

**“CRITIQUING MODERN SOCIETY IN WOLFE’S YOU CAN’T GO HOME AGAIN”**

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**ABSTRACT:** *Thomas Wolfe's You Can't Go Home Again explores the modernist themes of alienation, introspection, and societal critique through the journey of its protagonist, George Webber. The novel examines the impossibility of returning to an idealized past while grappling with the fragmentation and uncertainties of modern life. By employing fragmented narrative structure, lyrical prose, and a critical lens on American materialism, Wolfe captures the disorientation of the 20th-century experience. This study analyzes how the novel embodies modernist ideals, positioning it as a timeless reflection on identity, memory, and the human condition.*

**Key words:** *Thomas Wolfe, modernism, alienation, introspection, societal critique, fragmented narrative, American Dream, identity, memory, materialism, existentialism, literary analysis.*

**Аннотация:** *Роман Томаса Вулфа «Ты больше не вернешься домой» исследует модернистские темы отчуждения, самоанализа и критики общества через путешествие главного героя Джорджа Уэббера. Произведение показывает невозможность возвращения к идеализированному прошлому, одновременно раскрывая фрагментацию и неопределенность современной жизни. Используя фрагментарную структуру повествования, лирический стиль и критический взгляд на материализм американского общества, Вулф передает дезориентацию, присущую опыту XX века. Данное исследование анализирует, как роман воплощает модернистские идеалы, утверждая его как вечное размышление о самоидентичности, памяти и человеческой сущности.*

**Ключевые слова:** *Томас Вулф, модернизм, отчуждение, самоанализ, критика общества, фрагментарное повествование, американская мечта, идентичность, память, материализм, экзистенциализм, литературный анализ.*

Modernism, a transformative literary movement that emerged in the early 20th century, sought to capture the disorienting changes brought about by industrialization, urbanization, and the fragmentation of traditional societal values. Writers associated with

this movement rejected conventional narrative forms, embracing experimentation to reflect the complexities of human consciousness and the alienation of modern life. Thomas Wolfe's *You Can't Go Home Again* exemplifies these modernist tendencies, exploring themes of dislocation, introspection, and societal critique through the deeply personal yet universal journey of its protagonist, George Webber. Wolfe's literary style, often characterized as both sprawling and intensely lyrical, draws heavily from his own life, making his works deeply autobiographical yet profoundly reflective of broader cultural concerns. In *You Can't Go Home Again*, Wolfe uses George's experiences to examine the impossibility of returning to an idealized past and the challenges of finding identity in a rapidly changing world. According to Donald, Wolfe's work "is both a personal exploration of self and a critique of the societal transformations of his time"<sup>25</sup> Through fragmented narrative structure, poetic introspection, and a critical lens on American society, Wolfe crafts a modernist masterpiece that resonates with the uncertainties of the 20th-century experience. This analysis will demonstrate how Wolfe's novel embodies modernist themes by exploring George's alienation, the fragmented structure of the narrative, and the existential introspection that defines his quest for meaning. Additionally, it will situate Wolfe's critique of American society within the broader cultural disillusionment of the modernist era.

### **Critique of American Society**

In *You Can't Go Home Again*, Thomas Wolfe critiques American society for its obsession with wealth and success. The main character, George Webber, sees the emptiness behind people's constant pursuit of material things. For instance, when describing New York City, Wolfe writes, "The towers soared... cold and indifferent as the stars, untouched by man's failures or his triumphs"<sup>26</sup> The skyscrapers symbolize progress but also show how industrialization can make life feel cold and impersonal. Wolfe also criticizes how capitalism reduces people to numbers on a spreadsheet. George reflects on businessmen and financiers, saying, "These were men who had forgotten their own humanity in their race to conquer figures in a ledger"<sup>27</sup>. This idea connects to modernist literature's focus on the alienation of individuals in a rapidly changing world, similar to themes found in F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*. According to David Herbert Donald, Wolfe was disturbed by the "soullessness of a society obsessed with material gain, where the human spirit seemed to be the ultimate

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<sup>25</sup> Donald, David Herbert. *Look Homeward: A Life of Thomas Wolfe*. Harvard University Press, 1987.

<sup>26</sup> Wolfe, Thomas. *You Can't Go Home Again*. Scribner, 1940.pp215.

<sup>27</sup> Wolfe, Thomas. *You Can't Go Home Again*. Scribner, 1940.pp312

casualty”<sup>28</sup> In contrast, George travels to Europe and finds a deeper understanding of life. Even though Europe is scarred by war, it forces him to confront life’s fragility and meaning. However, Wolfe also shows that modernization is affecting Europe, just like America. Joanne Marshall Mauldin explains that Wolfe’s writing “captures the disillusionment of an era where old values have crumbled, leaving individuals adrift in a sea of change”<sup>29</sup> Wolfe ultimately portrays a society that has lost its way, torn between ambition and humanity. His critique remains relevant, reminding readers of the human cost of prioritizing material success over personal and emotional fulfillment.

### Conclusion

Thomas Wolfe’s *You Can’t Go Home Again* stands as a testament to the enduring power of modernist literature to capture the complexities of human experience. Through George Webber’s journey, Wolfe explores the alienation and fragmentation of modern life, employing introspection and experimental narrative techniques to reflect the disorientation of a world in flux. By juxtaposing personal identity struggles with societal critiques, Wolfe bridges the autobiographical and the universal, offering readers a mirror to their own uncertainties. As Field observes, “Wolfe’s ability to transform deeply personal experiences into universal truths is what secures his place within the modernist canon”<sup>30</sup>. Moreover, Wolfe’s critique of capitalism and materialism underscores his disillusionment with the American Dream, aligning his work with contemporaries like F.

Scott Fitzgerald and John Dos Passos. Through George’s epiphany—that the search for meaning lies not in reclaiming the past but in embracing life’s inherent fluidity—Wolfe advances a vision of modern existence that is both unsettling and deeply human. This perspective, as Mauldin notes, “captures the heart of modernism: the recognition of life’s instability and the resilience of the human spirit in the face of it”<sup>31</sup>. Ultimately, *You Can’t Go Home Again* invites readers to confront their own relationship with change, memory, and identity. Wolfe’s modernist innovations not only reflect the anxieties of his era but also resonate with contemporary audiences navigating a similarly fragmented and uncertain world.

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<sup>28</sup> Donald, David Herbert. *Look Homeward: A Life of Thomas Wolfe*. Harvard University Press, 1987. pp242

<sup>29</sup> Mauldin, Joanne Marshall. *Thomas Wolfe: When Do the Atrocities Begin?* University of Tennessee Press, 2007

<sup>30</sup> Field, Leslie. *Thomas Wolfe and His Critics*. Archon Books, 1988.

<sup>31</sup> Mauldin, Joanne Marshall. *Thomas Wolfe: When Do the Atrocities Begin?* University of Tennessee Press, 2007

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