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The Parallels between Thomas Wolfe's Life and the Characters He Created in *The Web and the Rock*

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By Alexandra Jones

Thesis Director
Dr. Mildred K Barya

Thesis Advisor
Dr. Terry Roberts

“. . . I have found the constant, everlasting weather of man’s life is to be, not love, but loneliness.

Love itself is not the weather of our lives. It is the rare, the precious flower.”

-Thomas Wolfe, “God’s Lonely Man”

Thomas Wolfe of Asheville, North Carolina wrote four novels, countless short stories, some plays and novellas, and a memoir but he is best known for his debut novel *Look Homeward, Angel* (1929) which established his reputation as an author who writes lengthy autobiographical fiction. His second and fourth novels, *Of Time and the River* (1935) and *You Can’t Go Home Again* (1940), are also generally well known but his third novel, *The Web and the Rock*, is not nearly as well known nor is it as well received by scholars and readers. This book was published in 1939 about a year after his sudden death. The novel was meant to show his development and growth as a mature author after receiving backlash from his first two novels. *The Web and the Rock* is set up differently from his other novels as it is set divided into seven books which are then divided into many chapters. Books one through three are centered on George Webber’s (nicknamed Monk) childhood and young adult years. Monk is the alter ego of Wolfe in the novel as he is living many true experiences that had occurred in Wolfe’s life. The chapters within the books are a series of tales ranging from explaining Monk’s depressing childhood to a story about a raging escaped convict on a shooting spree in downtown Asheville. Book IV, titled “The Magic Year”, begins with Monk’s voyage on the ship *Vesuvia* back home to New York from his adventures in Europe. The ship is where he meets Esther Jack who will be the love interest and main subject of the remaining four books. The relationship is based on

Wolfe's relationship with Mrs. Aline Bernstein, a famous theater set and costume designer; in fact it is almost identical. *The Web and the Rock* contains many events that actually happened between them as recorded in their personal journals and letters.

Monk and Esther's relationship begins with a romantic year together as they learn about each other's worlds and encourage each other's artistic creativities. After their honeymoon period ends Monk sees more of Esther's flaws while being blissfully unaware of his own. Both parties negatively impact their relationship. They argue and fight, then love and support each other, then argue and fight again, back and forth throughout the last four books. At the conclusion of the novel the affair ultimately ends in heartbreak. It is important to remember while analyzing their relationship that Wolfe diverted from his original goal of writing in a different style and is writing autobiographically again once Esther is introduced, so it is true to what really happened. He is brutally honest not just in explaining what Esther/Mrs. Bernstein's flaws are but also what his own flaws are and how all of the factors contributed to their downfall despite having a promising start. This honest form of writing is done as a form of self-therapy for himself. There are four main reasons that Wolfe pinpoints as the cause of their breaking apart and they all represent a lack of communication. One reason is Esther's overbearing grip on Monk which he comes to detest and causes several arguments. Initially her maternal personality and organization skills drew him to her. Eventually her authority becomes too much for him which leads to the second reason being is his insatiable appetite for being on his own and exploring the world in order to gain more material for his writing. The third reason is that Monk could not tolerate Esther's friends and peers from work. The final factor is his racism towards Jewish people. Esther is from a Jewish family and has the tendency to ignore his subtly racist remarks, although they are revealing into his prejudices that would definitely be an issue in any

type of relationship. All of these factors could possibly be handled and discussed between the two and perhaps a resolution could have been reached, but their lack of communication skills make that impossible. Ultimately instead of working to find a resolution, Monk flees back to Europe in order to escape from Esther altogether. He realizes, meaning that Wolfe realized, that he can never erase the mistakes nor can they return to the idealistic state of the magical first year of their relationship, ending the novel with the famous line “But—you can’t go home again” (695).

Along with the intention of showing his growth as an artist, *The Web and the Rock* is also a self-reflective work. In this essay I will explore how Wolfe intended to establish himself as an important novelist and make his departure from the autobiographical style of *Look Homeward, Angel* and *Of Time and the River*. The first three books of *The Web and the Rock* show success in his goal, but then once Wolfe deals with material relating to Aline Bernstein he loses the goal of objectivity and reverts back to his original creative habits. This sudden shift back into autobiographical writing is due to the need to write honestly to reflect upon his past as a form of self-therapy. Despite his best intentions Wolfe ended up in his original writing style because he was still emotionally too close to the events that happened with Mrs. Bernstein.

Thomas Wolfe and Mrs. Bernstein met on the ship *Olympic* when they were both returning home from Europe in August 1925. He was twenty-four years old and she was fortyfour years old and married to another man whom she had children with. Wolfe initially described her as ““a matronly figure of middle age, a creature with a warm and jolly face . . . a shrewd, able and immensely talented creature of action, able to hold her own in a man’s world””; Professor of History and biographer David Herbert Donald states that it “was the last time he ever had such an objective view of her, for Aline immediately captivated him” (Donald 131-

132). When they met Wolfe was attempting to be a playwright but was continuously unsuccessful. Mrs. Bernstein urged him to write a novel instead as his descriptive writing was better suited for that. Before being supported by Mrs. Bernstein, Wolfe had a close and complicated bond with his mother, who was financially supporting him even as an adult. Mrs. Bernstein ended up replacing his mother financially and emotionally. In one of his letters to Aline in 1926 Wolfe refers to her as “my grey haired widehipped timeless mother”, showing that he was consciously aware that she served as a maternal caretaker to him and was not just his lover (Stutman 10). They had a complicated relationship and Wolfe best described his feelings in a letter to her: “You are the most precious thing in my life, but you are imprisoned in a jungle of thorns, and I cannot come near you without bleeding” (9).

When analyzing any of Wolfe’s major female characters in his writing it is important to keep in mind his views on women which have been described by many scholars as ambivalent. He is close to some women such as his mother and Mrs. Bernstein but also holds prejudices against women in general. The introduction of the compiled letters between Wolfe and Mrs. Bernstein titled *My Other Loneliness* described Wolfe as being “so entrapped within the virginwhore dichotomy . . . that it seems at times as though he could not forgive Mrs. Bernstein for being his own mistress” (9). Throughout the letters between them there is a theme of going back and forth between being sweet to each other and fighting, just like their interactions in *The Web and the Rock*. Mrs. Bernstein is his first serious relationship after failed attempts to win over other women and it is unknown why Wolfe held ambivalent views towards women. It may have stemmed from problems with his own mother, who was so focused on being a businesswoman above providing a stable environment for her children. Regardless of why Wolfe

was this way his black-and-white subconscious belief that women are either perfect angels or they are whores affects his relationship with Mrs. Bernstein.

When analyzing *The Web and the Rock* it is also important to keep in mind that it was not published during Wolfe's lifetime. He turned over his first manuscript to his editor in May 1938, just a few months before his death. This novel and the subsequent novel *You Can't Go Home Again* were not edited or revised by Wolfe. Just like his first two novels "he had delivered to his publishers a huge pile of manuscript . . . From this manuscript his editor fashioned two novels as best he could, supplying brief continuity to fill some gaps" (Muller 98). Wolfe decided to leave his original editor Maxwell Perkins and went to Edward C. Aswell of Harper & Brothers, who described the giant manuscript that Wolfe dropped off to him before leaving for a cross country road trip as a mess. Aswell was under contract with Harper's that stated in their clause that the manuscript "would not exceed 750,000 words"; Wolfe's original manuscript was over one million words total (Halberstadt). Aswell commented that ". . . once the unfinished fragments and great chunks of stuff that did not belong in the books were taken out" then the book came together (McElderry 89-90). This means that he had to cut out several sections of the manuscript in order to not go over the 750,000 word maximum without any direction from the original author. The sections that Aswell wrote himself are the brief introductions to each book within the novel which describe what is happening at the beginning of each book to link them together coherently. Author and historian Herbert J. Muller argues that due to Wolfe's untimely death at the age of 37, *The Web and the Rock* ended up being "the least impressive of his novels" and that "had Wolfe lived, he would almost certainly have made considerable changes as well as additions. It was not his habit to tinker, or merely revise passages that did not satisfy him; he would rewrite entire[ly]" (Muller 97-98). Due to the fact that Wolfe spent a long amount of time

editing, revising, and rewriting his first two novels alongside Maxwell Perkins before they were published it is fair to assume that he would have done the same for his later novels. Despite Aswell's rearranging and piecing together of the book, the vast majority of *The Web and the Rock* was written by Wolfe by himself. It is essentially a rough draft so there are some flaws in the writing and plot sequence which will be relevant throughout this essay. Despite this criticism, Muller considers *The Web and the Rock* to be a transitional work of Wolfe's that contains both good and bad aspects of his growth as an author which is completely true.

While Wolfe's first two novels received praise by many fans and scholars they also received their fair amount of criticism. The main criticism he received was that his writing was too autobiographical and it suggested that he could not write fiction unless it was completely based upon his own life. When beginning the writing of *The Web and the Rock* he set out to prove that he could write fiction. This motive drove the writing process of the large manuscript, making it an interesting piece to analyze due to the sudden writing differences from the first two novels then the gradual shift back into his original writing style of autobiographical fiction.

Critic Bernard DeVoto is an important example of the criticism that affected Wolfe. His review of Wolfe's writing is one of the most famous essays written about him. DeVoto criticized his overly wordy descriptions, referring to them as "long, whirling discharges of words, unabsorbed in the novel, unrelated to the proper business of fiction, badly if not altogether unacceptably written, raw jobs of emotion, aimless and quite meaningless jabber, claptrap, belches, grunts and Tarzan-like screams" (DeVoto 86). DeVoto's conclusion to his harsh essay admits that Wolfe is a genius with potential to be a great novelist and he states that "however useful genius may be in the writing of novels, it is not enough in itself . . . it must be supported by an ability to impart shape to material" (90). This is a common criticism of Wolfe's writing;

that he wrote far more pages of material than necessary to describe places and events. DeVoto's other claim was that Wolfe's memoir, *The Story of a Novel* (1935) which described his process as an author, reveals that Wolfe was "still astonishingly immature, and that he has mastered neither the psychic material out of which a novel is made nor the technique of writing fiction" (88). It is suspected that Wolfe was fully aware of and hurt by DeVoto's criticism and he was determined to shed this reputation and prove himself as a capable and talented novelist.

Despite only having an unedited manuscript, Wolfe wrote an Author's Note for the beginning of the book. The note explains that the novel is about a young man's discovery of life in America. He proudly states that this novel "marks not only a turning away from the books that I have written in the past, but a genuine spiritual and artistic change. It is the most objective novel that I have written" (Wolfe, Author's Note of *The Web and the Rock*). This statement is directed at the critics who disliked his writing style, possibly DeVoto in particular. Wolfe was desperately trying to prove that he could be a great author and did not know how to explain that subtly by just letting his novel speak for itself.

The most famous chapter from *The Web and the Rock* that is usually read as a short story is Chapter 8: "The Child by Tiger". It is based off of a true event that happening in Asheville in November 1906 when Wolfe was six years old. After an escaped convict shot and killed three civilians and two police officers, an angry mob hunted after him, found him, and murdered him to display his body for everyone to witness. Wolfe fictionalized the killer and the murders in "The Child by Tiger", giving a story and motivation to the killer. The concrete details such as how many murders occurred and the outrage of the citizens were completely true. Other aspects such as the killer's motivation for his murders and the conversations that occurred are completely fictional. This chapter is an outstanding example of Wolfe's success at diverging from his typical

autobiographical writing style. He was able to put himself into the shoes of other people and imagine their intentions.

The first third of the novel was certainly different from his first two novels as it was not autobiographical. However once the character Esther Jack, aka Aline Bernstein, is introduced he loses his goal of objectivity and reverts back to his previous creative habits. Interestingly, this isn't the first time that Esther appears in a work of Wolfe's. She first appeared in the last pages of Wolfe's second novel *Of Time and the River* and was the love interest to Eugene Gant, the persona of Wolfe. Now she is back as the love interest to Monk. It is unclear if the lack of a name change was done on purpose or was an error that Wolfe would have changed. Regardless it is clear that the last two-thirds of the novel are about the Wolfe-Bernstein relationship.

The fourth book of *The Web and the Rock*, titled "The Magic Year", describes the first year of Monk and Esther's relationship which is without a doubt the best year for them. The description of Esther walking into the ship's dining room where Monk is eating dinner with his friend, Plemmons, and Plemmons's friends describe Monk's first impression of her. He sees that she:

. . . was a woman of middle age, of small but energetic figure and with a very fresh, ruddy, and healthy face . . . he would probably have described her simply as a 'nicelooking woman,' and let it go at that . . . Her small but business-like figure, her brisk steps, the general impression she conveyed of a healthy and energetic vitality, and her small, rosy, and good-humored face would have given anyone who saw her a pleasant feeling . . . and nothing more. Most people would have felt pleasantly warmed by the sight of her if they had passed her on the street, but few people would have paused to look back at her a second time. (Wolfe 312)

The description of her isn't ideal or completely unflattering either. It is a backhanded compliment. Essentially Monk is saying that she's not bad, but just average. The dinner party continues after she sits down and the group socializes, but there is little to no explanation as to why Monk is infatuated with her from that moment on. The narrator explains from that point on for the rest of the journey on the ship that "he was never able thereafter to see her as a matronly figure of middle age, a creature with a warm and jolly face . . . She became the most beautiful woman that ever lived – and not in any symbolic or idealistic sense – but with all the blazing, literal, and mad concreteness of his imagination" (313-314). Just a page after declaring that Esther wasn't particularly beautiful, Monk also declares that she is the most beautiful woman to him. One has to wonder how and why he changed his outlook on her so quickly. If we assume that it was not an editorial mistake, then we can assume that Monk developed an intense and fast infatuation with her like a teenager. There is no detailing about what happened on the trip home for those last days of the voyage. Readers have to assume that after spending a few days with Esther that Monk developed strong feelings for her quickly. This sudden and intense shift of feelings foreshadows the remainder of the novel. It represents how Monk's relationship with Esther will evolve and how his moods go very high and very low fast like a rollercoaster.

A significant example of his changing moods occurs early on when Monk and Esther plan to meet up for his birthday lunch at a certain time. In her essay "Thomas Wolfe's Ambivalence toward Women in *The Web and the Rock*", Mary Ann Mannino observes that "he immediately feels abandoned. It never occurs to him that she could have been in an accident, that he could have come at the wrong time, that she could have been delayed. What he thinks is that this strong capable person "had fooled him, that she had no intention of coming"' (Borland et al 135). Esther came later when he was about to leave and it's revealed that they had agreed on a

different time than Monk remembered. Recalling this small but crucial moment shows an older Wolfe that analyzed his thoughts and reactions. Monk/Wolfe reacting to a situation and later apologizing with a guilty conscience is a theme that continues throughout the novel.

As the first year of their relationship progresses the adjectives Wolfe uses repeatedly to describe Esther are: childlike, innocent, and energetic. This is particularly interesting because Esther serves as several roles to Monk: “mistress, cook, mentor, patron, mother, and muse” (Reeves 280). She cooks for him daily, keeps his schedule organized, gives him money, and provides encouragement and material to write by sharing stories of her life in New York. None of these jobs sound like a child’s. The narrator describes her as childlike dozens of times throughout Book IV. It most often happens when she is excited about something in her profession related to stage work. While she is a sophisticated city woman she is also quite happy and clearly conveys her emotions. She is much different from her serious theater friends as Monk soon realizes.

Probably the most important jobs of Esther are her functions as his literary muse and caretaker. She tells Monk many tales about her childhood and growing up in New York. He probes her with many questions so that she will spare no detail. This supplies him with plenty of writing material. Noted Wolfe scholar Paschal Reeves argues in his essay “Thomas Wolfe: Notes on Three Characters” that above giving him creative material, she also gave him confidence “to break through his self-limiting barrier” (Reeves 283). Because of this she “extend[ed] his range as a writer and add[ed] a new dimension to his work (283). Wolfe makes her contributions obvious through the character of Esther. It is a literary form thank-you note for her aid in the crafting of his first novel. Esther also supports him financially so that he could be a full time writer until his first novel was complete, edited, and published. This is exactly what Mrs.

Bernstein did for Wolfe while he crafted *Look Homeward, Angel*. Her role as a muse and physical caretaker is why he was able to devote all of his time to writing. Before this Wolfe worked as a professor at a local university but teaching and grading papers took away all of his energy that he wanted to devote to writing fiction. It probably would not have happened without her or it would have taken much longer. So if they seemed like a solid match initially then how did their relationship end up turbulent?

Wolfe acknowledges his tendency to react with anger to minor instances through Monk. He demonstrates another early red flag through Monk's attitudes towards Esther's peers and colleagues. Esther invites Monk to a show in New York that she worked on. Initially he is excited to see the "real" New York City: the excitement, the art, and the riches. He describes the street he rides on as "a little Broadway" (Wolfe 323). His joyfulness quickly came crashing down when he hears the theatre goers talking with one another before the play begins. One of them comments that "the play is nothing, of course. But you really ought to see the sets" (328). This remark infuriates Monk. He quickly views and dismisses these people as snobby and pretentious. He decides that "they were the true enemies of art and life, who would really undermine and wreck his work if he allowed them to" (329). At this stage of Monk's life he is still pursuing a career as a playwright. But throughout this night as he continues to be exposed to the theatre world his opinion of the people involved gets worse. In regards to Esther's art of set design he "could not see that designing settings for the stage was any art whatever, better than a kind of skillful carpentry" and he wondered how such a wonderful woman like her could be tainted by their "cheap personal egotism" and "their constant desire to exhibit themselves (463464). He continuously judges them and there never appears to be room for tolerance.

Monk's judgments towards this group of people represent Wolfe's feelings towards them and he wants to make them clear as being a factor in their relationship.

Another example of Monk's attitudes towards her colleagues is when Esther recommends that Monk send his book manuscript to a famous publisher that she is friends with, James Wright. Monk is ecstatic that she has a high connection that could launch his career as an author. Unfortunately Wright rejects the manuscript and sends a letter saying that they will not publish it because it would be too difficult "to find readers who would be willing to read it" and that they have already published several other autobiographical fiction books within the last year (Wolfe 514). The rejection completely tears up Monk. He takes his frustrations out on Esther which causes a long, loud argument that ends with an apology and is ultimately swept under the rug like their other exchanges. He feels belittled by the higher ups in her creative world that he still believes are too conceited. This is another contributing factor in his built up frustrations that he connects to her. This is the ultimate blow because becoming a writer is his passion. Due to the fact that Esther recommended this particular publisher he lashes out his anger at her.

Continuing on in the novel, a few months after returning home to New York from Europe, Monk suddenly remembers a brief conversation that he and Esther had on the ship when he is at her home. Monk is visiting her studio in New York for the first time. It is her work studio where she often sleeps overnight at but her husband and children do not come to it. The narrator does not explain why he now at this moment recalls or why the Monk chooses this particular instance to share it but it contributes to the built up frustrations Monk has with Esther. He "remembered now how quietly and with what fatal decision she had said the last night on the ship: 'I want to die – I hope that I die in a year or two'"; when Monk questions why she tells him "I don't know . . . I just feel finished . . . It seems that I've come to the end of everything . . .

There's nothing more that I can do.' The statement had exasperated and angered him inexplicably. . . ." (Wolfe 370-371). There is no explanation as to why this information wasn't given to readers when he was on the ship or what sparked this when Monk visits Esther's house. It is important because it angers Monk immensely and it is hinted that it is one of their first serious conversations that they ever had together. Considering she is the woman that Monk was pursuing a possibly long term relationship with, one would think that being told that the person of interest wants to die soon would be a red flag. The narrator explains that the "contrast between this moment of desolate and hopeless resignation and Mrs. Jack's usual state of merry and joyful absorption with the details of living was so great that he felt anger and mistrust" (371). But just a minute after Monk's recollection she suddenly talks about how hot it was on the ship and joked about how she used to think about unscrewing her head and "drop[ping] it down a well" in order to cool off, explained with "childlike fascination" as fitting with her usual personality (372). Her previous statement about wanting to die soon never comes up against in the remainder of the novel. This brief instance contributes to the pattern of Monk internalizing problems that he has that need to be brought up but never are. Wolfe included this as an afterthought of the persona of Monk but it provides an inside into his psyche. The sudden mention of it could have gotten skewed in the editorial process but having it happen is a crucial insight into him.

Another problem that arises that was definitely an important issue to Wolfe was the fact that Esther / Mrs. Bernstein were currently married with children. This is not mentioned at all until Book V: Life and Letters, about 150 pages after meeting Esther. However it is implied that Monk has known this for quite some time. It comes up for the first time to readers when Esther accuses him of looking at other women. When Monk says that he is free and will do as he pleases, she tells him: "'You're not free! . . . You belong to me and I belong to you forever'" to

which Monk tells her ““You have never belonged to me You have a husband and a daughter. Your duty is to your family, Sister Jack Try to rectify the mistakes of your past life before it is too late” (Wolfe 458). This is the first time Esther shows her jealousies and her possessiveness as well as the first time that Monk expresses disdain for her family that she doesn’t seem to even spend much time with. The conversation ends with a talk about religion and their original argument is not brought up again. This is an example of her controlling nature but most importantly it is the first time her marriage is mentioned. If someone is currently married to someone else that would greatly impact any relationship so it had to affect theirs in some way. It is true that the real Mrs. Bernstein was married with grown children when Wolfe met her and he was fully aware of that. While researching Thomas Wolfe’s relationships with women and how they are represented in his fiction, Ernest Clay Randolph argues that “George wants a one-way love affair. He expects complete devotion and honor from Esther, but he is not mature enough to realize that he must give a portion of himself to have such an arrangement” (Randolph 64). In this case, he’ll never get full devotion from a married woman. Esther’s marriage is only mentioned here. The age difference between the two lovers is also not discussed in-depth. This is probably because Wolfe didn’t come to terms with how these factors impacted their relationship or perhaps it just didn’t matter to them. Regardless, due to the sudden mention readers are left with the now revealed marriage awkwardly and suddenly brought up out of the blue. This is probably another editorial mistake that occurred and if it isn’t, then it’s probably an error that Wolfe would have fixed himself during the revising process. Unfortunately it’s impossible to know so we have to interpret this information as it is presented.

Interestingly in Wolfe and Mrs. Bernstein’s real life relationship Wolfe was scared of losing her. He “urged her to divorce her husband and marry him” and although it was a serious

proposal “it was certain to be rejected. Aline would never publicly humiliate her husband, and she was deeply loyal to her children” (Donald 143). After the rejection of his proposal their relationship changed and they began to spend more time apart in different continents; Wolfe in Europe and Mrs. Bernstein in New York. The proposal does not occur in *The Web and the Rock*. It is unfortunate because it would help to guide readers in understanding Monk’s feelings and why he sometimes acts the way he does. Even though we don’t get this we do see that after fighting and fighting and fighting, Monk finally departs for Europe like Wolfe did. The reasoning for Monk going off to Europe is explained in the introduction of Book VII: Oktoberfest written by Aswell. The omniscient narrator explains that on the ship to Europe Monk thought back to the day that he told Esther that she was “the best and truest friend I ever had” and “I’ll keep on loving you forever” (Wolfe 622). The narrator explained that what he said was true, but he still wanted to flee from her, New York, and the book he wrote. These were not the only reasons for fleeing; “he wanted to seek as well as flee. . . . And now he meant to get to know this land [Germany] . . . as a kind of second homeland of his spirit” (622). Monk has German in his blood from his father’s side of the family so he wanted to go there. He planned on staying in Germany for a while after he stays a few months in England and France first.

Monk’s need to flee and explore independently is shown again in Book VII. The first example was when he met Esther on the trip back home from Europe. The first time he went to Europe was to flee from the life in New York; he fled to New York originally to get away from his family. He lacks communication skills that would be needed to work through the arguments that they have. Instead he developed a habit of running away from conflict. This could be due to fear of boredom, being stuck somewhere, and losing his creative material and drive for his

writing. After all, every time they break up they end up back together somehow. But if he runs away then they cannot be together. When they finally have their break up at the end of Book VI (we know this is the final break-up because the chapter is titled “The Parting” and the proceeding chapter is titled “Esther’s Farewell”) they were arguing and yelling at each other and she said again “as she had said a dozen times, that he would never see her face again” (614). To make this the absolute final break-up Monk tells her the next month when she approaches him that “he was through with her forever, their life was finished, he wanted to forget her entirely . . . and go away somewhere He’d go to Europe—that’s what he’d do!” (614); and with that he is on his own, fully independent.

The theme of fleeing is directly connected to loneliness. Loneliness is a consistent theme throughout Wolfe’s works. Gerald Preher’s essay titled “A Cosmos of His Own: Loss, Ghosts, and Loneliness in Thomas Wolfe’s Fiction” explores this persistent theme in Wolfe’s major works. Preher states that “all his [Wolfe’s] fiction consists in variegated ‘portraits of the artist,’ a gallery of lonesome characters looking for a light in their lives, which exposes his melancholy and frustration that what has been lost can never be regained”. Monk was searching for someone to love and take care of him as his family did, except that he did not like them. When he does find the lover and caretaker that he was searching for, he searches for something else; not necessarily someone else but something to fill his creative desires. Wolfe wrote an essay titled “God’s Lonely Man” where he explains his views on the inevitability of loneliness. He believes that love doesn’t get rid of loneliness: “sometimes love is the flower that brings us death; and from it we get pain and darkness” (Preher 26). This essay was written towards the end of his life well after the events described in *The Web and the Rock*. However these views are presented in all of his fiction going as far back as *Look Homeward, Angel* which was dedicated to Aline

Bernstein. With such a pessimistic view it would be hard to maintain a happy, healthy relationship. This theme is clear in *The Web and the Rock* as Monk's continuous desire to flee leaves him lonely. Looking back at the Author's Note of the novel, Wolfe notes that it is the young man's journey through life, and these themes of exploration and solitude are common of youth.

Along with the theme of loneliness and fleeing is the wish to return and go back again. This is expressed in the final chapter. Monk is in the hospital after having his nose broken in a fight. He has a conversation with the Body (his body) and in this conversation Monk thinks about how his past has been good and he is nostalgic. To that the Body tells him "But—you can't go home again" (Wolfe 695). This is a conversation with himself as he is all alone in the hospital room. This famous final line is a realization that everything he was running from hasn't been bad. He can't erase mistakes in the past. While he doesn't explicitly talk about Esther, it is implied. This is the moment when he realizes that he cannot go back to the first magical year with her.

A major problem that never receives recognition from either party is Monk's racism towards Jewish people. Wolfe himself was racist and would express this in his fiction. When compiling and transcribing their letters, Suzanne Stutman noted that "early in the relationship Wolfe had used the term 'Jew' as one of endearment, but as the relationship cooled, her Jewishness became the source of vituperation and abuse" (Stutman 14). This is shown in *The Web and the Rock* as well, perhaps unintentionally.

When Monk goes to Esther's house for the first time, he thinks to himself that "one of the finest elements in the Jewish character is its sensuous love of richness and abundance: the Jew hates what is savorless and stingy in life" (Wolfe 364). Considering the racist remarks that come

before and after this, it's probably a compliment in his mind. Even if it is, he still refers to Jewish people as "it" and "the Jew" rather than using proper pronouns. When describing her ethnicity, he says that "She had been entirely Jewish, and of the finest stock" as if she were bred like an animal (435). In several arguments Monk will call her a Jew as an insult. In one of the arguments that came shortly before the final break-up Esther tries to even the playing field by telling him that he's "acting like a Christian" to which Monk says "And you're acting like a Jew! A damned, crafty Jezebel of a Jew!" and Esther spits back "We're too good for you" (590-591). Her sudden desire to get back at Monk for the comments about her race shows that they were eating away at her emotionally. She never addressed them in conversation to him. This is another aspect of his personality that shouldn't have been ignored because it leads to tension and buildup that contributes to their turbulent relationship. It is hard to say whether or not Wolfe was consciously aware that his racism could affect their relationship given that he was alive in the 1920s and 30s when discrimination was still socially acceptable for the most part in society. Even if he did or not he still included his remarks in his writing; he did not omit or sugarcoat them. He probably included them because they did happen a lot in conversation and his letters to her and he was an autobiographical author.

Chapter 49, titled "Dark October", is unique and an important chapter to analyze because it was originally written as a short story in 1931. Wolfe was able to edit and revise this before Aswell put it in the full novel. It is also unique from the rest of *The Web and the Rock* because it is about Esther's thoughts after Monk goes to Europe. Esther is alone sitting on a bench, depressed that Monk left her. She describes him in a beautiful prose:

He has the face of a demented angel, his head is wild and beautiful, and there is madness and darkness and evil in his brain. He is more cruel than death, and more lovely than a

flower. His heart was made for love, and it is full of hate and darkness. His soul was made for light and purity, and it is poisoned by evil and vile suspicions. . . . He is like a god, all made of light, and he lives alone in chains and darkness (Wolfe 683).

This description of Monk is full of contradictions purposefully. In his essay “Esther in ‘Dark October’”, James W. Clark Jr. believes that these contradictions “suggest her full knowledge and acceptance of her lover’s asymmetry. As she longs to be close to him and with him, she also recognizes Monk’s conflicted nature as a normal condition” (Clark 15). She was describing Monk to a police officer who questioned her for being out alone at night. She continues on to say that “‘His face is fair as heaven when singing birds unfold-’ and she could not go on, the tears were flowing down her face so fast she could not see, and they were choking her” (Wolfe 683). These words did not come out of the real Mrs. Bernstein’s mouth. Wolfe envisioned what she must have been thinking about when he left her. This is an incredible act of self-awareness that he knew he had hurt her. It is recognition of his own flaws that he cannot fix, or go home again.

The novel ends with “Dark October” and the realization that you can’t go home again, concluding Wolfe’s thoughts and showing that his self-reflection has come to a close. Perhaps satisfied with his thoughts and ready to reveal to the world what he learned from his relationship he sent off this manuscript to his editor. Wolfe’s Author’s Note claiming that *The Web and the Rock* is his most objective work may not be completely accurate but it does contain some truth. The first third of the novel can be viewed as such due to the differences in writing compared to his first two novels. The last two-thirds of the novel also contain differences in technique, such as writing one chapter like a play script and Chapter 49 that is completely from Esther’s point of view instead of just describing Monk’s thoughts. Wolfe does tend to write autobiographically and *The Web and the Rock* still contains threads of that because he needed to write honesty in

order to reflect on the most important and longest relationship of his life. He reveals that he is self-aware; he knows he is not perfect and that the downfall of his and Mrs. Bernstein's affair was not only her fault and not only his fault. He fully explains not only why they ended but why they began and should have been a great match from the beginning. Wolfe didn't originally set out to write tell-all novel that puts his own faults out in the open and perhaps if he had lived long enough to edit it then he may have changed some details or omitted others. He was still emotionally invested in Mrs. Bernstein. Because he didn't have that opportunity to edit his work then we get to see his unedited thoughts and memories that were important enough to him to write about in the first place.

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Thomas Wolfe was a notable American novelist from the early 20th century. He first attended the University of North Carolina and then Harvard University before moving to New York City in 1923. It was there that he wrote his most popular work, *Look Homeward, Angel* (1929), an autobiographical piece centering on his alter ego, Eugene Gant. Wolfe followed with four novels over the following eight years and had more than 10 works published after his untimely death in 1938. Wolfe graduated in 1920, and in the fall he entered the Graduate School for Arts and Sciences at Harvard University, where he set his sights on becoming a professional playwright as a part of Harvard's 47 Workshop. In 1923, Wolfe left Boston for New York, the city he called home for the rest of his life.