

VIBRANT DEATH:
AWARENESS BY DEVELOPMENT OF TONE AND IMAGES IN
THOMAS WOLFE'S GANT NOVELS

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Death is one of the major themes in Thomas Wolfe's novels. Compared briefly to the other major American writers of the twenties, F. Scott Fitzgerald and Ernest Hemingway, Wolfe's approach to death is filled with human vibrancy. The Gant novels, all published before Wolfe's death, delineate Thomas Wolfe's awareness and understanding of death.

Wolfe's tone and awareness of death and the life-force come from his voracious reading of James Joyce and later the lyric poetry of Wordsworth. Pamela Hansford Johnson makes a case for the influence of Walt Whitman; however, this has not been clearly proved. The theory of the life-force, presented by Whitman in "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry," is evident in Thomas Wolfe's death themes.

From the beginning of Look Homeward, Angel, to the final scene when Eugene Gant stands in the square and faces his brother Ben's ghost, the novel is concerned with death and death in life. Eugene must escape from the bonds of his home and society. Through the deaths which occur in the Gant household Eugene gains insights for living. Each death in the novel brings Eugene closer to his ultimate decision to leave home and find the world outside Altamont.

Grover, his brother and twin of his favorite brother

Ben, dies at the age of twelve of typhoid fever contracted from polluted water near the Saint Louis Fair grounds.

Grover's death is presented as a dream vision, for Eugene was only four years old. This is his first look at death, and the loneliness and lostness which he feels when he views Grover's remains become an integral part of his life until Ben's death and his decision to look beyond Altamont and his family.

Lily Reid, the prostitute, dies a lonely and deserted death. She is an echo of Grover and a part of the Gant family's acceptance of death. When Ben dies at the end of the novel, Gene has become reconciled to death. He comes to believe in a life-force which protects Ben from being lost forever.

The final death scene occurs in Of Time and the River. W. O. Gant, Eugene's father, who has survived several cancer operations comes finally to the end of his life. The imagery used in W. O.'s death is almost joyful. Gant sees death as a little child beckoning him homeward. Death has become acceptable.

Since most of Thomas Wolfe's writings are considered autobiographical, this thesis shows that Wolfe himself, through his cathartic writings, came to his own acceptance of death. His final communication, written only days before he died, indicates his settlement with death and his excitement in living.