

**WILLIAM OLIVER GANT AND EUGENE GANT: THE ABSURD
HEROES IN THOSMAS WOLFE’S
*LOOK HOMEWARD, ANGEL***

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Look Homeward, Angel is Thomas Wolfe’s first novel, it is about the Gant family, and it specifically deals with the growing up of a lonely and ambitious young man in a Southern town. It is autobiographical, basically tracing Wolfe’s own childhood and youth. This allows us to take a closer look into his own life, through the character of Eugene Gant and examine the existentialist theme of absurdity as defined by French philosopher and novelist Albert Camus. Camus states that the myth of Sisyphus is the ultimate allegory for human existence and the following study takes a closer look at that theory using Eugene Gant and his father, W. O. Gant, as examples.

Key words: Albert Camus, absurd, existentialism, Thomas Wolfe, Sisyphus

The term ‘absurd’ is defined by *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms* as something that applies to “the modern sense of human purposelessness in a universe without meaning or value” (Baldick 2001: 1). According to this definition, when we talk about the absurd, we are concerned with Albert Camus’s line of philosophical thinking concerning “the dialectic between the being of man and the objective world around him” (Killinger 1961: 309), rather than Jean-Paul Sartre’s, whose definition of the term is much more concerned with freedom, authentic living, and the vocabulary definition of the word rather than the philosophical term that Camus insists upon. In other words, the absurd character we are concerned with in this study would mean a character in a state of constant wandering toward nothing in particular. Here we will apply the theory of the absurd as viewed in Camus’s essay *The Myth of Sisyphus* to Thomas Wolfe’s autobiographical novel *Look Homeward, Angel*, and more specifically to a couple of his characters – those of Wolfe’s alter ego and protagonist of the novel, Eugene Gant, and Eugene’s father, William Oliver Gant (henceforth referred to as W. O. Gant). By

applying the absurd to the novel, I hope to achieve a new approach to the book, a new point of view into Wolfe's writings.

Camus presents his version of the absurd in his essay *The Myth of Sisyphus*, where he argues that "the absurd is born of this confrontation between the human need [for happiness and for reason] and the unreasonable silence of the world" (Camus 1979: 31-2). That is a conclusion born of previous arguments that the absurd is: "the revolt of the flesh" (Camus 1979: 20), "that denseness and that strangeness of the world" (Camus 1979: 20), and "the confrontation of the irrational and the wild longing for clarity whose call echoes in the human heart" (Camus 1979: 26). At length, we can cite M. M. Madison who tells us that

Camus argues that human life can have value and purpose, though the chaotic universe stands in powerful refutation. In reality, then, man and the universe are antithetically related giving the age-worn struggle between good and evil the form of rational man versus irrational nature; and the good life must be lived not in harmony but in defiance of the natural order of things.

(Madison 1964: 223)

Simply put, the absurd – Camus's absurd – is the contradiction of, or clash between the conscious man and the meaningless (or Godless) world. Camus tells us that we live in a world where we are left alone to choose our own destiny and even choose whether we should choose to do anything at all, bringing up the problem of suicide. The whole essay is a contemplation about suicide, about whether we should live life at all. According to Camus, the myth of Sisyphus is the perfect metaphor for life: everybody gets up in the morning to toil in the work hours and goes back home to rest up before getting up the next day, and repeats the whole process – over and over, until the end. Camus asks us, why should we bother with it at all? Why not put an end to hope and expectation if none of our efforts matter? Camus asks, "Does the Absurd dictate death?" (Camus 1979: 16) and tells us about the supposedly existential philosophies which "all of them without exception suggest escape" (Camus 1979: 35). Sartre's absurd, for example, is avoided by practicing one's freedom in order to live an authentic life. But Camus calls that "philosophical suicide" (Camus 1979: 43) because other existentialists merely ignore the absurdity of life rather than live it (Camus 1979: 43). The point he is trying to make is that one should not seek escape, but rather face the universe head on, acknowledge and face the absurdity because "that revolt gives life its value" (Camus 1979: 54).

Here is where we must separate three types of person: the unconscious character, the conscious, or absurd, character, and the absurd hero. The first one is the person who goes through the motions of life unconcerned with the question of being, life, death, and so on – in other words, the everyday person. The second one is the conscious man, the one who knows there is an end and that nothing he does will change that. And the third is the person who knows all about this end and the meaninglessness that surrounds him, and revolts against it by seeking happiness. All of these are found in the writings of Thomas Wolfe. In Camus's work there is a clear separation between the chaotic world and the individual seeking order. Richard S. Kennedy, Wolfe's first and most influential scholar, confirms that one of Wolfe's ideas was "to consider man's place in this dual universe" (Kennedy 1962: 101). We can safely assume that for Kennedy and for Wolfe "the real world of order and necessity, which can be perceived by thought, lies behind the chaos" (Kennedy 1962: 101), and the absurd hero in Wolfe's writings is the one seeking that real world and its possibilities. Wolfe's more important characters do not look away from the truth and face it in their own way. In this study we shall examine three of those characters, all of them defined by the absurd in one way or another.

We can approach Wolfe from an existential viewpoint due to one of the themes of all his writings: loneliness. It overlaps with the existential theme of alienation and it "recurs again and again in the mass of opinions and feelings expressed" (Kennedy 1962: 61). He himself defines the loneliness as "the homelessness and houselessness of modern life" (Kennedy 1962: 61). And according to David Galloway, the author of *The Absurd Hero in American Fiction*,

[...] when faced with the loneliness and lack of values of the modern world, man can do one of three things. He can seek an escape through sensualism; he can find ... some form of humanism; or he can break from all conventional ethics and systems and actively pursue new ones.

(Galloway 1981: 29)

All three of the described answers to the absurd are present in Wolfe's novel *Look Homeward, Angel*. All three are a result of the "spiritual drowsiness and emotional lethargy" (Galloway 1981: 131) that assail the modern man; all three are a method of kick-starting man back to life.

However, not all three responses are fully represented in the novel. We can easily recognize William Oliver Gant as the "sensualist" and

Eugene Gant as the absurd hero, but who, then, is the humanist? That role might have gone to Ben, Eugene's (and, by extension, Thomas Wolfe's) older brother, who is indeed a conscious character. Ben is the outsider in the family, who feels dejected with the world and questions meaning constantly. He finds no place for himself, even going as far as attempting to join the Canadian army just to feel useful. Alas, he is too weak and shows early symptoms of the tuberculosis that plagues the country at that period, ultimately falling victim to the disease. His brush with absurdity is identified early in the novel when Wolfe calls him "a stranger" (Wolfe 2016: 80) and his humanistic nature is expressed only through the protection and advice he gives solely to Eugene. There is an absurd hero spark within him that is presented with his constant questioning the meaninglessness of life, constant seeking of an ultimate answer, whether at home, by joining the army, or wandering the streets. Wolfe calls him someone "left floating in limbo" (Wolfe 2016: 126) as he "moved quietly, but not stealthily, about, confessing and denying nothing" (Wolfe 2016: 284). The best response to his search is provided by Dr. Coker, who tells him

A man must live, doesn't he? ... in order to work nine hours a day in a newspaper office, sleep nine hours, and enjoy the other six in washing, shaving, dressing, eating at the Greasy Spoon, loafing in front of Wood's, and occasionally taking the Merry Widow to see Francis X. Bushman.
(Wolfe 2016: 319)

This typically absurd answer about the state of life that surrounds him, along with the realization that he is unfit for military duty, which he saw as one option for escape, tips Ben over to the side of the Nietzschean nihilism, a state he inhabits until his premature death at the end of the novel, which is why we cannot call Ben a humanist absurd character despite his questioning qualities and his relationship with Eugene.

On the other hand, we can positively identify W. O. Gant as a true sensualist absurd character. Here I must specify that he is a sensualist character in the sense that he uses alcohol addiction to satisfy his appetites and numb his thoughts and senses rather than using carnal pleasures to avoid the same – a sort of subversion to the sensual escape that Galloway speaks of. Gant is a man who considers himself an artist, a stonemason whose work lives on, as opposed to the salesmen and workers in Altamont whom he views with pity because of their fleeting nature (Wolfe 2016: 98). He is an absurd character because he understands how life works, he fears mortality as "the high horror of death and oblivion, the decomposition of

life, memory, desire, in the huge burial-ground of the earth stormed through his heart” (Wolfe 2016: 99). Alas, Gant is no absurd hero. His response to this knowledge of the absurd is to reiterate Sisyphus’s labor in his own way: working and drinking rather than going up and down a mountain. Kennedy confirms the routineness of his life by citing Wolfe’s own autobiographical outline that would become *Look Homeward, Angel*: “My Father... had the instincts for ritual, the order of rising, washing, fire-making, etc.—his comings and goings” (Kennedy 1962: 28). Wolfe then pens it down for the reader in the novel, calling W. O. Gant a man who “had the passion of the true wanderer, of him who wanders to a fixed point” (Wolfe 2016: 47), implying that there is always a limit to Gant’s “revolt” and then the cycle is merely repeated. His reaction to the absurd is alcoholism. All his routines loop back to his addiction. And it is a closed loop as Gant’s own thoughts go back to “his vanished youth, his diminishing strength... and he had the very quiet despair of a man who knows the forged chain may not be unlinked, the threaded design unwound, the done undone” (Wolfe 2016: 56), then sending him through yet another “spree drinking” period (Kennedy 1962: 23). Once Gant becomes sick of prostate cancer, it is only drinking that holds him up as he can no longer practice his craft. Gant fights the everyday person with rhetoric of grandeur, blaming them for being nonsensical, but when it comes to his own life, he offers no solution to his condition, nor does he seek any. His fate is self-inflicted and the obvious question here is “What could he have done?” but that hardly matters as a much more important question is rather “Did he attempt anything at all?” This is the question that separates the absurd hero from the conscious character. The ultimate rule of the absurd hero, as defined by David Galloway, is: “Live the conflict for only the conflict can make you free” (Galloway 1981: 12), and the only conflict Gant has is a social one rather than an existential one.

Galloway also argues that “when man is victimized by life itself... it remains for him to seek salvation alone” (Galloway 1981: 28). That is exactly what Eugene Gant does throughout his life. We are reminded of his lonely search for salvation in almost every chapter of *Look Homeward, Angel*. His struggle with life makes him the perfect fit for an absurd hero, the one who breaks from convention, the one who is acknowledged for his “struggle with the environment, refusal to surrender personal ethics to environmental pressures” (Galloway 1981: 98). Eugene identifies himself as an “inarticulate stranger” (Wolfe 2016: 37) as early as infancy, setting up a role he would live throughout his life. Eugene is always on the verge of falling into the trap of repetition, whether by helping his mother in the

Dixieland home, working as a paper boy, university studies, or working at the dock in his escape period, but he never remains static and always breaks from the routine he sets himself in. And it is a conscious break which further allows us to call him an absurd hero. As he puts it himself, “We are passing away in smoke and there is nothing today but weariness to pay for yesterday's toil. How may we save ourselves?” (Wolfe 2016: 292). He acknowledges the Sisyphean loop and seeks salvation by finding new roads to travel. He is in a constant conflict: with himself, with his family, with society, and with life. He even brushes on the escape of sensualism that his father chooses when he first tastes alcohol:

[...] he knew how completely he was his father's son—how completely, and with what added power and exquisite refinement of sensation, was he Gantian. He exulted in the great length of his limbs and his body, through which the mighty liquor could better work its wizardry.

(Wolfe 442)

Rather than embrace this escape, he moves on to other things, other conflicts and never stands still, never caught in a cycle of repetition. He works in Dixieland, but seeks escape; he works as a paper boy, but leaves at first opportunity; his family want him to stay with them and repeat the cycles and help, but he goes off to university, being the only one in the family to do so – and the rebellion goes on and on. One may not call Ben happy, nor can we call W. O. Gant happy, but we can apply this adjective to Eugene for “happiness and the absurd ... are inseparable. ... It teaches that all is not, has not been, exhausted” (Camus 1979: 110). His constant struggle with life is his own salvation, his own way out of limbo. His unceasing appetite for life keeps him going in this battle with, paradoxically, life – that makes his existence absurd and him the true hero, the way Camus imagines him. Wolfe confirms this by telling the reader that “it was not [Eugene's] quality as a romantic to escape out of life, but into it” (Wolfe 2016: 528). It is a conscious struggle he chooses and welcomes and goes hand in hand with Camus's hope that “one must imagine Sisyphus happy” (Camus 1979: 111). Even at the very end of the novel, Wolfe closes the final scene by turning Eugene to face “the distant soaring ranges” (Wolfe 2016: 561), announcing his appetite for more.

Look Homeward, *Angel* is a novel, an autobiographical bildungsroman about a boy who struggles with life in his attempts to become a man and find his place in the universe. We can easily apply Camus's line of philosophy about the absurd to this novel mostly thanks to

its protagonist, Eugene Gant. He covers the entire basis set for an absurd hero and ventures forth without any illusion to bind him. Eugene is the type of character who struggles with the challenges he sets himself up with, creating meaning for himself rather than waiting for answers or expecting the universe to voice. His defining as an absurd hero opens up the possibility to view him, and other characters in Thomas Wolfe's writings, through the prism of the existential line of philosophy.

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