
**“The Presentation of Grover’s Character in
Thomas Wolfe’s The Lost Boy”**

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Abstract

Thomas Wolfe (1900-1938) is celebrated nowadays because of his untraditional way of writing that differentiates him from his contemporaries’ to some extent. What are diagnosed to be his weaknesses at that time comes to be regarded as features of modernism now; his writings are shapeless in its form, he uses unique prose-poem style and rich languages, and his psychologically vivid characters that fluctuating in his philosophical time sequel concept.

In his novella, The Lost Boy (1937), Thomas Wolfe tries to be innovative. He presents Grover’s character in a gradual way. Wolfe uses many devices to achieve his purpose. He uses different types of narration, traditional narrative incidents, and memory recall. The main concern of this research is to follow Wolfe’s

presentation of Grover's character through out the four parts of the novella.

Thomas Clayton Wolfe (1900-1938) was born in a middle class family, and raised in Asheville in North Carolina. He studied and graduated from the University of North Carolina in 1920, and received his Master Degree in playwright from Harvard University in 1922. Then he started a short career of teaching at New York University. His literary career started by writing two unsuccessful plays. Soon after, he turned to write novels and short stories because he believed that fiction suited his literary talents more than playwright. His four principal novels: Look Homeward, Angel(1929);Of Time and the River (1935);The Web and the Rock(1939); and You can't Go Home Again (1940) established his literary reputation. Besides, he wrote fifty eight short stories and seven novellas that were regarded as his best works and received enormous attention after his death. Most of them were included in his two collections of short stories: The Hills Beyond (1941), and From Death to Morning (1935). He died in 1938 because of pneumonia.¹

Thomas Wolfe is regarded as one of the prominent and controversial American novelists and short story writers of the early twentieth century. He has been criticized by some critics, and praised by others. He has been accused of a heavy reliance on

editors' efforts and autobiographical experiences; and an inability to size and organize his writings.² Yet, recent literary studies disprove all these claims; and consider him to be a head of his time. That is because of the many resemblances between modern fiction and his writings. For both of them are formless in shape, and focusing on the psychological aspects of characters.³ Hence, we find Wolfe records thoughts, emotions, memories, and trembling of his characters in a minute prose-poem style. One can feel that he is not reading a story, but living a story. Moreover, his works are seen as one work that presents his conception, and perception of the human entity. He writes with a unique style marked by long sentences with poetic language that is considered to be his personal invention.⁴ After his death William Faulkner, asserts that Wolfe was their generation's best writer:

.....My admiration for Wolfe is that he tried his best to get it all said; he was willing to throw away style, coherence, all the rules of preciseness, to try to put all the experience of the human heart on the head of a pin, as it were.⁵

His short stories and novellas are similar in themes, poetic style, and the autobiographical sense to those of his novels. Yet, recent studies considered them to be more mature, brilliant and having a tight aesthetic unity. In his literary career, Wolfe did not

believe in the artistic theory but in the richness of his writing's language and ideas. ⁶

Thomas Wolfe, also, has his own vision of time. C. Hugh Holman in his "Introduction" to The Short Novels of Thomas Wolfe asserts that time for Thomas Wolfe represents "the center of mystery of experience, and its representation on three complex levels was a major concern of his work".⁷ Holman goes further more to explain Wolfe's vision of time as being divided into three levels. The first level is the 'actual present'. In this level characters live in the present and move forward to the future. The second Level is the past time in which characters are presented through the accumulative experiences of the same characters 'as acting and as being acted upon' in that moment and up to that moment.⁸ Holman believes that Wolfe's past level actually "exists in the present principally through the action of memory, being triggered by a concrete sensory impression which in some way recalls the past."⁹ The third level is 'time immutable', as in Wolfe's own words. The implied time in this level is eternal and constant in contrast with life shortness.¹⁰

H. Wayne Morgan in his article "Thomas Wolfe: The Web of Memory" agrees with Holman's explanation of Wolfe's usage of time levels. He asserts that:

As an artist he [Wolfe] moves through all the three phases of this complex scheme of time, beginning with the simplicity of the present, to a final belief that life itself was a form of time.¹¹

Time is divided into levels, but these levels are going and coming, they are moving in a sequel way that never stops or changes. Wolfe implies his concept of time in creating his characters, especially Grover's Character in his novella "The Lost Boy" obviously. The main concern of this research is to follow Wolfe's Creation of Grover's character in accordance with his vision of time.¹²

Thomas Wolfe's novella The Lost Boy was published in the Redbook in 1937. Critics believe the story to be written around the year 1936, for it was inspired by the writer's visit to St. Louis in 1935. In this trip, Wolfe revisited the family house where they had lived in 1904 during the world's Fair, and where his brother Grover died of typhoid.¹³ The novella told the story of Grover's death at the age of twelve. He is the older brother of Eugene, Thomas Wolfe's fictional counterpart in his autobiographical novel Look Homeward, Angel. Fragments of the story were published in chapters (51-59) in this novel.¹⁴

The novella is composed of four parts in which the writer presents Grover's character gradually. Each part has its own setting, incidents, narrator and characters separately. What integrate the four parts together in one piece are: Grover, as the central character, and his early death and eternal pathetic loss as the major theme.¹⁵

In the first part, Wolfe presents Grover living in 'the actual present level' of time, in which he is living as an actual individual whose actions and reactions are observed by readers. Wolfe opens the first part with long passages full of fascinating descriptions of the shops and merchants' stores, the square, and the fountain and its rainbow sheets:

Light came and went and came again, the booming strokes of three o'clock beat out across the town in thronging bronze from the courthouse bell, light winds of April blew the fountain out in rainbow sheets.¹⁶

Wolfe describes the setting through Grover's thought, too:

.....and he did not feel lost. For "Here," thought Grover, "here is the Square as it has always been-and papa's shop, the fire department and the City Hall, the fountain pulsing with its plume, the street cars coming in and halting at the quarter hour, the hardware store on the corner there, the row of old brick buildings oil this side of the street, the people passing and the light that comes and changes and that always will come back again, and everything that comes and goes and changes in the Square, and yet will be the same again.[The Lost Boy]

To presents his character in an actual human entity, Wolfe starts his creation by fixing time in which Grover is living:

Here is old Grover, almost twelve years old. Here is the month of April, 1904. Here is the courthouse bell and three o'clock. Here is Grover on the Square that never changes. Here is Grover, caught upon this point of time. [The Lost Boy]

A detailed description of Grover's outside appearance; his face, clothes; is given by Wolfe to make readers acquainted with him. This description is told by a third person narrator who observes and presents Grover.

He was a child, dark-eyed and grave, birthmarked upon his neck-- a berry of warm brown-and with a gentle face, too quiet and too listening for his years.

.....

The scuffed boy's shoes, the thick-ribbed stockings gartered at the knees, the short knee pants cut straight with three small useless buttons at the side, the sailor blouse, the old cap battered out of shape, perched sideways up on top of the raven head, the old soiled canvas bag slung from the shoulder. [The Lost Boy]

The main incident in the first part is the candy shop incident. Grover wants to by some candy from a candy shop in the town and paying by stamps. The shop is run by an old man and his wife, who

tries to exploit the little boy accusing him of stealing, and taking his stamps. They treat him cruelly in a way urges the reader to sympathize with the little boy. The boy complains them to his father, who is a strong stone cutter. The father regains his son the stolen stamps. This simple incident has its enormous influences upon Grover causing him to lose his innocence and live his first experience of the dark side of adult's life. It is the first epiphany in the novella.¹⁷

And light came and went and came again-but now not quite the same as it had done before. The boy saw the pattern of familiar shapes and knew that they were just the same as they had always been. But something had gone out of day, and something had come in again. Out of the vision of those quiet eyes some brightness had, gone, and into their vision had come some deeper color. He could not say, he did not know through what transforming shadows life had passed within that quarter hour. He only knew that something had been lost-something forever gained.[The Lost Boy]

The above extract also improve the movement of time's coming and going in a sequel way.

The second part is narrated by Grover's mother thirty years after his sudden death. It is a long conversation with Eugene, her youngest son and Wolfe's fictional counterpart, in the form of a monologue. She told him stories about Grover with a soft touch

of motherly mourning over her lost son that urged the reader to sympathize with her pathetic tone. ¹⁸

I suppose you have the judgment of grown men....
But Grover! Grover had it even then!

.....

Oh, even as a child I could depend on Grover.
He could go anywhere, I could send him anywhere, and
I'd always know he'd get back safe, and do exactly what I
told him to! [The Lost Boy]

She was very proud of Grover, especially his ability in trading, and in speaking.

Well, I had to admit it, you know. I had to own up then. Grover, even as a child, was a far better trader than I was. . . . They said all of the market men, all of the farmers, knew him. They'd begin to laugh when they saw him coming-they'd say: "Look out! Here's Grover! Here's one trader you're not going to fool!". [The Lost Boy]

She told Eugene the train incident in which Grover exchange a mature talk with a grownup gentle man sitting near him. They were all going to the Fair with her:

..... asked this gentleman every sort of question- what the trees were, what was growing there, how big the farms were-all sorts of questions, which this gentleman would answer, until I said: "Why, I'll vow, Grover! You shouldn't ask so many questions. You'll bother the very life out of this gentleman." "Now you leave that boy alone. He's all right," he [the gentleman] said. "He doesn't bother me a bit,..." [He] put his arm round Grover's shoulders. "You leave him alone. He doesn't bother me a bit." [The Lost Boy]

The third part is told by Helen, Grover and Eugene's sister, thirty years after his death, too. She talks to Eugene directly reminding him of their brother:

Can you remember, Eugene, how Grover used to look? I mean the birthmark, the black eyes, the olive skin. The birthmark always showed because of those open sailor blouses kids used to wear.

.....

They were all crazy about Grover. Everybody liked him.... And how proud Grover was of- you! Don't you remember how he used to show you off? [The Lost Boy]

She tells him their adventure in the Fair, when she and Grover went out secretly downtown in St.Louis, they ate in a restaurant and when they returned home and Grover had his fatal illness.

We stayed down there till it was getting dark, and we passed by a lunchroom-an old one-armed joint with one-armed chairs and people sitting on stools and eating at the counter. [The Lost Boy]

One can feel regretting, and sense of guilt in Helen's talk in spite of the past thirty years after Grover's death.¹⁹

I can still see him lying there, and remember how sick he was, and how scared I was! I don't know why I was so scared. All we'd done had been to sneak away from home and go into a lunchroom-but I felt guilty about the whole thing, as if it was my fault. [The Lost Boy]

In part two and three, Thomas Wolfe portrays Grover's character by using the second level of time: that is the past. Here, Grover is presented through the memories of his mother and sister. Here he is not living in the actual time, but through the accumulated impacts of him over them.

In the fourth part, Eugene, Grover's youngest brother after thirty years becomes a prominent writer. He returns to the family house in St. Louis where Grover died. He finds the new owner of the house who allows him to enter inside. As he enters the house, memories start to flow inside his mind. He tries to recapture his past by telling her stories about his family, and Grover. He remembers Grover tries to make him pronounce his name. Inside his mind echoes of his voice and Grover's voices still reverberated:

"Now say it-- Grover!"

"Gova."

"No-- not Gova-- Grover! ... Say it!"

"Gova."

"Ah-h-- you didn't say it. You said Gova. Grover-- now say it!"

"Gova." [The Lost Boy]

He realizes that the past can not come back again. Even if he visits the house of memories, or tries his best to recapture a ghost

out of the past by returning to that point of time and place. Even his imagination and long talking about him will never help to return him again. Here lies Eugene's epiphany in which he realizes the underlined meaning of loss, death, loneliness, and sorrows.²⁰

And out of the enchanted wood, that thicket of man's memory, Eugene knew that the dark eye and the quiet face of his friend and brother-poor child, life's stranger, and life's exile, lost like all of us, a cipher in blind mazes, long ago-the lost boy was gone forever, and would not return. [The Lost Boy]

Conclusion

Thomas Wolfe presents Grover's character through stages. The first stage is the actual time. In this stage, Grover is an actual character acts and reacts with other character around him. He presents him in a way that he draws Grover's both soul and appearance. This stage is found in the first part of the story.

In the second and third part Wolfe presents Grover the dead boy. He used to close character to narrate his story. Besides they serve to announce his existence in spite of his death. The mourning mother in the second part, and the regretting sister in the third present Grover effectively. Both tell stories about him to his brother, Eugene, as if he is responsible to save Grover's memory. Grover's character is presented through the flow of happy and sad memories of them. These two parts led to the fourth part which is

the climax, where Eugene tries his best to recapture his brother, but he could not at the end. He realizes that the lost boy will never come a gain, this is the central theme of the story.

Notes

- 1- Walter Allen, *Tradition and Dream*, (London: The Hogarth press,1986),pp.99-100.
- 2- C. Hugh Holman, "Introduction", *The Short Novels of Thomas Wolfe*, (New York: Charles Scribner's Snos,1961),p.vii.
- 3- Walter Fuller Taylor, *The Story of American Letters* (Chicago: Henry Regnery Company,1956),pp.466-467.
- 4- Ibid.
- 5- Thomas C. Moser, "Thomas Wolfe, Look Homeward, Angel", *The Voice of America Forum Lectures, The American Novel Series N. 18.* p.2.
- 6- Holman, "Introduction", pp.vii-viii.
- 7- Ibid, p.xix.
- 8- C. Hugh Holman,*Thomas Wolfe* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota press,1960), p.34.
- 9- Ibid.
- 10- Ibid.

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- 11- H. Wayne Morgan, *Writers in Transition*(New York: Hill and Wang,1963), p.138.
- 12- Timothy Dow Adams, “The Ebb and Flow of Time and Place in “The Lost Boy” ”, *Critical Essays on Thomas Wolfe* ,Ed. by John S. Phillipson,(Boston: G.K. Hall &Co., 1985),p.160.
- 13- Ibid.,p.159.
- 14- B.R.McElderry,Jr., *Thomas Wolfe*, (New York:Twayne Publishers,Inc.,1964), p113.
- 15- James D. Boyer “Revisions of Thomas Wolfe’s “The Lost Boy”-Critical Essay”. *Studies in Short Fiction*.
<http://findarticles.com/p/articles/section2>, p.1
- 16- All the quotations are from Thomas Wolfe, *The Lost boy*
[http://xroads.virginia.edu/~ma01/white/anthology/](http://xroads.virginia.edu/~ma01/white/anthology/Wolfe)
Wolfe<HTML><HEAD><TITLE> *Anthology of Thirties Prose*, p.1. All the quotations included in this research are quoted from this edition.
- 17- Boyer,section.2, p.1.
- 18- B.R.McElderry,Jr.,pp.113-114.
- 19- Boyer,section.2, p.1.
- 20- Ibid,section.6, pp.1-2.

الملخص

توماس وولف (١٩٠٠ - ١٩٣٨) يحتفى به في هذه الأيام بسبب طريقته غير التقليدية في الكتابة والتي تميزه عن معاصريه إلى حد ما. ما كان يشخص على انه نقاط ضعف له في ذلك الوقت، يعتبر ميزات الحداثة الآن، فكتابته غير المحددة بشكلها، واستخدامه لأسلوب القصيدة النثرية بشكل متفرد، و شخصياته الحية نفسياً، و التي تتأرجح في مفهومه الفلسفي للوقت المتسلسل.

في روايته القصيرة الفتى الضائع (١٩٣٧)، حاول توماس وولف أن يكون مجدداً فقد قدم شخصية غروفر بطريقة تدريجية. استخدم وولف فيها العديد من الأدوات لانجاز هذا الغرض. فقد استخدم أنواع مختلفة من الرواة، الأحداث السردية التقليدية، واسترجاع الذاكرة. الموضوع الرئيسي لهذا البحث هو تتبع طريقة تقديم وولف لشخصية غروفر خلال الأجزاء الأربعة للرواية.

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