

— CONFERENCE PROCEEDINGS —

# THE INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE ON GLOBAL ISSUES, TRENDS AND DIRECTIONS ACROSS DISCIPLINES

## ICGD 2023

Theme: New normal opportunities  
and challenges in 2023

— CONFERENCE PROCEEDINGS —

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ON GLOBAL ISSUES, TRENDS  
AND DIRECTIONS ACROSS DISCIPLINES**

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and challenges in 2023

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WELCOME TO THE INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE ON  
GLOBAL ISSUES, TRENDS, AND DIRECTIONS ACROSS  
DISCIPLINES (ICGD), VIETNAM, 2023



On behalf of the international conference on global issues, trends, and directions across disciplines, I welcome you to the 2023 ICGD.

This year, the theme of 2023 ICDG is '*New Normal Opportunities & Challenges in 2023*'. The conference is co-hosted by Hoa Sen University in Vietnam and UNIMAS in Malaysia.

As an international academic platform, ICGD 2023 presents a unique opportunity for professionals, academicians, researchers, students, and enthusiasts to share ideas and understanding in a global setting.

This is the fifth year that we are holding one of our major annual events. The ICGD 2023 has made great progress in the last few years. The quality of papers this year is outstanding.

The conference attracts a number of presenters and participants, domestic and global, which focuses the latest advances in economics, finance, education, and social science theory and practice. It aims to facilitate research collaborations and to encourage the exchange of ideas among different disciplines.

I look forward to meeting you all and working with you over the next few days.

**President, Hoa Sen University  
Assoc. Prof. Dr. Vo Thi Ngoc Thuy**

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# **SPIRITUAL IMBALANCES IN THOMAS WOLFE'S *LOOK HOMEWARD, ANGEL*: A BINARY OPPOSITES ANALYSIS**

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## ***Abstract***

*Thomas Wolfe is a renowned writer of the 20th century, and his work *Look Homeward, Angel* features characters with complex personalities. This paper examines the spiritual imbalances of these characters using the theory of binary opposites, which highlights the contradictions within the protagonist Eugene and his family. The binary opposites include good versus evil, love versus hate, fantasy versus reality, spirit and material, etc. The analysis shows that the characters experience spiritual imbalances in different ways, including mental numbness, the materialization of spirit, and the self-splitting of the psyche. The study also explores the underlying causes of these imbalances, such as the commodification and alienation of individuals' spirits during the transformation of America's social economy in the 1920s. By providing a deeper understanding of the character's inner struggles, this paper sheds light on America's disoriented and perplexed spiritual state during the post-WWI era.*

**Keywords:** *Thomas Wolfe, Look Homeward, Angel, binary oppositions, characters, spiritual imbalances*

## **1. INTRODUCTION**

Born in 1900, Thomas Wolfe, one of the renowned American writers of the twentieth century (Turnbull, 1968, p. 132; Biswas, 2014, p. 5), witnessed people's inner contradictions, loneliness, and anxiety during that era. His works vividly depict the spiritual outlook of society at the time. His first novel, *Look Homeward, Angel*, was published in 1929. Although it did not receive immediate literary recognition, the novel is now widely regarded as one of the most significant works of fiction in the 20th century. *Look Homeward, Angel* has the complexities of characterization, portraying individuals with intricate and conflicting inner worlds. They are driven by the pursuit of ideals yet equally bound by the limitation of harsh reality; The pursuit of material satisfaction drives them, yet their spiritual lives are left unfulfilled. The contradictions of their internal states result in a tumultuous and fractured psyche, leading to significant familial disharmony. The protagonist Eugene, depicted as a forsaken child, roams

the world of love and hate in search of a sense of belonging. Therefore, binary oppositions such as love versus hate, fantasy versus reality, spirit versus material, and more are prevalent in this work.

Recently, a considerable scholarly focus has been on the themes, characters, and imagery presented in *Look Homeward, Angel*. Notably, a significant proportion of this research has focused on the study of characters. Zheng (2018), for instance, examines Ben's character and motivations from the perspective of kindness, kinship, and friendship, providing insights into the theme of exploration amidst the confusion (71-74). Qin (2018) explores the different value orientations of the novel's characters, highlighting Eugene's role as a contradictory unity burdened with both innocence and guilt (94-98). Petriceks (2021) analyzes the relationship between patient and doctor in *Look Homeward, Angel*, underlining the importance of physicians providing patients with comfort and support (3151–3163). Bailey (2018) employs queer theory to analyze characters who identify as homosexual or present as feminine or masculine (79-100). Poor (2018) employs Lacanian psychoanalysis to explore familial relationships, self-discovery, and identity formation depicted in the novel (46-62).

Despite the breadth of scholarship on *Look Homeward, Angel*, no prior research has yet explored the spiritual imbalances of characters in the novel from a binary opposition perspective. Thus, this research gap provides an opportunity for further study into this critical aspect of the novel's characters. Therefore, this study employs the theory of binary opposites to analyze the protagonist Eugene and his family - in terms of their contradictory personalities and actions.

## **2. MATERIALS AND METHODS**

### **2.1. Binary opposition in structuralism**

Structuralists consider binary opposition to be a fundamental process of the human mind that is crucial to the production of meaning (Smith, 1996, p. 383). Binary opposition refers to interrelated concepts or terms with opposing meanings, such as left/right or up/down (Baldick, 1990, p. 260). The concept of binary opposition is a theoretical foundation for structuralist analysis, as established by Ferdinand de Saussure's modern linguistics theory (Culler, 2003, p. 102). It has also proved to be a basic model for identifying thematic significance in literary works (Batkalova et al. 2019, p. 463). Binary opposition has been employed extensively in interpreting and analysing various texts, including poetry and myths (Aimukhambet et al., 2017, p. 11).

Jakobson (1956) developed the theory of binary opposition into poetry, emphasizing its potential to express various relationships and structures in a simplified manner, which makes it an attractive method (67). In the 1950s and 1960s, Claude Levi-Strauss was the first scholar to apply Saussure's linguistic theory to the analysis of narrative discourse. He used a linguistic analysis method in his seminal work, *Structural Anthropology* (1963), as well as in his study of myths (Baldick, 1990, p. 260). A French structuralist, Roland Barthes, extended Saussure's work in semiotics. It argued that binary oppositions are fundamental to all forms of language and that dissimilarities exist in all kinds of social contexts, including literature (Christanda, & Ni, 2019, p. 78).

## **2.2. Binary opposition in deconstructionism**

Derrida's concept of deconstructionism is a philosophical approach that seeks to reveal the underlying assumptions and biases in language, literature, and other cultural works. It involves breaking down binary oppositions, such as good/evil, speech/writing, and presence/absence, to show how meanings are not fixed or absolute but somewhat fluid and contingent on context. Derrida's deconstruction targets the hierarchies and foundations of binary oppositions to subvert the binaries. Through this process of deconstruction, Derrida aims to challenge the dominant ideologies and power structures within society, exposing their inherent contradictions and inconsistencies.

According to Derrida (1981), traditional philosophical binary oppositions are characterized by a violent hierarchy. One term dominates the other, such as signified over signifier, intelligible over sensible, speech over writing, and activity over passivity (Derrida, 1981, p. 41). A typical example of binary opposition is the presence-absent dichotomy, where presence usually prevails over absence due to its connection with withdrawal in tradition (Derrida, 1981, p. 114).

## **2.3. Research design**

This study uses qualitative analysis to analyze the binary oppositions in selected Thomas Wolfe's *Look Homeward, Angel*. Furthermore, the study also uses binary oppositions analysis, structuralist analysis and deconstructionist analysis methods as research techniques to do a textual analysis of Thomas Wolfe's *Look Homeward, Angel*.

The current study utilized a four-phase research methodology to investigate the impact of binary oppositions on characters' spiritual imbalances in literary works. The second phase involved data collection, where qualitative data in the form of discourse (words, sentences,

paragraphs, and utterances) about spiritual imbalances was collected during carefully reading the novel *Look Homeward, Angel*. Instances of spiritual imbalances in expressions such as actions, thoughts, dialogues, and character conduct were recorded as data. A deconstructive and structuralist approach was employed to identify and assess binary oppositions concerning the characters' traits, which were then analyzed and evaluated.

The third phase involved data analysis, where the collected data was categorized based on binary opposition perspectives. This phase involved selecting and categorizing the data about spiritual imbalances from the novel to identify relationships between the binary oppositions.

Once data analysis was complete, the next phase involved presenting the research results. The study objectively described how binary oppositions impact characters' mental imbalances in literary works, connecting their internal struggles with binary oppositions.

### **3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

After analyzing *Look Homeward, Angel* by Thomas Wolfe, the researcher finds that the characters are unable to achieve a balance within the binary oppositions of idealism and reality, good and evil in their mind, consequently leading to a state of mental numbness, the materialization of spirit, and the self-splitting of the psyche.

#### **3.1. Mental numbness**

Oliver Gant, Eugene's father, was a complex figure with many opposing qualities, creating a binary nature to his character. Throughout his life, he struggled to reconcile opposing forces such as idealism versus reality, love versus hate, and escaping from his family versus returning home.

Gant's conflicting ideals of idealism versus reality were evident in his dreams and career. At fifteen, he became an apprentice stone-cutter and dreamed of "wreaking something dark and unspeakable in him into cold stone" (Wolfe, 1975, p. 4). Gant's dream was to carve an angel's head, which he believed would represent his values of love, kindness, and glory. For Gant, carving an angel's head was a way to connect with others and convey his spiritual values to them. However, he could carve many things other than an angel's head during his lifetime. "He never learned to carve an angel's head" (Wolfe, 1975, p. 4). When he lived in Altamont, he bought a grimy stone angel and put it on the porch of his shop.

Although he never fulfilled his dream of carving an angel's head, Gant found spiritual comfort in the grime-covered statue. His complex relationship with the stone angel oscillated between

love and hate. In drunken moments, he would kneel before it, weeping and addressing it as Cynthia, the name of his past ex-wife. Other times, he cursed the stone and blamed it for his misfortunes. “You have impoverished me, you have ruined me, you have cursed my declining years, and now you will crush me to death, fearful, awful, and unnatural monster that you are” (Wolfe, 1975, p. 221).

At last, Gant sold this stone angel to one of his girls, Elizabeth, who kept a brothel. The stone angel left Gant forever, which collapsed his mental support. Throughout his life, Gant relentlessly pursued his dream of carving an angel’s head but ultimately failed and died with loss and hopelessness.

Unable to achieve his goal and unable to reconcile his inner conflicts, he resorted to alcohol to numb himself. Gant’s addiction to alcohol was severe. His episodes of drunkenness extended into prolonged binges that lasted for several weeks twice at intervals of five years. “Day after day he became maniacally drunk, until he fixed himself in a state of constant insanity” (Wolfe, 1975, p. 19). His wife Eliza attempted to help him recover by sending him to a sanitarium in Piedmont, where he underwent a six-week program to overcome his addiction. Eliza even warned the proprietors of the town’s fourteen saloons that she would “put them in the penitentiary” (19), if they sold him any alcohol.

Nevertheless, despite these efforts, Gant continued drinking and even became the subject of a song by local children. “Old man Gant /Came home drunk! /Old man Gant /Came home drunk!” (Wolfe, 1975, p. 21) In Eliza’s perspective, Gant is insensitive and cruel. Eliza had once remarked that when Gant was drunk and unconscious, “the small restless eyes became tranquil yet somber, reflecting the thwarted and desperate yearning of past frustration” (16).

Eventually, he rapidly aged due to his life being centred around excessive physical indulgence, including heavy drinking, excessive eating, and wild debauchery (Wolfe, 1975, p. 230). In Eugene’s perspective, his father was a fallen giant who gazed upon vast expanses of the past, paying no heed to the present world around him. In his old age, he was like a walking corpse. As described in the novel, Gant spent his final years in a state of living death, residing in a big back room at Eliza’s and waiting for death to come. His soul was consumed by bitter recollections, leading to a half-life bereft of vitality. He had lost all purpose and drive; only remnants of faded memories remained.

### 3.2. Materialization of spirit

Eliza, Eugene's mother, was a woman full of contradictions. She struggled with the opposing forces of materialism and spirituality. Her constant acquisition of land and properties showed her insatiable desire for material possessions. She devoted most of her time and energy to her boarding house and real estate projects. "Like a man, she walked confidently toward her dream of becoming wealthy, prioritizing property over her roles as a wife and mother" (Wolfe, 1975, p. 16).

However, Eliza's success in real estate speculation did not benefit her family. She transformed from a caring and loving mother to an authentic "Babbitt" and Grandet, neglecting her family. She was torn between her ideals of pursuing wealth and her traditional roles as a mother, leading to conflicts in the family dynamic. Her actions worsened the relationship between her husband and children, and they blamed her for their family issues. Although she regretted her behaviour, she was at a loss for how to rectify the situation.

Eliza initially encountered Gant when she attempted to sell him books. During their conversation, Eliza revealed her unwavering aspirations for financial prosperity and her plan for her real estate dream. Her enthusiasm and self-assuredness were evident as she talked about her pursuit of material possessions. To Eliza, Gant was valuable for his property rather than for who he was as an individual, and her attention was primarily directed toward his assets over him.

"Do you see this corner here—the one you're on? It'll double in value in the next few years. Now, here!" ... "They're going to run a street through there some day as sure as you live. And when they do—" she pursed her lips reflectively, "that property is going to be worth money." She continued to talk about property with a strange meditative hunger. The town seemed to be an enormous blueprint to her: her head was stuffed uncannily with figures and estimates—who owned a lot, who sold it, the sale-price, the real value, the future value, first and second mortgages, and so on (Wolfe, 1975, p. 10).

As depicted by the author, the house reflected Gant's soul. However, for Eliza, it was merely a possession that she cleverly evaluated for its worth, serving as a starting point for her wealth accumulation.

Like many women, Eliza's pursuit of her ideals and financial success was no easy feat. However, her fixation on the property caused her to neglect her family, ultimately leading to

the tragic loss of two of her children, Grover and Ben. Eliza's actions led to a growing disgust and disdain from her family, who felt neglected and ignored due to her unwavering focus on property. Gant, in particular, blamed Eliza for the family's misfortunes and frequently berated and abused her. He said that she must have ruined the family.

“Woman, you have deserted my bed and board, you have made a laughing stock of me before the world, and left your children to perish. ... Ah, Lord! It was a bitter day for us all when your gloating eyes first fell upon this damnable, this awful, this murderous and bloody Barn. There is no ignominy to which you will not stoop if you think it will put a nickel in your pocket. You have fallen so low not even your own brothers will come near you. ‘Nor beast, nor man hath fallen so far’”. (Wolfe, 1975, p. 108)

The children also had their grievances against her. Eliza's neglect of her children resulted in the tragic death of Grover. Helen shares the same dislike for Eliza, leading to a markedly strained mother-daughter relationship. Their animosity was a constant spark, frequently igniting. Eliza's slow temperament was unbearable for Helen, leading Steve to criticize her for “lack of sympathy, motherly love, and human kindness” (Wolfe, 1975, p. 202). As for Ben, he barely interacted with Eliza and even refused to see her on his deathbed. When his bright eyes rested on her, his clawed white fingers tightened their grip on the sheets, and he gasped strongly, as if in terror: “Get out! Out! Don't want you” (457). This was a devastating blow for Eliza, as her courage to pursue freedom was shattered. Even at sixty, Eliza continued to manage Dixieland, a family hotel, with great dedication. She devoted most of her time to her successful real estate business, which remained her top priority. However, Eliza's materialistic pursuit consumed her, causing her to neglect her relationships with her husband and children, resulting in a lack of maternal affection that negatively impacted her children's mental well-being. As a result, Eliza became a typical representative of the materialization of the spiritual world, doomed to loneliness and unable to obtain the love of her husband and her children.

### **3.3. Self-splitting of the Psyche**

Gant had a complicated relationship with his family, oscillating between love and hate. According to Wolfe (1975), Gant was intense “a family man” (Wolfe, 1975, p. 40), working hard in his shop and taking pride in being the breadwinner for his large family. He planted a variety of fruits and vegetables on his farm and took pleasure in providing for his family with the harvest gleanings. “He prepares all these delicious food on such a freezing winter, which shows his love for his family, and he can get great joy from it” (41).



Gant's love for his family was also evident in his elaborate and delicious meals, which brought happiness to the family at dinner time. However, Gant had a darker side to his treatment of his family. He could be rude to his wife and neglectful of his family responsibilities. Gant had a fierce temper and a fondness for alcohol, often leading to irrational rants and abuse towards his wife. He was known to visit prostitutes and become even more abusive when his wife paid more attention to the property than the family. An example of his destructive behaviour occurred when he became drunk the day before his wife, Eliza, gave birth to their son Eugene and lashed out in anger. "Ingratitude, more fierce than brutish beasts." "You will be punished, as sure as there's a just God in heaven. You will all be punished. Kick the old man, strike him, throw him out on the street: he's no good any more." (Wolfe, 1975, p. 23)

However, these swear words sound elegant and rhymed because Gant loved to sing poems. He liked literature, especially poetry, and He had always told Eliza, "I like poetry" (Wolfe, 1975, p. 10), and sometimes he read poems to his children, such as Shakespeare's or Gray's poems. After abusing these swear words, he felt it was not enough to express his emotion, so he quoted a poem by Shakespeare. "Look, in this place ran Cassius'dagger through; See what a rent the envious Casca made" (23). Despite his sometimes abusive language towards Eliza when intoxicated, Gant often apologised and expressed remorse the next day. "Eliza! My wife! Oh, baby, say that you forgive me!" (28) he exclaimed to his wife, crying upstairs after his outburst. This behaviour indicated Gant's complex nature, balancing his literary interests with his volatile emotional reactions to his wife and drinking habits.

Eugene, the novel's protagonist, is the most complex character in the family. The distorted motherly love, the absence of fatherly love, and the discordant and indifferent relationship with siblings have made him struggle with the self-contradiction of love and hatred, escape and return, fantasy and reality. He pursued a never-ending quest for inner balance and self-discovery, only to be submerged in unfathomable loneliness. The constant repression he experienced pushed him to seek refuge in a fantasy world, seeking to escape from the harsh realities of life.

When he was young, he could not escape from the confines of reality, specifically his family, so he was only immersed in the book or his fantasy world to pursue spiritual escape. Nevertheless, the harsh reality tightly bound him, smashing his fantasy world. The wonderful world in the book was nonexistent in the real world. So for Eugene, he struggled with

reconciling the conflict between his fantasies and the harsh reality that surrounded him, unable to identify a path leading towards an ideal world.

Eugene's conflicting emotions towards his family are evident when he expresses that "the first move I ever made, after the cradle, was to crawl for the door, and every move I have made since has been an effort to escape" (Wolfe, 1975, p. 422). Eugene had a strong urge to leave his family from an early age, and this desire has continued throughout his life.

According to the author Wolfe, Eugene had mixed feelings of love and hatred towards his mother, which demonstrated a distorted form of motherly love. On the one hand, he desired his mother's affection, but on the other hand, he also wanted distance from her. Starting from a young age, Eugene became sexually aroused by sucking on his mother's breasts, which eventually grew into a strong attachment towards her, particularly her breasts. He became possessive of his mother, Eliza, and her interaction with men caused him great distress. Eugene's weird relationship with his mother made him uncomfortable, leading to his decision to attend school at the young age of not quite six to escape from her. Despite Eliza's objections, she had no choice but to sign and silently weep. Eugene's Oedipal complex also affected his romantic relationships, as he was attracted to older women, including those of his mother's age. He sought out prostitutes and had affairs with boarding house residents in Dixieland, consistently focusing his attention on women who were older than him (Wolfe, 1975, p. 121).

Eugene had mixed feelings towards his father. He idolized and considered him a master in his craft, "He is better at this than anyone in all the world". Eugene shared his father's love for travelling. As the novel describes, "Gant made the journey to Augusta, taking Eugene with him. The inner excitement of both was intense; every detail of the landscape they drank in with thirsty adventurous eyes"(Wolfe, 1975, p. 125). However, Eugene's pursuit of an idealized father figure did not always align with his actual father's reality. His father struggled with alcoholism, had a volatile temper, and eventually became numb in his mind due to his inability to realize his dreams. Eugene's pursuit was of an idealized father figure who symbolized a force and wisdom beyond his own needs and hunger. It was not just his physical and carnal father, nor the father he lost when he was young, but an image of power and wisdom beyond his own needs and hunger.

After his closest brother, Ben, passed away, Eugene became even more isolated. His inner turmoil only increased his pain, and he could not escape the shadow of Ben's death. Eugene expressed his sorrow over the fact that more care, time, and money were given to Ben after his

death than during his life. He held onto the belief that Ben's spirit would return. He believed that "in flower and leaf, in wind and music far, he will come back again" (Wolfe, 1975, p. 486). The novel concludes with a lengthy dialogue between Eugene and Ben's spirit on a square, serving as Eugene's final attempt to reconcile his thoughts and emotions. With the revelation that "You are your world" (Wolfe, 1975, p. 520) Eugene is motivated to carve out a new path and alleviate his spiritual struggles. However, despite this resolution, the overall ambience of loneliness throughout the novel renders Eugene's efforts weak and ineffective.

### **3.4. The causes of spiritual imbalances**

During the early 20th century in America, rapid industrialization, commercialization, and technological advancements profoundly impacted society's cultural and moral fabric (Ma, 2018, 57-59). This led to a shift in people's traditional way of life, resulting in a materialistic and hedonistic society that detached humans from their spiritual selves. People pursued material wealth and commodities, leading to a society centred around money, where relationships and social activities revolved around the capital. However, this materialistic ideology did not provide the mental satisfaction people sought, leading to widespread anxiety and loneliness.

The Great Depression of 1929 further intensified this sense of hopelessness and despair, with many individuals in America's southern region experiencing widespread poverty and unemployment (Romer, 2023). The collapse of traditional social values and moral ethics created confusion and spiritual emptiness, leading to what was known as the "lost generation" (Wang & Pei, 1996, p. 96-98). This cultural and moral upheaval is vividly portrayed in the novel, where Eliza sacrifices her family for material gain. Despite Altamont being an isolated mountainous town, its booming construction and real estate industry were driven by the pursuit of material wealth.

The characters in the novel experience inner turmoil, with their rich material lives unable to provide them with spiritual fulfillment. Anxiety and loneliness plague families, leading individuals to leave their homes and search for ideal spiritual homes outside. Characters like Gant and Eugene escape their homes and travel to seek inner peace, hoping to find balance by changing their surroundings. Therefore, the transformation and development of the social economy during the 1920s in America have led to the commodification and alienation of individuals' spirits, resulting in a disoriented and perplexed spiritual state.

#### 4. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the article has analyzed the spiritual imbalance of the characters in Thomas Wolfe's *Look Homeward, Angel* using the theory of binary opposites. By examining the contradictory personalities and actions of the protagonist Eugene and his family, the study has shown how they experience spiritual imbalances through mental numbness, the materialization of the spirit, and the self-splitting of the psyche. Furthermore, the paper has studied the underlying causes of these imbalances, which are linked to the commodification and alienation of individuals' spirits resulting from the socioeconomic changes during the 1920s in America. The importance of this research lies in its ability to provide a deeper understanding of the disorienting and perplexing spiritual state in America during the post-WWI era by reflecting it in a literary work. It also highlights how binary oppositions can provide a valuable framework for analyzing complex characters and their inner conflicts.

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