Perspective and Illusion:
Edward Hopper's *House by the Railroad* and
Thomas Wolfe's "The Far and Near"

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Objectives:
Students in an 11th grade English class will appreciate the impact of the railroad on American illusion and disillusion. They will analyze the artistic perspective in Edward Hopper's realistic painting *House by the Railroad* and Thomas Wolfe's use of point of view in his short story "The Far and Near."

Historical Context:
The years preceding World War 1 were optimistic. After the war, Americans celebrated victory, but remembered the devastation and tragedy. Technology promised to improved daily life. Big cities attracted perspective workers from rural farmland into teeming neighborhoods. However, idealism turned to disillusion and cynicism with the Great Depression. Artists of this era were more cautious and observant about this American transition. Modernist writer Thomas Wolfe and Realist painter Edward Hopper were drawn to New York City to recreate and critique the American mood.

Modernist writer Thomas Wolfe no longer felt constrained by literary convention. His works reflected the country's loss of stability and control. Modern storytelling was open-ended, fragmented, and narrated from a limited point of view—often leaving the reader frustrated, but challenged. Themes were no longer explained; they were implied. The Modernist audience must interpret this new literature, as well as a new era, for themselves.

Realist painter Edward Hopper also captured this fragmented, isolated American scene during the Depression Era. He and fellow American artists Robert Henri and John Sloan painted city scenes of everyday working class people, although he disassociated himself with the Ash Can School. The urban landscape lured a potential work force to the big cities, where people only met anonymity and isolation. He was fascinated by the lonely-solitary people, dark streets, vacant windows, and empty theater seats. Even his small groups of human subjects were indifferent and disconnected. His simplified shapes suggest abstraction, but represent a realist vision.

Vocabulary:

1. Point of view- the perspective or vantage point from which a story is told.
2. First person point of view- the narrator is a character in the story and uses the pronoun "I." 3. Omniscient third person point of view- The narrator is not a character in the story, uses pronouns "he" and "she," and tells what each character thinks and feels.
4. Limited third person point of view- The narrator relates the thoughts and feelings of only one character.
5. Modernism in literature- Writers, profoundly affected by World War I, addressed disillusionment with unconventional themes and styles, challenging readers to engage in resolving conflicts and interpreting themes.

6. Modernism in art developed in the latter part of the 19th century. Artists represented and critically examined the ideas of the age and including French Impressionism and American Realism

7. Realism- A movement that began in France in the late 19th century. Artists represented natural scenes and depicted noble, working people.

Activities:

1. Read Wolfe's "The Far and Near" [http://readfirst.net/wolfe.html](http://readfirst.net/wolfe.html)
   Discuss and/or write answers to the following questions:
   a. What has the engineer been doing daily for 20 years? (He passes a cottage on the outskirts of a little town and waves to a woman and her daughter.)
   b. What 4 tragedies has the engineer witnessed? (He has seen his train run over a wagon filled with children, a passenger car, a hobo, and an unidentified victim.)
   c. What vision helps him to cope with his life's tragedies? (The house and the women represent dream-like perfection.)
   d. What does he plan to do when he retires? (He wants to visit the women.)
   e. What happens when he carries out his resolution? (He discovers that the house and women are ugly. His vision is shattered.)

   Discuss and/or write answers to the following questions:
   a. Describe the setting of the house. (It is isolated. The terrain is flat and barren. The landscape has disappeared. A railroad lies in front of the veranda.)
   b. What has caused the isolation? (The railroad has cut off the house from its previous, possibly lush landscape.)
   c. Describe the appearance of the house. (It is lit by the midday sun, which has cast a dark shadow on the right side. The front entrance is hidden in shadow. The shades in the windows are randomly drawn. The red bricked chimney is a focal point, leading the viewers' eyes to the picture's foreground where hints of red highlight the railroad ties.)
   d. Is there any human activity evident? (No people are visible. However, people may be hiding behind the shades. The house may have been occupied earlier and abandoned. A family may have been lured further out west. The house itself may be personified.)
   e. If you were a resident of this house, what would you think when you saw the train pass? (A resident may think dream about the train's exotic destination and wish to be aboard.)
   f. If you were a passenger on the train, what would you think when you passed the house? (A passenger might assume the house is vacant or might wave to unseen occupants.)
Performance Task/Writing Activity-

Compare and contrast Wolfe's and Hopper's ideas of illusion and isolation caused by the railroad. Introduce both artists and their works, first noting similarities between the short story and the painting. The body of the essay should be organized around points of contrast. Support your ideas with quoted passages from the story and observations of the painting.

More Writing Activities for English class-

1. Rewrite the story from the woman's point of view, using a limited third person narrator.

2. Rewrite the story with the engineer as first person narrator. Discuss the possibility of retelling the story from an omniscient third person point of view. How would that perspective change the story? (The reader would know the true feelings of the woman and her daughter before the engineer's visit, eliminating the climax and conflict resolution.)

3. Write an essay comparing and contrasting Jay Gatsby's attachment to Daisy in F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* with the engineer's attachment to the woman/women who live in the little cottage in "The Far and Near." Introduce both stories first noting similarities between the two characters' illusion. The body of the essay should be organized around points of contrast. Support your idea with quoted passages from the novel and short story.
The Far and the Near

Point of View. Point of view refers to the vantage point or perspective from which a narrative is told. Most stories are told from either a first-person or third-person point of view. In a narrative with a first-person point of view, one of the characters tells the story in his or her own words, using the first-person pronoun I. In a narrative with a third-person point of view, the narrator does not participate in the story and refers to characters using the third-person pronouns he or she. A third-person narrator may be either limited or omniscient. A limited third-person narrator focuses on the thoughts and feelings of only one character. An omniscient third-person narrator conveys the thoughts and feelings of all the characters.

During the Modern Age, fiction writers generally abandoned the use of omniscient narrators in favor of first-person and limited third-person narrators. This practice reflected the Modernist belief that "reality" and "truth" cannot be viewed objectively. Writers also frequently attempted to convey a sense of uncertainty by using a narrator who lacked an understanding or awareness of the nature of human existence.

Writing about the way he remembers experiences, Thomas Wolfe once remarked:

The quality of my memory is characterized, I believe, in a more than ordinary degree by the intensity of its sense impressions, its power to evoke and bring back the odors, sounds, colors, shapes, and feel of things with concrete vividness .... the look of an old iron bridge across an American river, the sound the train makes as it goes across it; the spoke-and-hollow rumble of the ties below; the look of the muddy banks; the slow, thick, yellow wash of an American river; an old flat-bottomed boat half-filled with water stogged in the muddy bank ....

"The Far and the Near" is filled with the vivid sense impressions that the engineer has piled up in his mind for more than twenty years of traveling the same route on the railroad. As you read, notice Wolfe's descriptions and how they appeal to the engineer's senses and imagination. Wolfe emphasizes the intensity of these impressions by showing how memory, imagination, and longing all spring from the passing impressions of life.

According to an old Russian proverb, "A toe of the star-gazer is often stubbed." Freewrite, exploring the meaning of this proverb.
On the outskirts of a little town upon a rise of land that swept back from the railway there was a tidy little
cottage of white boards, trimmed vividly with green blinds. To one side of the house there was a garden
neatly patterned with plots of growing vegetables, and an arbor for the grapes which ripened late in August.
Before the house there were three mighty oaks which sheltered it in their clean and massive shade in
summer, and to the other side there was a border of gay flowers. The whole place had an air of tidiness,
thrift, and modest comfort.

Every day, a few minutes after two o'clock in the afternoon, the limited express between two cities passed
this spot. At that moment the great train, having halted for a breathing-space at the town near by, was
beginning to lengthen evenly into its stroke, but it had not yet reached the full drive of its terrific speed. It
swung into view deliberately, swept past with a powerful swaying motion of the engine, a low smooth rumble
of his heavy cars upon pressed steel, and then it vanished in the cut. For a moment the progress of the engine
could be marked by heavy bellowing puffs of smoke that burst at spaced intervals above the edges of the
meadow grass, and finally nothing could be heard but the solid clacking tempo of the wheels receding into the
drowsy stillness of the afternoon.

Every day for more than twenty years, as the train had approached this house, the engineer had blown on the
whistle, 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. At first she had a small child clinging to her skirts, and now this child had grown to
full womanhood, and every day she, too, came with her mother to the porch and waved.

The engineer had grown old and gray in service. He had driven his great train, loaded with its weight of lives,
across the land ten thousand times. His own children had grown up, and married, and four times he had seen
before him on the tracks the ghastly dot of tragedy converging like a cannon ball to its eclipse of horror at the
boiler head-a light spring wagon filled with children, with its clustered row of small stunned faces; a cheap
automobile stalled up the tracks, set with the wooden figures of people paralyzed with fear; a battered hobo
walking by the rail, too deaf and old to hear the whistle's warning; and a form flung pas his window with a
scream-all this he had seen and known. He had known all the grief, the joy, the peril and the labor such a man
could know; he had grown seamed and weathered in his loyal service, and now, schooled by the qualities of
faith and courage and humbleness that attended his labor, he had grown old, and had the grandeur and the
wisdom these men have.

But no matter what peril or tragedy he had known, the vision of the little house and the women waving to
him with a brave free motion of the arm had become fixed in the mind of the engineer as something
beautiful and enduring, something beyond all change and ruin, and something that would always be the
same, no matter what mishap, grief or error might break the iron schedule of his days.

The sight of this little house and these two women gave him the most extraordinary happiness he had ever
known. He had seen them in a thousand lights, a hundred weathers. He had seen them through the harsh light
of wintry gray across the brown and frosted stubble of the earth, and he had seen them again in the green
luring sorcery of April.

He felt for them and for the little house in which they lived such tenderness as a man might feel for his own
children, and at length the picture of their lives was carved so sharply in his heart that he felt that he knew
their lives completely, to every hour and moment of the day, and he resolved that one day, when his years of
service should be ended, he would go and find these people and speak at last with them whose lives had been
so wrought into his own.

http://www.readfirst.net/wolfe.html
That day came. At last the engineer stepped from a train onto the station platform of the town where these two women lived. His years upon the rail had ended. He was a pensioned servant of his company, with no more work to do. The engineer walked slowly through the station and out into the streets of the town. Everything was as strange to him as if he had never seen this town before. As he walked on, his sense of bewilderment and confusion grew. Could this be the town he had passed ten thousand times? Were these the same houses he had seen so often from the high windows of his cab? It was all as unfamiliar, as disquieting as a city in a dream, and the perplexity of his spirit increased as he went on.

Presently the houses thinned into the straggling outposts of the town, and the street faded into a country road—the one on which the women lived. And the man plodded on slowly in the heat and dust. At length he stood before the house he sought. He knew at once that he had found the proper place. He saw the lordly oaks before the house, the flower beds, the garden and the arbor, and farther off, the glint of rails.

Yes, this was the house he sought, the place he had passed so many times, the destination he had longed for with such happiness. But now that he had found it, now that he was here, why did his hand falter on the gate; why had the town, the road, the earth, the very entrance to this place he loved turned unfamiliar as the landscape of some ugly dream? Why did he now feel this sense of confusion, doubt and hopelessness? At length he entered by the gate, walked slowly up the path and in a moment more had mounted three short steps that led up to the porch, and was knocking at the door. Presently he heard steps in the hall, the door was opened, and a woman stood facing him.

And instantly, with a sense of bitter loss and grief, he was sorry he had come. He knew at once that the woman who stood there looking at him with a mistrustful eye was the same woman who had waved to him so many thousand times. But her face was harsh and pinched and meager; the flesh sagged wearily in sallow folds, and the small eyes peered at him with timid suspicion and uneasy doubt. All the brave freedom, the warmth and the affection that he had read into her gesture, vanished in the moment that he saw her and heard her unfriendly tongue.

And now his own voice sounded unreal and ghastly to him as he tried to explain his presence, to tell her who he was and the reason he had come. But he faltered on, fighting stubbornly against the horror of regret, confusion, disbelief that surged up in his spirit, drowning all his former joy and making his act of hope and tenderness seem shameful to him.

At length the woman invited him almost unwillingly into the house, and called her daughter in a harsh shrill voice. Then, for a brief agony of time, the man sat in an ugly little parlor, and he tried to talk while the two women stared at him with a dull, bewildered hostility, a sullen, timorous restraint.

And finally, stammering a crude farewell, he departed. He walked away down the path and then along the road toward town, and suddenly he knew that he was an old man. His heart, which had been brave and confident when it looked along the familiar vista of the rails, was now sick with doubt and horror as it saw 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. And he knew that all the magic of that bright lost way, the vista of that shining line, the imagined corner of that small good universe of hope's desire, could never be got again.
1900–1938

A man of tremendous energy, appetites, and size, Thomas Wolfe poured out thousands of pages of fiction during his brief career. Unlike such Modernist writers as Hemingway and Fitzgerald, who wrote concise, carefully structured prose, Wolfe wrote elaborate, loosely structured fiction that was often uneven in quality. His novels and short stories tended to be long and somewhat unpolished, yet they were filled with vivid imagery and lyrical language.

Born in Asheville, North Carolina, Wolfe grew up in a large, eccentric family whose members later served as models for characters in his fiction. He attended the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, where he developed an interest in playwriting. After a year of postgraduate study at Harvard, he moved to New York. There he taught composition at New York University and wrote plays in his spare time. Unable to find success as a playwright, he turned to fiction. With the assistance of Maxwell Perkins, the leading editor of the time, Wolfe published his first novel, *Look Homeward, Angel*, in 1929. The novel, based on his experiences in Asheville, was a critical and financial success and earned him widespread recognition.

Describing the day that Perkins paid him for the manuscript of *Look Homeward, Angel*, Wolfe wrote: "It was the first time ... that anyone had concretely suggested to me that anything I had written was worth as much as fifteen cents, and I know that I left the publisher's office that day and entered into the great swarm of men and women who passed constantly along Fifth Avenue at Forty-eighth Street and presently I found myself at 11 Oth Street, and from that day to this I have never known how I got there."

Inspired by the success of his first novel, Wolfe began working on a sequel. Once again Perkins helped him to shorten and shape the novel, which was published as *Of Time and the River* in 1935. The novel sold well, yet Wolfe was criticized for basing his work too closely on his own life and for his reliance on Perkins. Stung by this criticism, Wolfe switched publishers and vowed to abandon his autobiographical mode in his next novel. Unfortunately, he died of a brain infection before he could finish this novel. He did, however, leave several thousand pages of manuscript in the hands of another editor, Edward Aswell, who shaped them into two more books, *The Web and the Rock* (1939) and *You Can't Go Home Again* (1940).

Although he has been criticized for his lack of discipline, Wolfe was clearly a gifted writer. In his novels and short stories, including "The Far and the Near," he displayed a strong sense of time and place, an ability to create vivid, realistic descriptions, and a profound understanding of the human condition.

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