



The Homeless Loneliness in Thomas Wolfe's *Look Homeward, Angel*

Zhao Shuwen

Foreign Languages Department, Taiyuan Normal University, Jinzhong, Shanxi Prov., China

Email address:

zsw1213@163.com

To cite this article:

Zhao Shuwen. The Homeless Loneliness in Thomas Wolfe's *Look Homeward, Angel*. *English Language, Literature & Culture*.

Vol. 1, No. 1, 2016, pp. 1-4. doi: 10.11648/j.ellc.20160101.12

Received: March 17, 2016; **Accepted:** March 30, 2016; **Published:** May 9, 2016

Abstract: *Look Homeward, Angel* by Thomas Wolfe is a book cherishing the memory of his homeland, a book displaying the survival experience of the American South, and a book searching for the spiritual home. The main characters in the novel all feel a deep loneliness. "For Wolfe, the experience of loneliness is neither strange nor curious, but 'inevitable and right' because it is part of the human heart." "Loneliness is and always has been the central and inevitable experience of every man." The cause for this loneliness is not only from the family and social environments, but from the universal existence state as well which reflects human survival plight. It also indicates the author's exploration and thinking of the human existence.

Keywords: Thomas Wolfe, Loneliness, Homeland, Soul

1. Introduction

Thomas Clayton Wolfe (1900–1938) was an American novelist of the early twentieth century. Within his short lifetime, Wolfe wrote four lengthy novels, plus many short stories, dramatic works and novellas. He is known for mixing highly original, poetic, rhapsodic, and impressionistic prose with autobiographical writing. His books, written and published from the 1920s to the 1940s, vividly reflect on American culture and the mores of that period, albeit filtered through Wolfe's sensitive, sophisticated and hyper-analytical perspective. [1]

In Chinese academic circles, Thomas Wolfe's position has been awkward. In the past there were fewer introductions of Wolfe in China, but his importance in the literary world should not be underestimated. In 1987, SDX Joint Publishing Company issued the first Chinese edition of *Look Homeward, Angel* (1929) in two volumes totaling more 900 pages, translated by QIAO Zhigao. Almost ten years after that (in 1996) Anhui Literature and Art Publishing House issued its Chinese version translated by FAN Dongsheng and XU Jundong. Only in recent years, these two translations have gone out of print. The translation of *Look Homeward, Angel* by QIAO Zhigao now commands a price much higher than its original price and circulates among lovers of literature. What is the most interesting is that Jiangxi Education Press

published a new translation of *Look Homeward, Angel* in 2009, and three earlier translations (from Dunhuang Literature and Art Publishing House, Shanghai Translation Publishing House and Jiangsu People's Publishing House) were also reissued. [2] Thus, in 2009, the four publishers released new editions of *Look Homeward, Angel* by four translators have brought us the legend of Thomas Wolfe. [3] Therefore, under the circumstance of being gradually accepted by Chinese readers, deeper appreciation of Wolfe and the work of his various periods especially *Look Homeward, Angel* will be necessary. And in this novel the loneliness is unfolded incisively and vividly. [4]

2. The Lost Homeland

The setting is the fictional town and state of Altamont, Catawba, a fictionalization of his home town, Asheville, North Carolina. It is located in the southern America, but quite different from most part in the South. It is no longer what the ordinary people in the south look forward to—tall red pillars, black people playing of a four-stringed musical instrument. [5] There arises frenetic activities of the buying and selling of real estate. People are crowded in the business world. They all worship the materialism of the South. Getting rich becomes the symbol of an individual's success, and the worship of the golden calf diffuses. This desire for the material life brings the spiritual poverty and narrow-mindedness. "Through the hot

streets of that town seethed the toughs, the crooks, the vagabonds of a nation—Chicago gunmen, bad niggers from Texas, Bowery bums, pale Jews with soft palms, from the shops of the city, Swedes from the Middle-West, Irish from New England, mountaineers from Tennessee and North Carolina, whores, in shoals and droves, from everywhere. For these the war was a fat enormous goose raining its golden eggs upon them. There was no thought or belief in any future. There was only the triumphant Now. There was no life beyond the moment. There was only an insane flux and re-flux of getting and spending.” The belief in God is banished covered with a cloak of secular. As Eugene is told “it pays to be a Christian.” “It helps you in a business way. They come to know you and respect you. You won’t get far in this town, Gene, without them.” [5] Facing the hometown of spiritual sterility, Eugene feels out of place, because he cannot find the spiritual home, and the oasis of love. And the home which used to be the soul of his harbor is no longer a parking place in his heart.

Home, a separate place to the outside world, a place to enjoy family care, is to Eugene a cage to get out of. Eugene’s father is a stone cutter. “He built his house close to the quiet hilly street; he bedded the loamy soil with flowers; he laid the short walk to the high veranda steps with great square sheets of colored marble; he put a fence of spiked iron between his house and the world. Then, in the cool long glade of yard that stretched four hundred feet behind the house he planted trees and grape vines.” [5] Thus it can be seen that his father is a man full of love to life. The home is his safe harbor. He uses his hands to shape it with care. Outside the room “the grape vines, tough and barren, writhed about the house like sinewy ropes” while inside the “warm rooms where one....” This should have been a picture of happy life, but what is apprehensive is that Gant is an eccentric. “The strange figure of Oliver Gant cast its famous shadow through the town. Men heard at night and morning the great formula of his curse to Eliza.” “He breathed over them all his hot lion-breath of desire and fury: when he was drunk, her white pursed face, and all the slow octopal movements of her temper, stirred him to red madness. She was at such times in real danger from his assault: she had to lock herself away from him.” [5] On the night before Eugene is born, Gant comes back, drunk again, and wants to beat Eliza. Gant makes the home lose the peace it should have had. Eliza is an avaricious and close-fisted woman, only obsessed with making money, almost indifferent to the family. “Eliza was not content with her husband’s trade: there was no money in death. People, she thought, died too slowly.” She is willing “to rent out a part of her home” to make money. Eliza gets a boarding-house and “took Eugene with her.” “Thus, before he was eight, Eugene gained another roof and lost forever the tumultuous, unhappy, warm centre of his home.” The family separates in two places. The normal relationship and order of family life has permanent changes. The children come and go between the two homes and lose the sense of stable life. Dixieland becomes Eugene’s new home, where he cannot find the resting place for his heart. “There was no place sacred unto themselves, no place fixed for their own inhabitation, no place

proof against the invasion of the boarders.” [5] Dixieland is for him a lost home, losing the warmth and comfort of a home. To make money, Eliza accepts whatever boarders without caring for the children’s healthy growth. Eliza is too busy to look after the family. When “Ben had been desperately ill, with pneumonia in both lungs”, “Meanwhile, Eliza talked incessantly about real estate, bought, sold and traded.” [6] It is difficult to last for a home with no love, especially when Gant’s condition worsens. But in such circumstances, Steve is extremely vulgar and only concerns about his share. “They were snarling like curs over one bone—their little shares in the money of an unburied dead man who lay, with low moanings of disease, not thirty feet away.” [5] The house which Gant built with grape vines writhing about is now dilapidated and under new ownership. This symbolizes the final disintegration of the family. For the Gant’s, they are people who have lost their home and they have never had a home with real meaning. In the home that they live every day, they cannot find care, warmth, and sustenance. They are homeless people.

3. The Lonely Soul

In the eyes of the townspeople, the Gant’ are strange and difficult to understand and get close to. No one wants to make friends with the family and no one knows a lot about their lives. Gant often behaves in an odd way and “memorized each accent of the noble rant, and strode muttering through the streets, with rapid gestures of the enormous talking hands.” [5] Steve is a drunk and a disturbance and idles about every day. “But Helen, small thin fury, held on relentlessly.” Luke talks too much and always tries to please others. Ben is “a stranger, and as he sought through the house, he was always aprowl to find some entrance into life, some secret undiscovered door—a stone, a leaf, —that might admit him into light and fellowship.” [5] Eliza’s only purpose is to amass possessions. She falls into the abyss of desire and unable to extricate herself. Her role as mother and wife has been distorted. She works from morning till night talking business. The more she invests in real estate, the less she can use in her daily life. She is trying hard to save: “She would fret loudly if a light was kept burning in the house, saying that ruin and poverty faced her. She seldom ate unless the food was given to her; she went about the house holding a cup of weak coffee and a crust of bread. A stingy careless breakfast was the only meal to which Luke and Eugene could look forward with any certainty.” [5] There appears a barrier between her and the family and their relationship is drifting apart. This is an extremely lonely family and they distort themselves in the loneliness. Very few people are lonelier than Gant and Eliza. Both fail to express themselves: Gant uses eloquence, curses, excessive drinking, and acolasia, while Eliza uses the ways of chattering, money and real estate. [5] Both cannot express themselves, both lose language of love, and both cannot transfer their own feelings. Gant’s eloquent speeches do not make him have a better communication with his family. Eliza communicates with the children in a tone of a

businessman. As Eugene comes back from school, Eliza would “send him out on the streets at once with *The Saturday Evening Post*. ‘It won’t hurt you to do a little light work after school.’” Eliza desires to be loved and understood, but she has to live in the loneliness because the desire for wealth has put up an insurmountable gap between her and the family.

Disillusionment makes Gant lost in the loneliness and he has no way to get out. When he was fifteen, he was attracted by a carved angel, “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.” [5] But his dream does not come true. As for Gant, unable to carve the angel means he cannot express the feeling in his heart, and it means he has lost the ability to express himself. That’s why he vents his frustration and anguish in the wine, that’s why he vents his complaints in the quarrel with his wife, and that’s why he sinks himself into the passion to forget his sufferings in spirit. And finally, he even sells the angel out front to Elizabeth to be used as a tombstone for a prostitute. This symbolizes the thorough disillusionment of his dreams and leaves a wound in his heart incurable forever. Since then, he locks himself in a cage of self-pity and bitterness.

Ben has not found his spiritual home till he dies. He is a lonely spirit and quite alien to the living circumstances. The love he pays in the cold world is not rewarded and the efforts he makes are all in vain. He wants to join the army, but “he had been rejected as unfit in the draft”. The merciless door of fortune is always close to him. Ben cannot find the home in his heart. He cannot find the spiritual home. The loss of his own and the loss of his spiritual home give him a sense of lonely, restless, joyless life. That is the helplessness when an individual life loses the spiritual sustenance and the home of his heart. His inner world is utterly helpless and despairing. His sensitive and vulnerable soul has nothing to rely on. As Albert Camus points out, “In a universe suddenly divested of illusions and lights, man feels an alien, a stranger. His exile is without remedy since he is deprived of the memory of a lost home or the hope of a promised land.” [7] Because of Eliza’s negligence, Ben’s condition worsens and dies of consumption. During his lifetime, Ben cannot find his love but the irony is that “Death was like a lovely and tender woman, Ben’s friend and lover, who had come to free him, to heal him, to save him from the torture of life.” His pain at Ben’s death breaks thoroughly the tie between Eugene and the family because all the people in the family are indifferent except Ben. Eugene becomes amply disappointed at family love when he sees the callousness of his parents, so he has to put his emotional sustenance in love. He says to the girl she loves so much “Laura! My dear! My sweet! Don’t leave me alone! I’ve been alone! I’ve always been alone!” [5] But Eugene’s love is short-lived. The girl goes back to her hometown and becomes another person’s wife. She has hid from Eugene the truth of her engagement. The hopeless affection and love trap Eugene into a lonely world.

4. The Disquieting Loneliness

Everyone in the Gant’s feels lonely. They cannot find the place where they can rest their souls, they cannot find a sense of belonging in the lost homeland, and they cannot find the spiritual home in the reality. [8] And more, their souls are nowhere to rest because God is away from their world. This is a sense of loneliness, no place to settle down, no one to rely on, and no home to stay. This loneliness is the experience of the characters’ feelings of life. It is also the author’s thinking and questioning of human survival. “Novelists are neither historians nor prophets. They are explorers of the existence.” [9] What’s the relationship between the state of survival and the human existence itself? Their loneliness is not just because they are in a noisy environment lack of family warmth, not just because they live in a materialistic society but because of their predicaments. From the deep sense, it is the loneliness that humans can not get rid of. From the point of nature, human beings are always seeking the certainty of the existence, the inevitable logic and causality between things, and eager to control their own destinies. However, the reality is quite the opposite, the world they are living in is strange. It is contingency and uncertainty of existence that are ruling the world. When he is thinking of his existence, Gant keenly feels just how strange and how solitary human beings are in this world. As for Eliza, the death of Grover gives her the most terrible wound of her life. For the first time in her life she feels so strange and so helpless. In front of fate, human beings are weak and insignificant. We have to be pushed around by this giant hand. Ben searches for it in his lifetime but fails eventually. In front of the door of the fate, he cannot find the way to enter. Ben is always confused about what life is. When he is watching the mountains in his home town, Eugene understands that “they were the cup of reality, beyond growth, beyond struggle and death. They were his absolute unity in the midst of eternal change.” This “eternal change” reflects the uncertainty of life. Human beings can not seize their own destiny, and have to be mercilessly swallowed any time. Eugene feels the strong contrast between the change of life and the eternal passage of time and nature. He feels life is so insignificantly short and fragile. Loneliness arises spontaneously.

In the absence of God, people can only fight alone in this alien world. Loneliness will permeate people’s life. Loneliness is the nature of life. And it increases the sense of loneliness to live in the social environment focusing on the pursuit of material desires and to live in the family environment lacking of warmth. Facing this loneliness, all the characters in the novel endeavor to get rid of it—but to no avail. “Gant, a fallen Titan, staring down enormous vistas of the Past, indifferent to the world about him; Eliza, beetle-wise, involved in blind accretions; Helen, childless, pathless, furious—a great wave breaking on the barren waste; and finally, Ben—the ghost, the stranger, prowling at this moment in another town, going up and down the thousand streets of life, and finding no doors.” [5] Their lonely journey highlights the gloomy color of fate, reveals

the infinite desolation and despair, and it also reflects the author's sense of loss for life. But behind the loss we see from Eugene the author's hidden gleam of hope. Eugene is also feeling lonely. He feels the loneliness that lacks of love and emotional contact, he feels the loneliness of being misunderstood, and he feels the loneliness of living alone in a strange world. But he does not sink in the loneliness as the other characters in the book. Embodied in his loneliness is a kind of spirit in relentless pursuit of the ideal life. Even facing loneliness, he can also experience the beauty of loneliness. "As that Spring ripened he felt entirely, for the first time, the full delight of loneliness. Sheeted in his thin nightgown, he stood in darkness by the orchard window of the back room at Gant's, drinking the sweet air down, exulting in his isolation in darkness, hearing the strange wail of the whistle going west." [5]

5. Conclusion

Facing the vulgar external world, Eugene gradually becomes independent from his loneliness. His experience adds some warmth to the novel—a kind of spirit—to face the loneliness and to relentlessly pursue the spiritual home. This relentless pursuit highlights man's courage and significance to live in the strange world. Loneliness is the thick layer of barrier between people that cannot be crossed. It is also the firm barrier for the brave to build their spiritual home. And under this lonely barrier the spiritual home can be protected. [10]

In his own unique way and perspective, Wolfe tells his philosophical thinking and understanding of life. He holds that the world in which we live is absurd. We don't know where it comes from and where it leads. Everyone living in this world is lonely and alienated. In this work *Look Homeward, Angel* every character feels inexplicably lonely and alienated. In Wolfe's works, family relations play a big role. When we read them we can feel deeply the ubiquitous loneliness. [11]

References

- [1] Reeves, Paschal (1974). *Thomas Wolfe, The Critical Reception* [M]. Ayer Publishing. p. xvii. ISBN 0-89102-050-0. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Thomas_Wolfe#cite_note-critical_reception-1 [OL].
- [2] WANG Lanming. Thomas Wolfe Studies in China [J]. The Thomas Wolfe Review, Volume 34, Nos. 1 & 2(2010): 138-139. Print.
- [3] ZHANG Yuehan. This Summer and the Four Translations of *Look Homeward, Angel* [N]. Guangzhou: Information Times, 2009-09-13. Print.
- [4] YANG Yanlan. The Loneliness in *Look Homeward, Angel* [J]. Chongqing: Journal of Chongqing University of Science and Technology (Social Sciences Edition), 2009(4): 105. Print.
- [5] Wolfe, Thomas. *Look Homeward, Angel* [M]. Hong Kong: The World Today Press, 1985. Print.
- [6] O'Connor, William Van. *Seven Modern American Novelists* [M]. Trans. ZHANG Ailing, et al. Beijing: SDX Joint Publishing Company. 1988: 270. Print.
- [7] Camus, Albert. *Le Mythe de Sisyphe* [M]. Trans. SHEN Zhiming. Guilin: Guangxi Normal University Press, 2002: 7. Print.
- [8] LI Zhengrong. Back to the Spiritual Home [J]. Taiyuan: Journal of Shanxi College for Youth Administrators, 2009(8): 88. Print.
- [9] Kundera, Milan. *L'art du Roman*. [M]. Shanghai: Shanghai Translation Publishing House, 2004: 56. Print.
- [10] YANG Yanlan. The Homelessness and Loneliness—On Thomas Wolfe's *Look Homeward, Angel* [J]. Nanjing: Data of Culture and Education, 2008(4): 30. Print.
- [11] CHEN Haifeng. Isolation and Alienation—On the Theme of Thomas Wolfe's *Look Homeward, Angel* [J]. Taiyuan: Masterpieces Review, 2010(6): 115. Print.