

Themes and character in the far and the near, also a bit abo

[Sociology](#), [Women](#)



(Thomas Wolfe 1935) Thomas Wolfe's short story "The Far and the Near" was first published in *Cosmopolitan* magazine in 1935 and was reprinted later that year in Wolfe's first short-story collection, *From Death to Morning*. For a writer known by his long, sprawling novels such as *Look Homeward, Angel: A Story of the Buried Life* and *Of Time and the River*, this ultra-short short story is a rare occurrence. While Wolfe's novels have often fallen under criticism for their excessive autobiographical sources, the influence of their editors, and Wolfe's wordy style, many critics in the last half of the twentieth century began to praise Wolfe for his short fiction. "The Far and the Near" details the story of a railroad engineer in the 1930s who passes a certain cottage every day for more than twenty years, waving to the women who live there but never actually meeting them or seeing them up close. Upon his retirement, he goes to see the women, but they treat him badly and destroy the idyllic vision that he has built up around them. Within its few pages, Wolfe's short story emphasizes the potentially devastating effects on a person who is forced to confront the reality behind a vision. Since the work was written during the Great Depression, the loss of hope that takes place in the story would have been extremely familiar to Wolfe's audience. The story can be found in the paperback edition of *The Complete Short Stories of Thomas Wolfe*, which was published by Collier Books in 1989. Author Biography Thomas Wolfe was born on October 3, 1900, in Asheville, North Carolina, a resort community. Wolfe was a good student at the local elementary school, and in 1912, he was sent to a private school. At the ripe age of fifteen, he entered the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. In 1919, one of Wolfe's plays, *The Return of Buck Gavin: the Carolina*

Playmakers, with Wolfe playing the lead role, staged *The Tragedy of a Mountain Outlaw*. Wolfe graduated in 1920, and, emboldened by his initial success in the theater, he entered Harvard University the same year, where he studied playwriting. In 1922, Wolfe graduated from Harvard with his master's degree, although he remained in Cambridge, Massachusetts, writing plays and unsuccessfully trying to sell them. In 1924, he started teaching English at Washington Square College of New York University, a position that he held on and off until 1930. In 1924, he also traveled to Europe, returning the next year. On his voyage home, he met Aline Bernstein, a married woman nineteen years his senior, with whom he started a long affair. The two stayed together in England during Wolfe's 1926 trip and shared a New York apartment when they both returned to the United States. His first novel, *Look Homeward, Angel: A Story of the Buried Life*, was published in 1929. For this first publication, Wolfe and Maxwell Perkins, an editor at Charles Scribner's Sons, worked closely together. In 1930, Wolfe gave up his teaching post, ended his affair with Mrs. Bernstein, and traveled to Europe again. In 1935, he published his second novel, *Of Time and the River: A Legend of Man's Hunger in His Youth*. The same year, he published his first short-story collection, *From Death to Morning*, which included the story "The Far and the Near." In 1935, Wolfe published *The Story of a Novel*, an essay detailing his writing methods and theories. In a review of the essay, Bernard DeVoto attacked all of Wolfe's work, stating that Wolfe depended upon the heavy editing of Perkins. As a result, Wolfe eventually left Scribner's, signing with Harper's in 1937. However, he was unable to publish any more works before he died of tubercular meningitis in Baltimore,

Maryland, on September 15, 1938. Following his death, Wolfe's editor at Harper's, Edward C. Aswell, set about creating distinct volumes out of the massive amount of manuscripts, notes, and outlines that Wolfe had left with him. From this assortment, Aswell created several works, including two novels - *The Web and the Rock* (1939) and *You Can't Go Home Again* (1940) - and a short story collection, *The Hills Beyond* (1941). In 2001, the original, unedited manuscript (according to its editors) of *Look Homeward, Angel: A Story of the Buried Life* was published as *O Lost: The Story of the Buried Life*.

Plot Summary Wolfe's "The Far and the Near" starts out with a description of a little town, which contains a small cottage on its outskirts. The cottage appears clean and comfortable. Every day, just after two o'clock in the afternoon, an express train passes by the house. For more than twenty years, the train engineer blows his whistle, prompting a woman inside the house to come out on her porch and wave to him. Over this time, the woman's little girl grows up, and she joins her mother in waving to the engineer. The engineer grows old during this time and sees a lot of tragedy during his service for the railroad, including four fatal accidents on the tracks in front of him. Throughout all of this tragedy, however, he remains focused on the vision of the cottage and the two women, an image that he thinks is beautiful and unchangeable. He has a father's love towards the two women and, after so many thousands of trips past their cottage, feels that he knows the women's lives completely. As a result, he resolves to visit the women on the day he retires, to tell them what a profound effect they have had on his life. When that day comes, he walks from the train station into the small town. As he walks through the town, he is unsure of his decision, because

the town seems so unfamiliar – much different from how it has looked from his train cab. When he gets to the women's cottage, he is even more unsure, but he decides to go through with it. When he meets the woman, she is instantly suspicious of him, and the train engineer is sorry that he has come. The woman whom he has idealized all of those years appears different, and her harsh voice is not what he expected. He explains who he is and why he has come, and the woman reluctantly invites him inside and calls for her daughter. The engineer sits down with both women in an ugly parlor and awkwardly talks to them while they fix him with hostile looks. Finally, the engineer leaves, and he is shaken from his experience. He is distraught because the one aspect of his life that he thought was pure and beautiful is stained. With this revelation, he realizes that he has lost all hope and that he will never be able to see the good in life again.

Characters The Train

Engineer The train engineer is the protagonist of the story, whose idealistic vision is shattered when he sees the reality behind it. Every day for twenty years, the engineer's express train passes a cottage on the outskirts of a little town. Each time, he blows the train's whistle, and the woman in the cottage comes out and waves at him. As the years pass, he watches her little girl grow into a woman, who joins her mother to wave at the engineer. He has never met either of the women but feels he knows all about them and their lives. In fact, the beauty of his vision of the women is so strong that he relies on it to get him through hard times – including the four fatal accidents he witnesses when people get stuck on the train tracks in front of him. He resolves to go visit the women when he retires, to tell them about the impact they have had on his life. However, when he goes to do this, it is not the

idealistic trip that he had envisioned. The town is unfamiliar, and the women are hostile and suspicious, even when he explains who he is. In addition, the women look different - older and more haggard- than how they appeared from the engineer's train cab. Still, he forges ahead, and by the time he leaves the women, he is shocked and disappointed and has lost his hope and his ability to see the good in life.

The Woman in the Cottage The woman in the cottage waves to the train engineer every day for twenty years but is very hostile to him when he comes to visit her. Although she is comfortable with waving to the engineer when there is a safe distance between them, she is suspicious of him when he comes to her cottage. As a result, she and her daughter - who has grown up with the daily waving ritual - are on guard against the engineer, and the conversation is awkward. Her unexpected hostility shatters the engineer's idealistic vision.

The Woman's Daughter The woman's daughter grows up in the cottage by the railroad tracks, where she joins her mother in the daily waving ritual to the train engineer. When the engineer sits down to talk to the two women, the daughter is as guarded and suspicious as her mother.

Themes Appearances For more than twenty years, the engineer blows his train whistle every day as he passes the cottage, and " every day, as soon as she heard this signal, a woman had appeared on the back porch of the little house and waved to him." Although he has seen the woman - and later the two women - do this from afar, the engineer nevertheless allows his mind to fill in the gaps about how the women might appear up close. In his mind, he crafts these assumptions about the women's appearance into an idealistic vision, in which he feels very connected to them. The narrator reports, " He felt for them and for the little

house in which they lived such tenderness as a man might feel for his own children." As the years pass, this vision builds in strength, until the engineer feels that he knows " their lives completely, to every hour and moment of the day." However, when he meets the women face to face, his vision is shattered. The reality is that, even though the two women have waved to him from afar, up close they are suspicious and fearful of him. Also, while he has imagined their beauty, when he comes face to face with the woman who owns the cottage, he sees that her face is " harsh and pinched and meager," and her flesh sags " wearily in sallow folds." When the engineer finally leaves the house of the two women, he realizes as he is walking away that he has allowed himself to be fooled by a distant appearance. Now, he can see " the strange and unsuspected visage of the earth which had always been within a stone's throw of him, and which he had never seen or known."

Happiness While he is under the spell of his false vision, the engineer is truly happy: " The sight of the little house and of these two women gave him the most extraordinary happiness he had ever known." When he prepares to go visit the two women, he is even more happy, because he will finally be able to tell them how their " lives had been so wrought into his own." In turn, he thinks they will be happy to see him and that they will welcome him as a friend. While he is working as a train engineer, he never has the opportunity to go and visit the women, and so the ultimate realization of his vision - meeting the women remains a goal. While this goal is not met and he still has the desire to go see them, he is happy. However, once he leaves the safety of the train and its distance from the women, his happiness is quickly undermined. He is overcome by a " sense of bewilderment and confusion" as

he walks through the town. Nothing lives up to his idealistic vision, and his happiness diminishes with each disappointment, from his confusing journey through the town to the hostile treatment by the two women. Although Wolfe's overall literary reputation is still in question, several critics, like Roberts, continue to focus on Wolfe's short fiction. As Roberts notes: in the short fiction he wrote during the nine brief years between the publication of *Look Homeward, Angel* and his death, Wolfe managed to turn almost all of the critical stereotypes about his work inside-out.

Compare & Contrast

1930s: The United States is in the midst of the Great Depression. The unemployment rate reaches more than 23 percent, and poverty and hunger are common in many areas.

Today: The United States is in the midst of an economic downturn. The unemployment rate rises from a thirty-two-year low of 4 percent in 2000 to hover in the 5 to 6 percent range in 2002.

1930s: Following the widespread adoption of trucks in the United States in the 1920s, the railroads lose business on their freight trains.

Today: Although the railroads' percentage of domestic freight traffic has decreased at a relatively steady rate since World War II, their higher percentage of freight traffic than trucks has been maintained.

1930s: During the Great Depression, many railroads fall into bankruptcy. Those that survive do so in part because of their adoption of new technologies, such as the diesel locomotive, which help make the trains faster and more efficient.

Today: In the United States, subways and passenger trains are popular options for daily commuting, although subways exist only in large cities such as New York, Boston, and Chicago. In Western Europe and Japan, however, railroads are experiencing a renaissance, thanks in part to the availability of technologically advanced,

high-speed trains. Criticism Ryan D. Poquette Poquette has a bachelor's degree in English and specializes in writing about literature. In the following essay, Poquette discusses Wolfe's pervasive use of opposites in "The Far and the Near." The story title "The Far and the Near" presents two diametrically opposed concepts. In fact, if readers examine the title of the collection in which the story was included, *From Death to Morning*, they find two more opposite concepts. When death is associated with a time of day, it is usually night. Likewise, when morning is used to represent a life stage, it usually symbolizes birth. As C. Hugh Holman notes in his entry on Wolfe for *American Writers*, most of Wolfe's books featured opposites in their titles in either a suggestive or an overt way. Holman notes that this had to do with Wolfe's view on life: "Thomas Wolfe grappled in frustrated and demonic fury with what he called 'the strange and bitter miracle of life,' a miracle which he saw in patterns of opposites." This obsession with opposites is also evident in the content of Wolfe's tales themselves. "The Far and the Near" is a particularly vivid example of Wolfe's use of opposites. In the story, Wolfe employs distinct contrasts in imagery and word choice to increase the effectiveness of the story's mood shift. This mood shift takes place at a very specific point in the story, directly after the engineer gets off his train and walks slowly through the station and out into the streets of the town." Everything up to this point is described in positive terms, while everything past it is negative. This is most apparent in Wolfe's use of imagery. When the story begins, the reader is exposed to part of the vision that the engineer has survived on for more than twenty years. The town is described as the place where the train "halted for a breathing space" on its journey between its two

destination cities. This quaint description associates the town with restful images, making it sound like a comfortable, tranquil place. This idea is amplified by the initial description of the house that the engineer passes every day: " a tidy little cottage of white boards, trimmed vividly with green blinds." The house also features " a garden neatly patterned" and " three mighty oaks" that provide shade. As the narrator notes, " The whole place had an air of tidiness, thrift, and modest comfort." This positive image of the town and the cottage only increases when the engineer begins the waving ritual with the woman in the cottage, a routine that is prompted by the whistle of his train. " Every day for more than twenty years a woman had appeared on the back porch of the little house and waved to him." The simple image of a woman waving at him becomes fixed in his mind and helps flesh out his overall vision of the town, cottage, the woman, and her daughter. This idyllic image gets the engineer through tough times because he thinks his vision is " something beautiful and enduring, something beyond all change and ruin." When he goes to meet the women and tell them how this positive image has profoundly affected his outlook on life, he expects that the whole experience will be positive, too, since that is how for years he has anticipated this day. However, when he walks into the town for the first time, the imagery does not match his mental picture: " Everything was as strange to him as if he had never seen this town before." This feeling grows in the time he takes to walk all the way through the town to the women's cottage. When he gets to the cottage, he is able to identify it by " the lordly oaks," " the garden and the arbor," and other familiar characteristics such as the house's proximity to the railway. However, these images do not have the

same positive connotations that they did in the beginning. The town and cottage are no longer quaint and comfortable. Instead, "the town, the road, the earth, the very entrance to this place he loved" has turned unrecognizable, like "thelandscape of some ugly dream." The ugliness of this imagery increases when he is finally let into the house and led into "anugly little parlor." The women also turn out to be contrary to what he expected. In the first half of the story, his unwavering belief in the goodness and beauty of the women - created by the image of their waving - leads him to believe that he knows " theirlives completely, to every hour and moment of the day." Perhaps more importantly, he assumes that they will greet him asa welcome friend. However, in the second half of the story, this image is also shattered. When he meets the older womanface-to-face, he knows " at once that the woman who stood there looking at him with a mistrustful eye was the same womanwho had waved to him so many thousand times." However, just as the correct identification of the house by its exteriorbrings him no joy, neither does the woman's appearance. Her face is " harsh and pinched and meager," and the flesh sags" wearily in sallow folds." Even more disappointing, she does not welcome the engineer but instead views him with " timiduspicion and uneasy doubt." In addition to the stark contrast in physical imagery, Wolfe also chooses contrasting words to represent the distinctlypositive and negative ideas and feelings of the story's two halves. In the beginning, Wolfe's narrator instills a sense ofstrength in the engineer's train. The train is " great," " powerful," and achieves " terrific speed," and its progress is " markedby heavy bellowing puffs of smoke." The engineer is also described in terms that emphasize his strength: " He had drivenhis great

train, loaded with its weight of lives, across the land ten thousand times." The fact that the engineer has successfully completed so many journeys, safely delivering his human cargo, underscores the idea of strength and dependability. In addition, the engineer has "the qualities of faith and courage and humbleness," and his old age is described in the best possible terms, with "grandeur and wisdom." He also feels "tenderness" for the two women, whose image is "carved so sharply in his heart." Even the tragedies he has seen on the railroad tracks have not affected his positive mood thanks to his idyllic vision of the two women. However, when the engineer gets off the train and views the unfamiliar town, Wolfe starts to use words that seem uncharacteristic to the reader since they immediately follow the positive language of the first half. The engineer is no longer strong and sure, and neither is anything else. His "bewilderment and confusion" grow as he walks to the "straggling" outskirts of town, where "the street faded." Even the engineer's walk is described as a "plod" through "heat and dust." All of these words have negative connotations, which increasingly give the town and cottage a feeling of stagnation and impending death. These feelings intensify when he first sees the older woman and feels "a sense of bitter loss and grief." Even sounds become negative, both the woman's "unfriendly tongue" and the engineer's own voice, which he is shocked to find sounds "unreal and ghastly." Like the descriptions of the town, the engineer's physical qualities, such as the strength of his voice, degrade in the second half of the story. After he spends his "brief agony of time" with the women, feeling "shameful" for coming, the man leaves, at which point he realizes

that he is " an old man." Unlike the first half of the story, when his age is described