



Objective

This lesson plan will provide teachers with information on Thomas Wolfe, analysis of his short story “The Sun and the Rain,” and an overview of the myth of Antaeus. The information here provides discussion material on Wolfe and the story in class as a companion to the Writing Competition assignment. After the overview, students should understand the concept of writing fiction based on one’s own life and be able to use Thomas Wolfe’s writing as an example for writing their own story. Students will use their own life experience about a time that they left a busy place for a simpler setting. Perhaps they met someone from a different culture, experienced a language barrier, but achieved a level of understanding beyond the spoken word through nature. This lesson will prepare your students for the Thomas Wolfe Memorial “Telling Our Tales” Student Writing Competition, which we hope your students will consider entering.

Standards/Goals:

North Carolina Standard Course of Study, English Language Arts

- RL.4-12.2 - Determine a theme of a story, drama, or poem from details in the text; summarize the text.
 - RL.4-12.3 - Describe in depth a character, setting, or event in a story or drama, drawing on specific details in the text.
 - RL.4-12.4 - Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in a text, including words that affect meaning and tone.
 - RL.4-12.6 - Compare and contrast the point of view from which different stories are narrated, including the difference between first- and third-person narrations.
 - W.4-12.3 - Write narratives to develop real or imagined experiences or events using effective technique, descriptive details, and clear event sequences.
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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. Some of these stories were used in later novels, such as his 1934 short story “The Sun and the Rain,” which was initially published in *Scribner’s Magazine* but later published as part of the novel *Of Time and the River* the next year.

Characters, Setting, Plot, & Theme

In the story, Eugene Gant (referred to simply as “the youth” in the short story) is on a train from Chartres to Orleans in France, leaving the city for the countryside. During his trip he encounters a French peasant traveling with his wife and daughter. The differences between them are apparent, as the Frenchman is poor, while Eugene is a relatively wealthy American tourist. Intrigued by the presence of an American, the peasant questions the young man about his travels, though the two men have difficulty understanding each other.

The peasant's daughter is clearly irritated by her father's inability to comprehend what Eugene is saying, to the point that she seems not to notice the personal connection her father and Eugene are making. Eugene and the peasant man form a lasting connection with each other when they notice the rain beginning to fall outside. The old Frenchman takes the opportunity to teach Eugene some French words, namely the words for "sun," "rain," and "earth." This exchange provides a powerful lesson for Eugene. The two men are able to overcome their cultural differences by highlighting what they have in common: nature. These words emphasize the importance of nature for the younger man, and the need to reconnect with the world outside the busy cities.

When "The Sun and the Rain" was absorbed into Wolfe's second novel *Of Time and the River* in 1935, the story was placed within Book VI "Antaeus: Earth Again." The title of the section refers to the Greek myth of Antaeus from the twelve labors of Hercules. Antaeus was a giant of Libya, the son of the sea-god Poseidon and the earth-goddess Gaea. He challenged all travelers through his country to a wrestling match that he always won. Because he was the son of the earth goddess, he remained invincible to any physical challenge so long as he was in contact with the earth. This behavior continued until he met Hercules. Hercules had been wandering for eight years, and was currently in search of the Golden Apples of Hesperides. Hercules discovered the secret power of Antaeus and used his immense strength to lift the giant into the air and crush him.

In the context of Wolfe's writing, the comparison to Antaeus relates to wandering and making contact with the earth or nature. Eugene Gant takes a trip and learns a lesson that conveys a sense of place and developed a new appreciation for nature.

**This story depicts the use of tobacco, which is a common element historically in literature and pop culture of that time, as well as within this short story. The Thomas Wolfe Memorial does not condone or endorse the use of tobacco products, and it is at the teacher's discretion if they feel a broader conversation is warranted about this topic.*

Procedure:

***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 at wolfememorial.com.**

- Step 1: Preparation

Print and pass out (or have students download and pull up) the following

documents from the Wolfe Memorial website:

<https://wolfememorial.com/student-writing-competition/>

- Prezi Presentation that follows lesson plan:
<https://prezi.com/view/TaDbsFv6HRStUEHQoQZ3/>
- Thomas Wolfe's short story "The Sun and the Rain"
- "The Sun and the Rain" 2025 Vocabulary list
- "The Sun and the Rain" 2025 Writing Prompts
- Guidelines and Instructions 2025
- Submission Form 2025
- *Optional: Print out the myth of Hercules and Antaeus using the link below.*
- **Step 2: Discuss background of Thomas Wolfe and his writing with information provided in the "Historical Context" section of this lesson plan.**
- **Step 3: Ask students to read "The Sun and the Rain" and the accompanying Vocabulary list.**
- **Step 4: Read about Hercules and Antaeus together or individually:**
<https://www.thoughtco.com/antaeus-112058>
- **Step 5: Discuss "The Sun and the Rain" and discuss moments that define the events within the narrative. Use information from "Characters, Setting, Plot, & Theme" as needed.**
- **Step 6: Discuss the myth of Hercules and Antaeus and discuss how it connects to Wolfe's writing. Use information from "Characters, Setting, Plot, & Theme" as needed.**
- **Step 7: Engage in light-hearted debates as a class to find common ground among students/people who are seemingly insurmountably different from one another. Some ideas could include but are not limited to:**
 - Food debate: What's the best style/kind of barbeque (Lexington style, eastern style, mustard based sauce, etc.)? Is Duke's mayonnaise really the best? Is Coke or Pepsi better? Could you persuade someone to share your view?
 - Season debate: What's your favorite season? Do you think snow is pretty or a nuisance? Could you persuade someone to share your view?
- **Step 8: Wrap up by going over the Guidelines and Instructions for the Writing Contest assignment. Student submissions for the competition are of course optional.**
 - *Optional Step: Have students draw a picture of the place they may want to include in their story.*
 - *Extension: Have students visit the Thomas Wolfe Memorial to learn more about the man and his writings.*