't know yet what I am capable of doing,” wrote Thomas Wolfe at the age of twenty-three, “but, by God, I have genius—I know it too well to blush behind it.” While in Europe in the summer of 1926 he began writing the first version of a novel, *O Lost*, which eventually evolved into *Look Homeward, Angel*. In 1929, with the publication of *Look Homeward, Angel*, Wolfe gave the world proof of his genius. Wolfe said that *Look Homeward, Angel* is “a book made out of my life.” *It* tells the coming-of-age story of Eugene Gant, whose restlessness and yearning to experience life to the fullest take him from his rural home in North Carolina to Harvard University.

Thomas Wolfe was born in Asheville, North Carolina, in 1900 and was the youngest of eight children of William Oliver Wolfe (1851–1922) and Julia Elizabeth Westall (1860–1945). The Wolfes’ lived at 92 Woodfin Street, where Tom was born. His father, a successful stone carver, ran a gravestone business. His mother took in boarders and was active in acquiring real estate. In 1906, Julia Wolfe bought a boarding house named “Old Kentucky Home” at nearby 48 Spruce Street in Asheville, taking up residence there with her youngest son while the rest of the family remained at the Woodfin Street residence. Wolfe lived in the boarding house on Spruce Street until he went to college in 1916 at the age of 16. The boarding house is now the Thomas Wolfe Memorial State Historic site.

In the *Look Homeward, Angel*, he named his hometown Altamont and called his mother’s boarding house “Dixieland.” His family was fictionalized under the name Gant, with Wolfe calling himself Eugene, his father Oliver, and his mother Eliza. Wolfe was closest to his brother Ben, whose early death at age 26 is chronicled in *Look Homeward, Angel*. The novel ends with Eugene being visited by the ghost of his brother Ben. Wolfe never

got over the death of Ben at a young age. He later told a cousin he had written the book for Ben.

Wolfe shared with other Southern writers an obsession with time and memory, with a sense that the past was part of the present. He wrote that for people life was a short moment but that time and the earth were everlasting.

An often quoted refrain from *Look Homeward, Angel* touches on these topics; Wolfe writes:

“Remembering speechlessly we seek the great forgotten language, the lost lane-end into heaven, a stone, a leaf, an unfound door. Where? When? O lost, and by the wind grieved, ghost, come back again.”

Julia Westall Wolfe

Julia Wolfe was the daughter of a Scotch-Irish family, who had lived in the Western North Carolina region for many generations. She was the fourth child in a family of eleven, growing up on a farm beside the Swannanoa River, some nine miles from Asheville.

She was known to have had a strain of mountain mysticism in her blood. Julia had a strong belief in the supernatural. Among her stories was how her father and grandfather had predicted the exact day and hour of their deaths, and how members of her family clan had been seen in two places at the same time. She was haunted by dreams, and when her sister Sally died she had visions of her in heaven. Julia also was known to possess an excellent memory for stories, the gift of total recall, which her son put to such good use in his writing.

Describing his character Eugene Gant, Thomas Wolfe wrote; “He heard the ghostly ticking of his life; his powerful clairvoyance, the wild Scotch gift of Eliza, burned inward back across the phantom years, plucking out of the ghostly shadows a million gleams of light...”

William Oliver Wolfe

William Oliver Wolfe, often called W.O., apprenticed to become a stonecutter when he was 15 years old. When he arrived in Asheville in 1880, he opened a business on Pack Square, and worked on buildings, sold iron work and carved monuments or tombstones. Thomas Wolfe loved to sit in his father's tombstone shop, among the silent grey and white blocks of marble and look at stone carvings of doves, lambs and angels. His first published short story taken from his first book was titled “Angel on the Porch.” It recalled the stone angels sold from the porch of his father’s shop.

Thomas Wolfe wrote; “As the boy [Oliver] looked at the big angel with the carved stipe of lilystalk, a cold and nameless excitement possessed him. The long fingers of his big hands closed. He felt that he wanted, more than anything in the world, to carve delicately with a chisel. He wanted to wreak something dark and unspeakable in him into cold stone. He wanted to carve an angel's head. The great interior dustiness of the main room in front, sagging with gravestones--small polished slabs from Georgia, blunt ugly masses

of Vermont granite, modest monuments with an urn, a cherub figure, or a couchant lamb, ponderous fly-specked angels from Carrara in Italy which he bought at great cost, and never sold--they were the joy of his heart.”

Suggested Activities:

- Write a short story about a conversation you might have with a ghost.
 - Hand out the list of Common Grave Stone Symbols. Ask students to design a cemetery monument to be carved in stone using one of the symbols listed.
 - Visit an historic cemetery in your community and make a list of monument symbols discovered there.
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