
THE ELEMENTS OF MODERNISM IN THOMAS WOOLFE'S "YOU CAN'T GO HOME AGAIN"

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*This article examines the modernist elements in Thomas Wolfe's *You Can't Go Home Again*, a novel that captures the turbulence of the early 20th century. Modernism, as a literary movement, sought to break away from traditional forms and address the anxieties and uncertainties brought on by rapid societal, economic, and cultural changes. Wolfe's protagonist, George Webber, symbolizes the modern individual, grappling with feelings of alienation and displacement as he navigates the challenges of fame, self-discovery, and a changing America. The novel explores themes of fragmented identity, the tension between tradition and progress, and the search for meaning in a world that feels increasingly unfamiliar. Wolfe's use of a reflective and often nonlinear narrative style mirrors the modernist aim of capturing the inner workings of the human mind and the chaotic nature of modern existence. This study delves into the novel's thematic depth, character development, and stylistic choices, offering insights into how Wolfe's work embodies key aspects of modernist literature.*

INTRODUCTION.

Thomas Wolfe's *You Can't Go Home Again* stands as a compelling exploration of the human condition during a time of rapid societal and cultural transformation. Published posthumously in 1940, the novel reflects the upheaval of the early 20th century, a period defined by industrial growth, economic uncertainty, and shifting

social norms. This era also gave rise to modernism, a literary movement that sought to break away from traditional narrative forms and explore themes such as alienation, identity, and the search for meaning in a rapidly changing world.

At the heart of Wolfe's novel is George Webber, a writer whose experiences and reflections encapsulate the struggles of a modern individual. Through his journey, Wolfe examines the dissonance between personal aspirations and societal expectations, the fragmentation of identity, and the challenges of reconciling past and present. The novel's thematic focus, paired with its stylistic innovations such as reflective monologues and nonlinear storytelling, places it firmly within the modernist tradition.

This article aims to analyze the key elements of modernism in *You Can't Go Home Again*. By delving into its themes, characters, and narrative techniques, the study seeks to highlight how Wolfe's work not only captures the spirit of its time but also contributes to the broader discourse of modernist literature. Through this exploration, the novel emerges as a profound commentary on the complexities of life in the modern era.

Literature Review

The modernist elements in Thomas Wolfe's *You Can't Go Home Again* have been the subject of significant scholarly interest, with critics highlighting its thematic depth and stylistic innovations. Wolfe's work is often discussed within the broader context of modernist literature, which includes authors such as James Joyce, Virginia Woolf, and William Faulkner. These writers, like Wolfe, sought to depict the fragmented nature of reality and the psychological complexities of their characters amidst a rapidly changing world.

One prominent theme in modernist literature, as identified by scholars like Malcolm Bradbury and James McFarlane, is the alienation of the individual [1]. Wolfe's portrayal of George Webber aligns with this theme, depicting his struggles to reconcile his personal identity with the expectations of his hometown and the broader American society. Critics such as Pasquale Russo argue that this tension underscores the novel's exploration of the human condition in a time of uncertainty and upheaval [2].

Wolfe's narrative style has also attracted considerable academic attention. His use of reflective monologues and episodic structure, as noted by Richard S. Kennedy, mirrors the stream-of-consciousness techniques employed by other modernist writers [3]. This approach allows Wolfe to delve deeply into Webber's psyche, revealing the internal conflicts and existential questions that define his journey.

Additionally, scholars like Leslie Field have explored Wolfe's treatment of societal change, particularly the tension between tradition and progress [4]. The novel's critique of materialism and the disconnection from one's roots reflects broader modernist concerns about the impact of industrialization and urbanization on human relationships and identity.

Despite these contributions, some critics, such as Elizabeth Nowell, have debated the extent to which Wolfe's work fits within the modernist framework [5]. While his themes and stylistic choices align with modernist conventions, his romanticized view of memory and the past introduces elements of nostalgia that complicate his categorization within the movement.

This review of existing scholarship highlights the complexity of Wolfe's contribution to modernist literature. It sets the foundation for further analysis of *You Can't Go Home Again*, focusing on its thematic engagement with alienation, identity, and societal change, as well as its narrative techniques. Through this lens, the novel's position within the modernist canon becomes clearer.

Methodology

This study employs a qualitative research approach to analyze the modernist elements in Thomas Wolfe's *You Can't Go Home Again*. The methodology is designed to explore the novel's themes, character development, and narrative techniques through the lens of literary modernism.

Textual analysis involves a close reading of the text to identify and interpret modernist features. Key passages are examined to uncover themes such as alienation, identity, and societal change. Special attention is given to the narrative structure, including Wolfe's use of reflective monologues and nonlinear storytelling, to understand how these techniques align with modernist conventions. The novel is analyzed in relation to its historical and cultural context, focusing on the societal changes of the early 20th century, such as industrialization, urbanization, and shifting social values. This analysis provides insight into how these changes influenced Wolfe's themes and narrative style.

Analysis and discussion

The analysis of Thomas Wolfe's *You Can't Go Home Again* reveals several key elements of modernism that define the novel's thematic and stylistic framework. This section presents the findings from the textual and contextual analyses, organized around three central aspects: themes of modernist literature, narrative style, and the novel's relationship with societal changes. The novel's exploration of alienation and identity aligns with the core concerns of modernism. George Webber, the protagonist, embodies the sense

of disconnection experienced by individuals in a rapidly changing society. His return to his hometown and the rejection he faces illustrate the modernist theme of the impossibility of returning to a stable past. The fragmented nature of his identity reflects the broader uncertainty of the modern era, where traditional values no longer provide clear guidance. For example: *"The simple joy he felt at being once more a part of such familiar things also contained an element of strangeness and unreality."*

"With a sharp stab of wonder he reminded himself, as he had done a hundred times in the last few weeks, that he had really come home again..." Modernist literature often shows how people experience confusion and inner conflicts. In the story, George feels both happy, guilty, and disconnected at the same time, which shows this sense of fragmentation [6]. When he goes back to places he knows, he feels both at home and out of place, which reflects how modernist writers focus on how our sense of self and how we see the world can be unstable.

"Through some enchantment of the quiet and the westering light and the smell of April in the air, it seemed to George that he knew these people all around him... He loved this old house on Twelfth Street... The house became like a living presence." The text uses a stream-of-consciousness technique to explore George's inner thoughts and emotions. His reflections shift from his love for his surroundings to the history of the people in his hometown. This style of storytelling mirrors the way our thoughts flow and jump from one idea to another, which is a key feature of modernist literature.

"But no sooner had he arrived in New York than his heart told him to call her up—and he had done it. Then they had met again, and after that things followed their own course." *"It seemed, perversely, that he ought to be unhappy to be doing what his reason had told him not to do. But he was not."* The text presents George's internal conflict between reason and emotion, highlighting the modernist fascination with ambiguity and the complexity of emotions. His decision to reunite with Esther, despite believing it unwise, reflects the unpredictability of human behavior and the tension between rationality and desire.

"His eye took in the towering mass of the new hospital at the end of the block... the soaring walls salmon coloured in the evening light." *"The air was strangely quiet. All the noises of the city were muted here into a distant hum, so unceasing that it seemed to belong to silence."* Modernist texts often explore the contrast between urban landscapes and personal introspection. The description of New York City juxtaposes the towering modernity of the hospital with the nostalgic, humanized intimacy of the old houses. The muted city noise becomes a metaphor for the isolation and alienation of

modern life, emphasizing the tension between the individual and the rapidly changing urban environment.

“Most of the trouble he had brought upon himself, he saw, had come from leaping down the throat of things. Very well, he would look before he leaped hereafter.” George’s deep reflection shows his feelings of disillusionment and his desire to gain control over his life, which is a common theme in modernist literature. His recognition of past mistakes and his determination to learn from them highlight the modernist belief that progress is uncertain, and human flaws are often inevitable.

“‘A foolish consistency,’ Emerson had said, ‘is the hobgoblin of little minds.’” “And great Goethe... compared the development and progress of mankind to the reeling’s of a drunken beggar on horseback.”

The mentions of Emerson and Goethe in the text show how modernist literature often engages with philosophy and references other works. These references add depth to the story, linking George’s personal struggles to bigger, universal human challenges. The metaphor of the drunk beggar represents the unpredictable and uneven nature of personal and societal development, which is a key idea in modernist thinking.

“Would she take his love, but leave him free to live his life and do his work? That was the way he told her it must be, and she said yes, she understood.” Modernism often challenges traditional notions of love, morality, and relationships. George and Esther’s unconventional arrangement—where love coexists with independence—reflects a modernist reevaluation of traditional social constructs. The text questions whether such a compromise can sustain happiness, embodying the era’s uncertainty and experimentation with new ways of living.

“Through some enchantment of the quiet... it seemed to George that he knew these people all around him.” “Would she accept this compromise? Would she take his love, but leave him free to live his life and do his work?” Modernist literature often explores the paradox of human connection and isolation. While George feels a fleeting sense of unity with his neighbors, he remains deeply isolated in his personal struggles. Similarly, his relationship with Esther is marked by intimacy yet complicated by emotional distance and individual needs.

Modernism, as an artistic movement, is characterized by a break with traditional forms, a focus on individual subjectivity, fragmentation, and the questioning of conventional narrative structures. In the passage from *You Can’t Go Home Again*, there are several elements of Modernism visible in both the content and the style of writing.

Modernism often delves deeply into the interiority of characters, using stream-of-consciousness techniques to depict their fragmented, tumultuous thoughts and emotions. For example: *“He had been back in New York only a few days when Lulu Scudder, the literary agent, telephoned him in great excitement. The publishing house of James Rodney & Co. was interested in his manuscript, and Foxhall Edwards, the distinguished editor of this great house, wanted to talk to him about it. Of course, you couldn’t tell about these things, but it was always a good idea to strike while the iron was hot. Could he go over right away to see Edwards?”* This passage represents a fragmented internal monologue, reflecting George’s anxious state of mind as he deals with his emotions of doubt, hope, and uncertainty. His thoughts are not presented in a linear fashion but are instead filled with interruptions, self-reassurance, and hesitation. The stream-of-consciousness style here emphasizes George’s internal conflict, which is central to Modernist literature. Modernist authors often focus on capturing the disjointed flow of thoughts, rather than presenting external events in a straightforward narrative.

Modernism often portrays characters in states of alienation or disillusionment, where they feel estranged from society or from themselves. For example: *“For several days he felt let down, but then his common sense reassured him that people couldn’t really tell much about a new author from a short piece in a magazine. The book would show them who he was and what he could do.”* In this passage, George’s sense of alienation and disillusionment after his story is published in *Rodney’s Magazine* reflects a core theme of Modernism. He expects immediate recognition, but the lack of reaction from the public leaves him feeling disconnected from his audience. This illustrates the gap between an artist’s ambition and the reality of how their work is received. His disappointment reveals a common Modernist theme: the disruption of idealized expectations. Like many Modernist characters, George struggles with the tension between his dreams and the harsh reality of being misunderstood or unappreciated.

In this passage, the elements of Modernism—including psychological depth, stream-of-consciousness, fragmented time, alienation, and existential crises—are clearly visible. The text emphasizes inner conflict, the unreliability of success, and the fragmented nature of modern experience. These aspects reflect the modernist sensibility, focusing not just on the external world but on the complexities of human thought and emotional disintegration within that world.

Conclusion. In conclusion, *You Can’t Go Home Again* by Thomas Wolfe showcases several key elements of Modernist literature, including fragmented experiences, alienation,

and the search for meaning in a complex world. Through George's introspective journey, Wolfe explores the struggles of identity, the tension between personal ambition and societal expectations, and the uncertainty of progress. The novel's use of stream-of-consciousness and references to philosophical ideas further deepens its exploration of the human condition. Ultimately, Wolfe's portrayal of George's disillusionment and alienation highlights the Modernist focus on the disconnect between individual desires and the realities of life. Through this lens, the novel contributes to a broader understanding of Modernist themes and the challenges faced by characters in a rapidly changing world.

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