A Study of Personality in Literary Autobiography: An Analysis of Thomas Wolfe's *Look Homeward, Angel*

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Analyzed physical and psychological traits used by Thomas Wolfe to describe self and others in *Look Homeward, Angel* as a method for studying personality. Set-theoretical comparisons (HICLAS algorithm) of the traits he attributed to self during 5 successive age periods revealed that Wolfe viewed his development as the accumulation over time of core family traits, particularly those of father. Multidimensional scaling revealed sharp differences between trait content Wolfe attributed to self and family and trait content he attributed to nonfamily. Interpretable differences were also found between family and nonfamily in the proportion of unique traits attributed to a person. In addition, differences were found in the proportion of unique traits attributed to self during the 5 different age periods. Implications of the findings for personality are discussed.

*Look Homeward, Angel* (LHA) is a fictionalized autobiography of Thomas Wolfe’s life from his infancy to his early 20s. Most of the people and places described in the book are readily identifiable despite their fictional aliases. The elements selected from *LHA* for analysis are all the characteristics, physical and psychological, that Wolfe attributed to himself and to others in the novel. The focus of this study is on personality organization as reflected in these views that Wolfe held of himself and others.

Although the subject of this study is Wolfe, its basic purpose is to demonstrate the value of an in-depth analysis of an individual’s view of self and others in autobiography (particularly one as articulate and personal as Wolfe’s) as a way of studying personality organization in general.

The psychology of autobiography, the use of literary materials to study personality, and a social psychological conception of personality and personality development—all provide the orientation and certain general assumptions underlying this study of Thomas Wolfe’s fictionalized autobiography as a study of personality. The introductory remarks that follow are intended to make explicit how this study is rooted in each of these three domains and to provide a background for spelling out the methodological and substantive aims of the study in more detail.

**Autobiography**

An important and widely shared assumption is that the recall of past experiences is strongly influenced and even distorted by one’s present views of self and others. Several kinds of evidence exist for this assumption (Cohler, 1982; Eakin, 1985; Langness & Frank, 1981; Runyan, 1984; Spence, 1982). The strongest evidence is from experimental social psychology (Greenwald, 1980; Ross & Conway, 1986). A related and supporting assumption is that the present exerts its influence on memory because of a person’s need to provide his or her self with a sense of historical continuity. Moreover, when recall of age-related selves is embedded in a narrative of one’s life—an autobiography—the narrative form itself also exerts a strong influence toward continuity, because a story is expected, among other things, to make meaningful connections between past, present, and future (Cohler, 1982; Gergen & Gergen, 1983, 1988; Spence, 1982).

Is it necessary for the empirical study of autobiography that fact be separated from fiction—self-discovery from self-invention? A functional research stance is that meaningful research questions can be posed and answered about these phenomena as phenomena, even if fact and fiction are inextricably bound in autobiography. This stance is akin to that underlying the study of implicit personality theory; that is, the perception of people is lawful and worthy of study whether these perceptions are accurate or not. Indeed, the study of person (self and other) perception in autobiographical memory suggests a new rubric and research domain for personality and social psychology: implicit developmental theory. Ross and Conway (1986) enunciated a similar notion, implicit theories of stability and change, in their review of a wide range of laboratory (and other) findings on remembering one’s own past.

Wolfe’s implicit beliefs about his psychological development were uncovered in this study by partitioning his extensive de-
scriptions of self into several chronological periods. A comparison of these age-related selves revealed certain systematic relations of these successive selves to each other. Also, as part of this analysis of Wolfe's implicit beliefs about his development, his descriptions of other people were compared with those of his age-related selves.

**Literary Materials as Data**

Literary material has a number of advantages for the study of personality. It is naturalistic: unstaged for and unfettered by the psychologist, psychoanalyst, or psychotherapist in its production. It is readily available to other investigators and as such can be subjected to reanalysis and reinterpretation. Biographical information, as well as other literary works, letters, and personal notes of the author, are usually in the public domain as well. Writers who are productive through a major period of their lives provide unusual opportunities for longitudinal studies of personality (e.g., McCurdy, 1940a, 1940b, 1953). Literary material is a more articulate expression of personal experience than the protocols typically produced by subjects in the laboratory and by therapy patients (Runyan, 1984, p. 205), although the boundaries for this assertion have yet to be specified.

Within the psychoanalytic tradition, literary material is often viewed as not unlike dream material, that is, as "manifest content," containing abundant symbolism and with the author represented by the central figure in the narrative. Because the author and his or her free associations to this manifest content are generally not available, as they would be in a psychoanalysis, psychoanalytic investigators have substituted a variety of expedients to uncover the latent meaning of the literary work, including the use of standard symbol and theme interpretation, and biographical and other information that might be available about the author. These practices confound in unknown ways the personality of the author with that of the investigator. Similar problems of confounding exist within most nonpsychoanalytic studies of personality through literature.

Freud (1907/1959) himself characterized the work of the creative writer as being somewhat different from that of ordinary dreaming when he wrote:

> The author . . . directs his attention to the unconscious in his own mind, he listens to its possible developments and lends them artistic expression instead of suppressing them by conscious criticism. Thus he experiences from himself what we learn from others—the laws which the activities of this unconscious must obey. But he need not state these laws, nor even be clearly aware of them; as a result of the tolerance of his intelligence, they are incorporated within his creations. We discover these laws by analysing his writings... (Freud, 1907/1959, p. 92)

For McCurdy (1939), an early pioneer in the development of a sharable methodology for the study of personality through literature, this formulation by Freud signaled the possibility "that literary productions (and dreams as well) often possess a character of coherence and wholeness which invites analysis without reference to anything external to themselves" (p. 307). By external, McCurdy meant biographical data, symbol interpretation, and "other gratuitous comments and interpolations" (p. 307). McCurdy urged as one of the working caveats for a sharable scientific methodology that the investigator turn to external information only after an internal analysis of the literary work is completed. This is, in fact, the way he proceeded in much of his own empirical studies of the literary works of D. H. Lawrence, the Brontë sisters, and Shakespeare (McCurdy, 1940a, 1940b, 1947, 1953, 1961). Nonetheless, only a handful of scattered efforts exist in the use of a sharable scientific methodology for studying personality through literature (e.g., Hall & Lind, 1970; Sears, Lapidus, & Cozzens, 1978; Swede & Tetlock, 1986; White, 1947).

More recently and from quite another tradition, that of person perception within the domain of social psychology, Russell, Jones and I developed a replicable methodology for representing an author's view of people from his or her literary work and applied this method to a collection of Theodore Dreiser's (1929) short stories (Rosenberg & Jones, 1972). We selected from this literary corpus all the terms and phrases that referred to stable characteristics (traits) of a person, with each such reference noted according to the character to whom it was attributed. A multidimensional scaling and clustering of these traits revealed aspects of Dreiser's perception of people that were central to his life and personality, as corroborated by an in-depth biography (Swanberg, 1965).

The present study of Thomas Wolfe's autobiography uses methods for extracting character description from narrative that are similar to those used for Dreiser's short stories. However, methodological advances that have been made in the analysis of such trait attributions since the Dreiser study (Gara & Rosenberg, 1979; Rosenberg, 1988; Rosenberg & Gara, 1985) are particularly appropriate to the analysis of an autobiographical work such as LHA. In particular, in addition to a multidimensional scaling of the traits, there are now algorithms based on set-theoretical notions that can be used to represent the relations among the characters (De Boeck, 1986; De Boeck & Rosenberg, 1988). That is, the fact that the trait descriptions of some characters subsume those of other characters can be represented by these analyses. Intermediate degrees of overlap between characters, as well as equivalence (when two characters share the same traits) at one extreme and disjunction (when two characters have no traits in common) at the other, are also represented, as are the classes of trait attributions on which the relations among characters are based. A recently published analysis of Henry Kissinger's White House Years (1979) by Swede and Tetlock (1986) also aimed to uncover the perceived relations among prominent people described by Henry Kissinger, albeit with different analytic tools.

**Social Personality**

A basic assumption in the interpretation of Wolfe's descriptions of the people in LHA is that an individual's personality is reflected in his or her perceptions of both self and others. This assumption has its roots in the very early formulations of modern social psychology (Baldwin, 1897/1973; Cooley, 1902; Mead, 1934). Of these early American thinkers, it is the psychologist, Baldwin, who first enunciated the concept of social self—or socius, as he called it—as a way of representing the personality of an individual. For Baldwin, the socius, a dialectic consisting of one's views of ego and of alters, is the self and is personality.
Although Baldwin's (1927) assertion may seem extreme to contemporary personality psychologists, the notion that a person's perceptions of others, as well as of self, reveal important components of his or her personality is common to a variety of otherwise diverse modern personality theorists. Sullivan's (1953, pp. 16-17) interpersonal conception of personality, for example, is clearly traceable to Cooley and Mead (and their conceptions to Baldwin and James), whereas other personality theorists not obviously influenced by early American social psychology and sociology also incorporate a person's views of others to characterize personality. The idea that personality is reflected in one's view of self and others is basic to assessment instruments such as the Thematic Apperception Test and the Repertory Grid (Kelly, 1955).

What the present study offers in its structural representations of self and others and Wolfe's descriptions of them is an explicit display of Wolfe's social personality, his socius as he believed it developed in the context of family and community. The structural representations presented in this study identify the people in Wolfe's formative period with whom he identified and whose traits provided the basic categories for construing self. With regard to the people with whom Wolfe did not identify, there are two types that can be discerned in this study: people whom Wolfe knew intimately and those whom he did not. Thus, there are two kinds of contrasts of his view of self, one elaborated and the other not.

The theoretical concepts of contrast (or “duality”) and elaboration, applied here to social personality structure, are found in such diverse personality theories as those of Freud, Kelly, Jung, and Sullivan. The concept of elaboration is central to Kelly's structural theory of personality. I made minimal use in this empirical study of Wolfe's social personality of other theoretical concepts that are particular to certain psychodynamic and personological theories. A psychoanalytic conception of Wolfe's personality can be found in Steele's (1976) psychobiography. Also available is an eclectic analysis of Wolfe's social personality based on Freudian psychoanalysis, learning theory, and Murray's system of needs and pressures (Snyder, 1971).

Aims of the Study

The preceding discussion makes it possible now to spell out the methodological and substantive aims of this study.

On the methodological side, the study aims to demonstrate that a sharable methodology exists that is feasible for extracting information about social personality from naturalistic materials (here, a literary work), and that recently developed analytic methods, based on a set-theoretical model, provide a parsimonious way of representing this information structurally. This study of Thomas Wolfe is the first application of these data-gathering and data-analytic methods to an autobiography.

On the substantive side, the study aims to show the validity of the concepts of contrast and elaboration in the organization of social personality. The validity of these concepts is assessed in two ways. One is in the interpretation of the structural representations of social personality per se. The second is in the examination of the relations between these structural representations and biographical and other information about the person's life course, information external to the autobiography itself. These relations are expected to be complex, and hence their examination is necessarily qualitative and discursive. Nevertheless, their examination focuses specifically on the question of whether the structural representations used in this study capture features of social personality that are relevant to the life course. Also, although specific substantive hypotheses conceived at the outset of this study regarding the relations between social personality and life course seem premature at this stage of the research enterprise, their formulation for subsequent studies of autobiography (perhaps laboratory-based) may be inspired and rendered more realistic by the present study's results.

Finally, there is an element of discovery that was present in the conception of this study, fulfilled at least in part by the analysis of traits attributed to one person only and only once in the entire autobiography. Their systematic analysis in an autobiography reveals for the first time that when these unique traits are self-attributions, they may be indexing developmental periods of self-examination and change. When these unique traits are associated with another, they appear to index interest in and involvement with the other.

A general comment on the place of studying the single individual in the scientific enterprise: Any general explanatory principle, derived from whatever empirical source, must ultimately be shown to apply at the individual level. An idiographic analysis can also facilitate the search for (as well as provide a validation of) general explanatory principles of personality, provided it is these general principles that stay in focus as the goals of the research. Even the typical empirical study involving a sample of subjects from a seemingly well-specified population is, in a strong sense, an idiographic, as there are inevitably particulars associated with the sample as a whole—particulars that may shape the results in unknown ways. For these studies, as for the study of single individuals, it is the ongoing enterprise of developing a cohesive body of theory and knowledge that yields an understanding of the phenomena. As McCurdy (1961) noted in reference to his own use of imaginative literature as data to study personality, it is “comparative studies of this sort [that] would yield some new insights into personality development in general” (p. 427).

The Data Base and Its Context

Biographical Sketch of Thomas Wolfe

Thomas Wolfe was born in 1900 in Asheville, North Carolina, a city in the mountainous, western part of the state. He was the youngest of eight children, one of whom (Leslie) died in infancy, and another (Grover) at the age of 12, when Thomas was 4 years old. Both Grover and his twin brother Ben, who died at the age of 26, are referred to in LHA by their real given names. Other family members were given fictional names. The family tree with the family's real given names, as well as those used in the novel, is shown in Figure 1. Members of the family, as well as other significant people in LHA, are referred to in this article by their real names.

Wolfe's father was a tombstone cutter who owned his own business in Asheville. Originally from Pennsylvania, he migrated to Asheville where he met and married Julia, a country
school teacher and a member of a locally prominent family. When Thomas was still a child, Julia bought a boardinghouse and moved into it with Thomas and his brother Ben. Only his father and one sister, Mabel, remained in the family house, which Thomas visited frequently to be with his father and sister.

Thomas attended public school until the age of 12 and was then enrolled in a private school. He was a superior student and at the age of 16 went to the University of North Carolina to major in classics and English literature. LHA ends with his graduation from the university 4 years later and his departure to Harvard for graduate study.

He obtained a master’s degree from Harvard and then taught English at New York University while attempting to launch a career as a playwright. During this period he developed a close relationship with Aline Bernstein, a married woman of some social standing who was 18 years his senior. Their relationship lasted several years, and he dedicated LHA to her. He neither married nor developed a close relationship with another woman. He wrote LHA while living in New York and during his travels in Europe. It was an instant success and was widely read for over a decade, particularly by young people for whom he articulated many of the strong feelings and desires associated with growing up.

Wolfe subsequently wrote three other novels, none of which attained the success and recognition of LHA. He also wrote a number of short stories and essays, some published after his premature death in 1938 of a tuberculosis infection that had spread to his brain.

Like a number of other prominent writers, there is a plethora of readily available information about Wolfe’s life. This information is used in interpreting and amplifying the findings from the present study. With the recent publication of Donald’s (1987) biography of Wolfe, there are now three biographies of him, the other two by Nowell (1960) and by Turnbull (1967). In addition, there is Kennedy’s (1962) literary biography. Several extensive volumes of Wolfe’s letters have been published (Holman & Ross, 1968; Nowell, 1956; Stutman, 1983), as well as selected personal notes (Kennedy & Reeves, 1970). An ongoing newsletter for Wolfeophiles, The Thomas Wolfe Review, publishes anecdotes and new discoveries about details of his life and an updated bibliography of Wolfe-related work.

Look Homeward, Angel as Autobiography

After several abortive attempts in his early 20s to portray his life and family history in plays and short stories, Wolfe turned to the novel as the artistic form adequate to encompass all that he had to say. At the age of 26, he started in earnest to plan his first and major novel. His determination to portray the full impact of his family on his early development and his struggles to shape his own identity can be found among his first notes about the book.¹ The evidence that he indeed based the novel very directly on events and people from his own life is extensive and cogent (Holman, 1975, Ch. 2; Watkins, 1957, p. 9). Most of the characters in LHA are readily identifiable in real life.

Wolfe spent several months scribbling a voluminous chronology of his early life, starting with his earliest childhood memories, “allowing his mind to rove freely, dredging up memories as if he were on the psychoanalyst’s couch” (Kennedy, 1962, p. 120). However, none of the writing in the novel is cast in psychoanalytic language or interpretation. Wolfe completed his intense self-exploration for the novel and the book itself within 2 years. The novel, initially titled O Lost, was accepted for publication by Scribner’s within a year and published in 1929 as Look Homeward, Angel. Wolfe’s strong determination to tell

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¹ These notes are quoted by Kennedy (1962, p. 120) in his literary biography of Thomas Wolfe. The original unpublished notes are deposited in the Houghton Library at Harvard.
the story of his early life as he experienced it, his dedication to recovering these experiences by dredging up early memories, and his stream-of-consciousness writing style all support the characterization of LHA as a highly personal document (Allport, 1942) and as a rich source of material for personality research.

Finally, there is the methodological issue of the role of the editor in shaping the published version of the novel. The recent allegations (Halberstadt, 1980) of extensive editorial tampering with Wolfe's writing—"Wolflegate," as some of the media referred to it—apply almost entirely to his posthumously published works, and even these allegations have not gone unchallenged by Wolfe scholars (e.g., Kennedy, 1981). Still, the question of editorial influence in the final version of LHA, which Halberstadt does refer to briefly, has merit for a study such as this one. As already noted, an important working assumption in this analysis of LHA is that the work has a coherence and wholeness coordinate with the social personality of the author, that is, with his view of self and others.

When Wolfe submitted his manuscript to Scribner's, it was about 1,100 pages in length. Wolfe shortened the novel to about 800 pages following the suggestions of his editor, Maxwell Perkins. The specific question for the present study is whether the novel as finally published is representative of the longer version in terms of character description. Kennedy's (1962, pp. 173–179) detailed account of the nature of the cuts has suggested little if any bias in the data base extracted for the present study. The general nature of the cuts are perhaps best summarized by Wolfe himself. In a letter to his former schoolteacher, Mrs. Roberts, he wrote of Perkins and his suggestions:

He said the book was new and original, and because of its form could have no formal and orthodox unity, but that what unity it did have came from the strange wild people—the family—it wrote about, as seen through the eyes of a strange wild boy. These people, with relatives, friends, townspeople, he said were "magnificent"—as real as any people he had ever read of. He wanted me to keep these people and the boy at all times foremost—other business, such as courses at state university, etc., to be shortened and subordinated. (Nowell, 1956, p. 169)

Extraction of Self and Other Descriptions

Terms and phrases in LHA that refer to stable personal characteristics were recorded verbatim and listed according to the character to whom they were attributed. The task of extracting and recording these terms and phrases was performed by a secretary/research assistant who was employed full time for this and other research projects on person perception. The guidelines she used for identifying and recording terms and phrases are the same as those used in the study of Dreiser (Rosenberg & Jones, 1972). To ensure that she had a thorough understanding of the guidelines before coding the entire book, she and I independently coded several small samples of the test. After each sample was coded, we compared the terms and phrases we had each extracted. On the last two practice samples of 20 pages each, we achieved an average agreement of 83% on the total list of terms that we had extracted.

A disagreement usually arose from certain ambiguities inherent in the narrative form as to whether a phrase in the text actually referred to a stable characteristic of a person being described; for example, air of travel, cruel openings of her life, and ornate wooden palace (a possession of the character). The general rule for such phrases was to include them in the listing of traits for that person. This rule helped ensure that Wolfe's way of perceiving a character's personality would be as fully represented in the data as possible.

A brief summary of the guidelines is as follows: Unmodified physical or psychological trait terms that appeared in the narrative were recorded as single words (e.g., strange, tall, and lonely). When a trait word was qualified or modified in some way, the entire phrase was recorded (e.g., sensual swing of the body and loneliness of his soul). To facilitate the subsequent classification of phrases into trait categories, each phrase was identified by a key trait word (sometimes a word combination) contained in the phrase. When the key word was not the first word in the phrase, the phrase was identified by recording the key word first, followed by a comma and the rest of the unit (e.g., full of strange noises was recorded as strange, full of (—) noises). If a phrase contained two or more key words, the phrase was listed separately for each key word (e.g., strange and awkward loneliness was also listed as loneliness, strange and awkward, and as awkward, strange and (—) loneliness).

References to transient feelings and moods were not recorded. However, when a feeling term clearly referred to a relatively stable affective disposition of a person (e.g., "he was a cheerful person," "his life was filled with terror") it was listed as a trait term for the person.

The terms and phrases extracted from LHA were grouped into trait categories by two graduate students, using the following general guidelines:

1. It was necessary but not sufficient that the trait terms placed in any given category contain the same basic morpheme or morpheme compound. It was also necessary that the meanings of the trait terms in a category be judged as similar. For example, cynical was grouped with cynicism, kindly with kind, and so on. Thus, grammatical variation was permitted within a category, but no judgments were made about the possible synonymy of trait terms with different morphemes; for example, beautiful and pretty formed two different categories.

2. Descriptive units containing more than one word were categorized according to their key word if and only if the meaning of the phrase was judged to be similar to that of the unqualified key word. For example, the following units were assigned to the same trait category: awkward, awkward bulk of puberty, awkward calves, and awkward muscles. On the other hand, dark eyes (a physical feature) was put in a different category from dark perception (a psychological feature).

3. Physical traits, of which awkward is one example, were frequently used by Wolfe and were placed into separate categories according to both the attribute and, in many instances, the part of body referred to. For example, there was one category for small, referring to body frame, and another category for small eyes; one category for small eyes and another for grey eyes; and so on. In general, there were three types of physical-trait categories: body frame or build (e.g., small, plump, heavy), a particular body part (e.g., small eyes, black hair, thin face), and complexion (e.g., white, pale, brown). However, psychological traits seemingly manifested in physical features (e.g., pas-
sionate face, sad eyes, and wild form) were assigned to general trait categories (passionate, sad, and wild, respectively).

4. The negation of a trait with not or never was categorized by prefixing the trait with un-, in-, or im-.

In general, the intent of the categorization was to preserve Wolfe’s linguistic categories without proliferating categories unnecessarily. Thus, no judgments were made about the possible synonymy of trait terms with different morphemes. On the other hand, a range of qualification was permitted within a category.

A total of 5,410 descriptive units—trait terms and phrases—were extracted from LHA, attributed variously to 270 characters. The categorization rules resulted in 2,217 categories: 775 categories were attributed to two or more characters, 73 other categories were each attributed to only one of the characters but were repeated two or more times in the text, and the remaining 1,369 categories occurred only once in the text. These are the data on which the present study’s analyses of LHA are based.

Results and Discussion

Structural Analyses

A frequency criterion was used to select individuals to be included in the analyses, because individuals with very few trait attributions would not provide a stable index of their similarity either to each other or to other individuals. Those described with more than 5 of the 775 shared traits were included; this resulted in a sample of 117 people. This sample included all the family members as well as other people considered psychologically important in Wolfe’s early life (Snyder, 1971). As the structural analyses reveal, this sample proved more than sufficient for revealing Wolfe’s views of self and others.

Five of the 117 people are Wolfe himself, each corresponding to a different age period. That is, Wolfe’s extensive descriptions of himself were partitioned into five chronological periods: ages 0–2, 3–5, 6–11, 12–15, and 16–early 20s. This partitioning corresponds to some extent to Wolfe’s own partitioning. He wrote the book in a chronological order and divided it into three parts: the last two chronological periods correspond to Parts 2 and 3, respectively; Part 1 covers his life from birth through age 11, which was partitioned for the analyses into 0–2, 3–5, and 6–11.

The structural location of the five age-related selves provides a simple and effective way of tracing Wolfe’s retrospective portrayal of his personality development, and in the context of the other people in his life.

A sample of 91 trait categories, selected for their statistical representativeness, was used for analyses aimed at representing the structure of Wolfe’s social personality. Wolfe’s attributions of the 91 traits variously to the 117 people (chronological selves and others) are summarized in a two-way matrix. A small region of this matrix is shown in Table 1 to illustrate the nature of these data.

Two kinds of structural analysis were used to represent Wolfe’s beliefs about self and others as reflected in his character descriptions. One analysis, a nonmetric multidimensional scaling (KYST; Kruskal, Young, & Seery, 1973), is a structural representation of the traits based on the degree to which they co-occur in the same people. The second, a recently developed categorical analysis (HICLAS; De Boeck, 1986), portrays the set-theoretical relationships (De Boeck & Rosenberg, 1988) among the age-related selves and others. The multidimensional scaling of traits provides a familiar and useful perspective for the HICLAS analysis.

Representative traits and their underlying dimensions. The psychological distance measure used in the multidimensional scaling of the 91 traits is the same as that used for Dreiser’s trait protocol (Rosenberg & Jones, 1972) and for subsequent laboratory studies of implicit personality theory (Kim & Rosenberg, 1980; Rosenberg, 1977). The measure is based on the degree of co-occurrence of the traits in the same people. Proud and alone, for example, both tend to be attributed to the same characters (certain family members; see Table 1); thus, the psychological distance between proud and alone is small. Gentle and soft also tend to co-occur in the same characters, and thus have a small distance between them as well. However, proud and alone tend to be attributed almost exclusively to certain family members, whereas gentle and soft describe other characters, almost none of whom are members of the family (see Table 1).

Thus, the distance between proud or alone and gentle or soft is large. Intermediate degrees of distance are also represented in terms of their relative co-occurrence.

The distance measure reflects Wolfe’s beliefs about which traits tend to go together in a person and which do not, as well as the similarity in meaning of certain traits. The assumption that trait co-occurrence reflects both a person’s beliefs and a semantic component is supported in studies of person perception and implicit personality theory (e.g., Gara & Rosenberg, 1981; Shweder, 1977). The two pairs of traits, proud and alone and gentle and soft, illustrate more or less clear cases of each of these two underlying components of co-occurrence, respectively. As in other studies designed to uncover the underlying dimensions in personality perception, it is not necessary to separate these two components.

2 The use of a sample is necessary for structural analyses because the total set of trait categories is too large a corpus to be accommodated by extant structural algorithms. Moreover, it is unlikely that all the traits would need to be included in a structural analysis as there is probably considerable redundancy in their meaning and usage. Nevertheless, there remains the problem of selecting a representative subset of traits for analysis. A common solution to this problem has been to select the traits (or themes) most frequently found in the literary corpus on the reasonable assumption that these are the author’s most important constructs (e.g., McCurdy, 1961; Rosenberg & Jones, 1972; Swede & Tetlock, 1986). The methodological question of whether a sample of traits so selected is also a representative sample is addressed empirically in this study. A statistical procedure was used that estimates the representativeness of each trait by calculating the average covariance of each trait with every other trait. The 91 traits with the highest average covariance were selected as most representative of the total set of traits. It was then found that the correlation between the rank order of the traits in terms of their statistical representativeness and their rank order in terms of their frequency is .95. Thus, the statistical selection procedure can be adequately approximated by simply selecting the most frequently occurring trait categories as representative of the total set of categories. Nevertheless, this methodological exercise yielded an important finding that should be highlighted: the adequacy of a simple, frequency-based criterion for selecting representative trait categories.
A multidimensional scaling solution was obtained for one, two, three, four, and five dimensions (KYST; Kruskal et al., 1973). The badness-of-fit values (stress) for the five solutions are 0.17, 0.11, 0.09, 0.06, and 0.05. Although the two-dimensional solution provides a relatively good fit and was found to be adequate to show the two major dimensions in Wolfe’s trait space, the five-dimensional solution shows these two major dimensions more clearly than the two-dimensional solution. The additional dimensions in the five-dimensional solution represent certain contrasting trait categories that differentiate family members. The detailed portrayal of these family contrasts, as well as the family members that exemplify them, are shown in the HICLAS analysis described in the next section, Self and Others.

The two major dimensions of the five-dimensional solution are shown in Figure 2. These two dimensions correspond to two properties of the traits. One property, family-nonfamily, is a phi coefficient that measures the degree to which Wolfe attributed any given trait to himself or a member of his immediate family relative to his attribution of that trait to nonfamily members. The second property, male-female, is also a phi coefficient that measures the degree to which Wolfe attributed any given trait to a male character relative to his attribution of that trait to a female character.

The multiple correlation between the family-nonfamily property and the trait space is .97 ($p < .0001$). Between the male–female property and the trait space it is .53 ($p < .007$). It should be noted that there is nothing inherent in the scaling methodology or in the measurement of the properties per se that would necessarily produce significant correlations between the configuration and these properties.

The correlation of .97 for family–nonfamily is unusually high for naturalistic data. Wolfe obviously saw certain sharp differences between family, including self, and nonfamily. These differences can be discerned in Figure 2 by comparing the trait content in the lower (nonfamily) part of the space with the upper (family) part. One difference is that traits ascribed to nonfamily refer primarily to physical traits, whereas the family traits include a large proportion of psychological traits. Another difference is that the psychological traits attributed primarily to nonfamily (for example, gentle, soft, elegant, and shy) contrast in evaluative tone and depth with such core family traits as alone, desperate, dark fantasies, and life of pain.

The predominance of physical traits in Wolfe’s descriptions of nonfamily members is characteristic of the way a child describes people (e.g., Livesley & Bromley, 1973; Peeters & Secd, 1973), and as such may reflect Wolfe’s ability to recreate and describe his childhood experiences. However, attention to physical traits also predominates in one’s initial impressions of others and in casual relationships and as such is a phenomenon not limited to children. Thus, the emphasis on the physical traits of nonfamily may also reflect Wolfe’s social isolation from people outside of his family. The difference between family and nonfamily in the content of the psychological traits is consistent with this interpretation (Snyder, 1971, p. 72).

To my knowledge, the extensive scholarly literature on Wolfe’s LHA contains no discussion of these contrasting features in Wolfe’s perception of family and nonfamily and their psychological implications. Much of this literature focuses on
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(Figure 2 caption appears on next page.)
The male-female property, although significantly related to the configuration with its R of .53, is not as interpretative of the space as is the family–nonfamily property. That is, there are traits in the space not well located in terms of Wolfe’s actual attribution of them to men and women. A glaring misplacement is mustache (lower left quadrant). On the other hand, the location of handsome, big, vulgar, and powerful on the female side does indeed correspond to his attribution of them primarily to women. Overall, however, the kinds of traits Wolfe tended to ascribe to men and to women do not seem particularly unusual. Also, there is no evidence in LHA of the “virgin–whore dichotomy” that Wolfe scholars and biographers attribute to his adult views of women (e.g., Donald, 1987, p. 39; Stutman, 1983, p. 9). The absence of this dichotomy in LHA, if accurate for his adult life, is perhaps still another reflection of Wolfe’s ability to recreate his views of people during childhood and adolescence—periods of life in which such a dichotomy is unlikely. Nor is there any reason to doubt that structural analyses are insensitive to gender types when they are present in literary materials. The structural analysis of Dreiser’s short stories (Rosenberg & Jones, 1972), for example, independently revealed the male and female “types” noted by his biographer (Swanberg, 1965).

The multidimensional configuration can also be used, albeit somewhat awkwardly, to portray Wolfe’s view of himself during the various periods of his youth. This is done by identifying in the configuration the traits that he ascribed to himself during any given age period. This approach is illustrated in Figure 2.

The traits he attributed to himself during each of two age periods are identified: the C superscript for a childhood period (3–5) and the A superscript for the young adult period (16–20s). A comparison of these two periods reveals a number of things about Wolfe’s view of his personality development. From early childhood on, he identified himself almost exclusively with traits that he saw in certain family members, particularly men, that is, with traits in the upper right quadrant. The two intervening age periods (6–11 and 12–15), which are not shown in the figure, show progressively more of the traits in this quadrant being attributed to self. By the time Wolfe is a young adult, he sees himself as having acquired the bulk of these family traits. We also see that, as a young adult, he has added to his view of himself for the first time a scattering of traits that are not exclusively family traits (the lower two quadrants in Figure 2).

The set-theoretical analysis described in the next section provides a less cumbersome and more explicit structural representation of the relations among the successive age periods than that portrayed in Figure 2. This analysis also shows that the nonfamily traits are scattered over a large number of people, whereas the family traits are concentrated on a few people and are intricately related. In psychological terms, the family side of this contrast is highly elaborated, whereas the nonfamily side is relatively unelaborated. This important difference between family and nonfamily cannot be discerned in the multidimensional configuration.

Self and others.

I am, he thought, a part of all that I have touched and that has touched me, which, having for me no existence save that which I gave to it, became other than itself by being mixed with what I then was, and is now still otherwise, having fused with what I now am, which is itself a cumulation of what I have been becoming. (Eugene in LHA, p. 192)

The set-theoretical structure of Wolfe’s views of self and others, as obtained with the HICLAS (acronym for Hierarchical CLASSes) algorithm, is a structure that shows explicitly how a later self emerged from an earlier self and also identifies the people that were likely models for these age-related selves. The structure shows these relations among selves and others in terms of superset–subset relations. A superset–subset relation exists between any two people when the set of traits perceived in one person (subset) is a part of the total set of traits perceived in the other person (superset). The structure also represents the case in which the set of traits perceived in one person (subset) is a part of the set of traits perceived in two or more other people (supersets), who themselves may or may not share (overlap in) certain traits.

The HICLAS algorithm also groups traits into classes according to their co-occurrence patterns. Thus, the structure identifies the specific trait classes that Wolfe attributed to self and others, as well as the trait classes that he did not see in himself but did see in others.

The input data for the HICLAS algorithm is the two-way data matrix of 117 people (chronological selves and others) × 91 traits. Unlike multidimensional scaling, which requires as input a distance (or similarity) measure among the elements to be scaled, HICLAS operates directly on the two-way data matrix. The algorithm alternates between the rows and columns of the matrix to find the best-fitting row classes and column classes and their hierarchical relations. This iterative procedure continues until an iteration does not improve the goodness of fit of the solution to the data matrix.

For the HICLAS analysis, the cell entries in the Persons × Trait matrix were (necessarily) reduced to one when any given character was described at least once by any given trait category, and were zero otherwise. A series of HICLAS analyses was performed to determine the optimal rank (number of dimensions) for the data. Solutions from Rank 1 through Rank 8 successively incorporated additional people into row classes, or differentiated people in terms of their relations to each other, or both. However, solutions of Ranks 9 and 10 did not change the structural

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Figure 2. Two dimensions from the five-dimensional configuration of traits from Wolfe’s Look Homeward, Angel. (Self-attributions during 3–5 age period denoted with C superscript; self-attributions during 16–20s age period denoted with A superscript.)
Figure 3. HICLAS structure of persons and age-related selves in *Look Homeward, Angel*. (Each number in parentheses is the goodness of fit of the person in the structure. Heavy lines are used to connect Wolfe's age-related selves.)

TRAITS IN EACH CATEGORY

A: bitter; dark (complexion); thin face
B: alone; desperate; dark fantasies; long (body frame); lonely; life of pain; proud; sensual; shame; stranger
C: big (body frame); brooding; desires (various); fantasized; fear(ful); (filled with) terror
D: nervous; passionate; thin; wild
E: kind
F: big (body parts); drank; eager; needs (various); sensitive; straight (body frame); vulgar
G: grey eyes; old; red (complexion); sallow; shaven; small eyes; yellow (complexion)
H: black hair; bright; heavy (build); loose lips; scarred; scotch; triumphant

FATHER: confused life; sad; savage. FATHER AND MOTHER: intense; hunger (various).

MABEL: humorous; vitality. BEN: lost; powerful (strength); sick; white (complexion).

FAMILY TRAITS WITH NO SPECIFIC FAMILY EXEMPLAR: gaunt; liked money; superstitious; quiet; generous; madness; strange; hard.

RESIDUAL: gentle; soft; elegant; shy; beautiful; young; wise; country manner; (plus 19 physical trait categories)

Some people, including age-related selves, are above the horizontal center of the diagram and some people are below, so as not to clutter up the diagram. Also, this partitioning of people is not arbitrary, as is seen later. The trait classes are identified with the letters A–H, and their content is listed at the bottom of Figure 3. Each of the people shown in the figure is associated with one or more of these trait classes. For example, Mrs. Roberts, Wolfe's favorite schoolteacher, is associated with Class D, consisting of nervous, passionate, thin, and wild. Thomas Wolfe: 6–11 is also associated with Class D. Moreover, Class D is associated with all selves and others that are supersets of Mrs. Roberts or Thomas Wolfe: 6–11; these are Brother Fred and Sister Mabel (below the horizontal center) and Thomas Wolfe: 12–15, Thomas Wolfe: 16–20s, Brother Ben, and Father (above the horizontal center).

A family member is usually a superset. Fred, for example, spans Mrs. Roberts and a minor character and thus has both Trait Class D associated with Mrs. Roberts and Trait Class E.

HICLAS is an iterative procedure and like other such methods requires either a random or some rational starting point. It was found that in order to obtain an interpretable output with minimal rank, it was best to use a rational starting point based on a hierarchical clustering (Johnson, 1967) of the traits.
associated with the minor character. Mabel spans these two people as well as Fred. To show when the descriptions of one person subsume those of another (and also not to clutter the figure with lines connecting each person directly to their trait classes), that person is connected to some of his or her trait classes through other person(s). Thus, for example, Mabel's possession of Trait Classes D and E is shown by a single line to Fred, who also possesses D and E, rather than by lines from Mabel directly to D and E.

It should be noted that three of the siblings are not in the family part of the structure but are instead among the residual characters. This is probably understandable from the fact that two of these siblings, Effie and Frank, left home and moved away from Asheville when Thomas was quite young, and that Grover, Ben's twin, died when Thomas was 4 years old.

There are also a few trait classes that are superset trait classes. They are listed in the figure as associated with one of the following: Father, Mother, both Father and Mother, Mabel, Ben, and the family generally. This means that any character that is a subset of the given character has the associated traits as well. Thus, for example, the two traits listed for Mabel, humor(ous) and vital, are also associated with Fred, Mrs. Roberts, and the minor character. Also listed are the residual (R) traits. They are primarily nonfamily traits and, according to the HICLAS analysis, are so scattered among the characters that no specific classes were found among them.

The HICLAS algorithm also calculates a goodness-of-fit value for each person. These values are shown in the parentheses next to each person in Figure 3. The goodness of fit decreases from one (perfect fit) to the degree that a person possesses traits not present in the classes subsumed by that person plus the degree to which the person fails to possess traits present in the classes.

With HICLAS we can trace Wolfe's implicit view of his development in terms of the traits subsumed by each successive age-related self. Figure 3 shows explicitly how a later self emerged from an earlier self and also identifies the people that were likely models for these age-related selves.

Wolfe's infancy period (0-2) is among the residuals because he described himself primarily with unique traits (e.g., shiny; tiny acorn, and limp) and not in terms of any of the trait classes in the figure—understandable for someone describing his infancy. The figure shows that in characterizing his preadolescent development, Wolfe tended to emphasize one class of traits at 3-5 and another at 6-11. The fits, however, are rather low. The reason is that the traits Wolfe attributed to himself during these childhood periods are also thinly scattered among family trait classes other than C and D. The fit improves and the picture clarifies in the adolescent period, in that it is at adolescence when he attributes the bulk of the traits in three main family classes, B, C, and D, to himself. Also interesting to note is the increasing superordinacy of self with age: a younger self is generally subsumed by an older self. This result is a consequence of the way he actually described himself at each age period and is not an artifact of the analysis.

During the period from ages 3-15, Wolfe described himself as very much like his father and only somewhat like his mother. Note also that the mother has a sizable class of traits (H) not shared by Wolfe or any other family member. It is only in the postadolescent period that his identity shifts away from the father to some degree, both in the traits he sees in his father and not in himself and in the traits he sees in himself and not in his father.

Although scholars of Wolfe sometimes comment on his strong attachment to his mother, and this may be so, the analysis shows that his primary models were his father and his brother Ben. The identification of "models" is, of course, an interpretation of the fact that Wolfe attributed to himself certain classes of traits he also saw in his father and Ben. The inclusion of Mrs. Roberts in the structure, albeit marginally, probably reflects a projection rather than identification, as she was his teacher after the period in which he attributed the traits to himself.

The results are consonant with Wolfe's expressed belief that his development was strongly shaped by his "distrait, nervous powerful family" (Kennedy, 1962, p. 120). That is, although the analysis was not limited to family members, there are in fact almost no nonfamily characters who emerged as models. Nor are there nonfamily members, except for Mrs. Roberts and a minor character, who are described with even one of the basic family trait classes. The book portrays a gradual convergence to a set of core family traits, with very little sloughing of family traits. According to the multidimensional scaling (Figure 2), there are a few scattered traits Wolfe attributed to himself as a young adult that are not exclusively family traits.

The analysis also identifies ego-alien traits: "not me" (not in the Sullivanian sense). There are two distinct aspects of the ego-alien component of Wolfe's socius, one elaborated and the other unelaborated. To identify these two aspects, I first identify his most comprehensive description of himself as his characterization of ego. This is, in effect, his postadolescent self (16-20s), as it subsumes all his younger selves. Thus, Wolfe spans the leftmost four of the eight trait classes. This leaves four other family trait classes that fall into the elaborated ego-alien social self.

This aspect of the ego-ego-alien contrast also corresponds, but only in part, to a contrast he saw within the family. Most notable is the fact that Mabel and Fred are not characterized by a core family Trait Class B (alone, desperate, dark fantasies, etc.) and are otherwise described somewhat more positively than other family members, that is, as kind, humor(ous), and having vitality. Fred obviously agreed about the existence of a clear contrast between Thomas and himself when he wrote many years later, "I think with our family the two who were most opposite in temperament all the way through were Tom and myself" (F. Wolfe, 1971, p. 113). Less different from each other are Thomas and Mabel as they both share Class C. One of the special advantages of HICLAS is that it can represent various degrees and kinds of psychological contrast and not just disjunction.

The second, unelaborated aspect of the ego-alien component are the traits he saw in nonfamily. The basis for saying that this component is unelaborated is clear from the set-theoretical analysis. That is, Wolfe not only saw self (and family, except for Mother, Class H) as very different from other members of the community, a contrast that has already been seen in the multi-
dimensional scaling, but he also created no clear trait patterns in his descriptions of most of the nonfamily characters in LHA. Almost all of the nonfamily characters and their associated sets of traits were represented as residuals in HICLAS.

Asymmetric elaboration of contrasts is probably not an unusual feature in person perception and in personality organization. What is noteworthy here is that the degree of elaboration corresponds so closely to a family–nonfamily distinction. That is, although the analysis includes more than 100 people, there are almost no nonfamily members who emerged as models for self or as elaborated contrasts of self. Also, the tendency to view self as rather negative is unusual.

The picture of Wolfe's social personality that emerges from this study of LHA fits with the fact that he rarely developed close relationships with people in his adult life, despite the numerous and diverse social contacts that were available to him when LHA catapulted him into great fame. In his psychobiography of Wolfe, Snyder wrote

Thomas Wolfe's loneliness was his most pervasive personality characteristic. He began to suffer from this as a very young boy, and he never overcame his sense of social isolation. Probably when his mother took him to live with her at the Old Kentucky Home [the boardinghouse], he felt his first severe sense of loneliness. Once he wrote to Mrs. Roberts that he had two roofs and no home from the time he was a little boy. (Snyder, 1971, p. 70)

Snyder also cited Wolfe's own acknowledged discomfort with people, as expressed in his numerous letters, and his own explanation of it. He told Mabel in 1933

... the habit of loneliness, once formed, grows on a man from year to year and he wanders across the face of the earth and has no home and is an exile, and he is never able to break out of the prison of his own loneliness again, no matter how much he wants to. (Snyder, 1971, p. 72).

Snyder's analysis and Wolfe's own explanation of his loneliness are in accord with the literature on the relation between childhood experiences and adult loneliness (Shaver & Rubenstein, 1980).

Analysis of Unique Trait Categories

We now turn to the traits Wolfe attributed to one person only and only once in the whole book. Some of these singleton categories refer to unusual physical traits (bulbous eyes, beanpole of a girl, and Wagnerian breasts), others to relatively unusual identities or highly specialized roles (son of the bishop, artist, butcher, and milliner). Of the unique traits with a more psychological content, there are trait terms that seem similar in meaning to some of Wolfe's high frequency terms but that add a special nuance: patronizing, amiable, cheerful, and daring. They vary in their frequency of occurrence in common parlance, the latter 2 terms having more common usage than the first 2. A number of the unique traits are simply modifiers of high frequency terms, another way of adding a special nuance in the perception of a particular individual: electric (energy), heavy (sensuousness), hot (pride), and jet (black hair). Finally, there are Wolfe's unique poetic phrasings: air of travel, cruel openings of her life.

In everyday life, these unique characteristics are likely to refer to attributes that help the perceiver identify and give special meaning to a particular individual. As such, they are an important part of social personality, a reflection perhaps of the "accommodating" rather than "habitual" self (Rosenberg, 1988). This aspect of person perception has not been extensively investigated, and certainly not at the individual level. This is not surprising as these unique characteristics are likely to be even more idiosyncratic than the categories frequently used by an individual perceiver. They are also likely to refer to perceptual categories that are difficult to articulate. Nor are they amenable to any structural analysis. The distinction between recurrent and singleton categories is akin to Baron's (1980, 1988) distinction in person perception between conceptual and perceptual cognition, respectively.

A large naturalistic corpus of traits from the work of an articulate writer such as Thomas Wolfe offers an opportunity to examine the nature of the singleton categories and their distribution in the descriptions of self and others. The analysis of these categories was guided by two questions: (a) Is there a systematic shift in the proportion of unique traits that Wolfe attributed to himself as he was growing up, and (b) is the uniqueness (or its converse, the stereotypy) with which a person is perceived systematically related to the relationship of that person to Wolfe? In particular, is there a difference between family and nonfamily in the proportion of unique traits relative to shared traits?

With regard to the first question, Figure 4 shows a plot of the proportion of singleton traits relative to all the traits that Wolfe attributed to himself during each of the five successive age periods. The results are clear. The proportion of singletons is higher in early childhood (0–2, 3–5) and in adolescence (12–15) than in the other age periods. Although these findings are based on Wolfe's retrospective self-descriptions, they are in line with ideas about actual developmental patterns. That is, the elaborate conceptual system of traits that comes to dominate one's perception of self (and others) begins to emerge during very early childhood. The jump in proportion of unique traits during adolescence (12–15) is readily interpretable as a period in which one's conception of self, although rather well developed, typically undergoes reexamination and possible change. A reasonable conjecture is that the jump in proportion of unique traits occurs during any protracted period of intense self-examination. Adolescence is simply one such period (Cohler, 1982; Elkind, 1967; Enright, Shukla, & Lapsley, 1980). The proportion of singletons drops again after adolescence, at least for the time of Wolfe's life at which LHA ends.

What is also noteworthy about these findings is that they are found in a retrospective account. The results lend additional credence to the oft-repeated assertion among Wolfe scholars that he was deeply dedicated to incorporating his experiences into his literary creations. It also seems unlikely that Wolfe was guided by an explicit rule as to at which age to emphasize the more unique aspects of self-perception.

With regard to the second question, Figure 4 shows the proportion of unique characteristics that Wolfe attributed to members of the immediate family and to nonfamily members. The difference is large and significant. Family members are less stereotyped than nonfamily members. That is, Wolfe noticed (described) proportionately more unique characteristics in people about whom he also had a more elaborated conceptual picture.
This result is perhaps surprising and paradoxical at first blush. Suppose, however, that the unique characteristics one notices about another are an index of one’s interest in them. Viewed in this way, the results show that intimates are more likely than others both to attract one’s interest (unique traits) and to engage one’s elaborated conceptual system (shared traits). I would also conjecture that when this interest decreases for intimates, that is, when one’s view of an intimate is too dominated by the elaborated conceptual system, or when the unique noticings increase for casuals, these shifts may signal an important change in the relationship—the first in the direction of distancing and the second toward closeness.

Further Observations and Conclusions

Life After Look Homeward, Angel

Thomas Wolfe lived less than a decade after LHA was published. These were tumultuous and traumatic years for him. He severed his relationship with Aline Bernstein—his one intimate relationship with a woman—with considerable pain. He also terminated a close professional relationship with his editor, Maxwell Perkins, ostensibly because Perkins had become too intrusive in cutting his manuscripts. There are indications in his writings, his letters, and his talks that he was experiencing a major shift or crisis of some sort in personality.

The bold outlines of this shift can be discerned. For one thing, his preoccupation with his family and with their impact on him as a child diminished. This may have been the result of his having written the autobiography, characterized by one of his biographers “as a kind of self-administered psychoanalysis” (Donald, 1987, p. 148). More generally, the conjecture that the autobiographical act may itself have a transformational effect as the person reconstructs the past is a prevalent one (see, e.g., Cohler, 1982). Indeed, psychoanalysis and other kinds of historically oriented psychotherapies may be viewed as kinds of autobiographical methods designed to assist individuals in revising their life history.

A major theme of his second novel Of Time and the River (T. Wolfe, 1935) was the search for an ideal father with whom he could identify. This search for father, as he termed it, then diminished also, and he seemed to enter a “second cycle” (Slack, 1968, p. 106). The first cycle, a strong identification with his actual father, as revealed in the present study, and the search for an ideal father “of a strength and wisdom . . . to which the belief and power of his own life could be united” (T. Wolfe, 1936/1983b, pp. 37–38) was being replaced with concerns for “economics, politics, government, the organized structure of society” (T. Wolfe, 1983a, p. 124) and how they shaped people’s lives. In the context of the present study, these concerns may be interpreted as an attempt to elaborate the nonfamily contrast, albeit not necessarily in his interpersonal life. In any event, he attempted to bring his sociocultural concerns into his last (posthumous) novel, You Can’t Go Home Again (T. Wolfe, 1940).

The nature of this psychological struggle to transform the personality he portrayed in LHA is a most interesting question for adult personality development. His premature death prevents one from plotting the full course of this transformation. Snyder (1971), in his psychobiography, speculated that Wolfe’s “personality problems would have been likely to become more, not less, acute” (p. 228), which is to say that the elaborated side of self would continue to dominate. This was seen in Wolfe’s account of his adolescence, where in spite of his increased attention to self (as indexed by the rise in unique characteristics), he converged on the core family traits in young adulthood. Sny-
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The study of Wolfe demonstrates that literary materials, and particularly the character descriptions within them, contain information about important, global aspects of the personality of the author, and that this information can be systematically extracted and displayed using a sharable methodology. The methodology for extracting and analyzing character descriptions can take other, less laborious forms. An a priori set of categories may be used as, for example, McCurdy (1947) did when he used Cattell’s (1946) trait vocabulary to describe the key characters in the novels of Charlotte and Emily Brontë. Alternatively, a trait vocabulary somewhat more faithful to that of the author can be gleaned from a sampling of the work, say 5%-10% of the pages, from which the author’s high-frequency terms are estimated.

Laboratory-based free-response methods are also available for the study of self-perception and the perception of others (e.g., Rosenberg, 1977; Rosenberg & Gara, 1985). Relative to naturalistic materials as a data source, laboratory-based methods are efficient, and the fidelity with which such data portray a person’s personality and identity structure depends on the commitment the investigator is able to establish in the person for going beyond superficial descriptions of self and others. The same consideration applies in the selection of naturalistic materials. The analytic tools used in the present study are as applicable to laboratory data as they are to literary material (Rosenberg, 1988). The applicability of these analytic tools to both naturalistic and laboratory data creates an important bridge and conceptual interplay between these two complementary data sources.

Theoretical concepts about personality organization have been clearly anchored in this empirical work—concepts closely related to those of several personality theorists. Attention to the theoretical concepts of personality organization, to their representation in data, to their usefulness in interpreting data, and to their validation ensures a nomothetic outlook. Still, the goal of psychology is an understanding of the individual human being, and within personality, nomothetic principles must be systematically integrated into the analysis of an individual person to be of service in this goal. A sharable methodology capable of yielding an idiogetic picture of personality would seem to be an important component in such an integration. For example, the analysis of LHA provides a way to construct a theory of Thomas Wolfe’s personality, a theory by which certain particulars of his life can be interpreted and understood. These analyses do not by themselves represent the fullness of his experience of himself. However, they do provide a framework for understanding what Wolfe says to us in his literary work. The analyses themselves are quite general in applicability and as such are nomothetic, law givers.

References


