

A CONCEPTUAL PAPER ON BINARY OPPOSITIONS IN THOMAS WOLFE'S NOVELS

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Abstract. This study aims to examine the concept of binary oppositions in Thomas Wolfe's novels. Specifically, it seeks to identify the types of binary oppositions that appear in Wolfe's fiction, explore how these oppositions are constructed and represented, and analyze their functions or purposes in relation to the novels' themes, characters, characterization, imagery, and overall narrative structure. The research adopts a qualitative approach, employing textual analysis grounded in the theoretical frameworks of structuralism and deconstruction. More precisely, the study integrates Greimas's structuralist model, focusing on the deep narrative structures underlying meaning, with Derrida's deconstructionist perspective, which questions and destabilizes hierarchical oppositions within texts. By combining these complementary methods, the study intends to provide a comprehensive understanding of how binary oppositions operate in Wolfe's works. First, through structuralist analysis, it identifies the core oppositional relationships that organize Wolfe's narrative structure; then, from a deconstructive perspective, it questions and dissolves these established oppositions, ultimately revealing the fluid nature of meaning-making. The expected findings suggest that both deep and marginal meanings will emerge through the analysis of these oppositions, revealing the complexity and richness of Wolfe's literary universe. Ultimately, this research aims to contribute to the existing body of scholarship on Thomas Wolfe by offering new theoretical insights and interpretive perspectives that highlight the intricate interplay between structure, language, and meaning in his novels.

Keywords: *binary oppositions, deconstruction, structuralism, Thomas Wolfe's novels*

Introduction

Thomas Clayton Wolfe (1900-1938) is one of the greatest American writers of the twentieth century (Biswas, 2014; Turnbull, 1967). Sinclair Lewis, the first American author of the Nobel Prize for Literature, said, "*Wolfe may have a chance to be the best American writer...*" (Lewis, 1969). William Faulkner ranked Wolfe before all modern novelists, including John Dos, Kaiser John, Steinbeck, Ernest Hemingway, and himself (Holman, 1960). Wolfe's work mainly consists of four lengthy novels, two short story collections, a poetry collection, a small number of plays, and prose notes. His four lengthy novels are *Look Homeward, Angel* in 1929, *Of Time and the River* in 1935, *The Web and the Rock* in 1939, and *You Can't Go Home Again* in 1940 (Britannica Web Portal, 2025). With his rhapsodic writing style and dynamic epic autobiographical content, his masterpieces greatly influenced many later writers, like the beat generation of Jack Kerouac, Ray Bradbury, Philip Roth, etc. (Bailey, 2021). In 2016, taking Wolfe as the prototype, the biographical drama film, *Genius* came to the screen, putting Wolfe into the public eye again and sparking another wave of studying his novels worldwide (Lai, 2017). *Look Homeward, Angel* is Thomas Wolfe's debut novel, which was published in 1929, with 1,113 pages (333,000 words) long (Bentz, 1991). It is a highly autobiographical initiation novel. The novel tells the story of the hero: Eugene, whose

life journey and cognitive experience of escaping, searching, and returning, depicts Eugene's contradictory and complex wandering and explains the author's deep thinking on fate through the conflict and reconciliation between Eugene and his family and society (Qi, 2020; Wolfe, 1929). *Of Time and the River*, one of his another autobiographic work, is his longest novel. This novel was written on the theme of looking for father. It described the life experience of the protagonist after leaving his hometown, including studying in Harvard, teaching in New York and traveling to Europe. It reflects the mental journey of the younger generation who desired for success, fell into despair and revolted against despair (Liu and Gao, 2012).

The Web and the Rock, continued the upbringing of Eugene, the protagonist of the first two novels, outlines the protagonist George Webber from the town where he spent his childhood to the big city New York where he worked hard in youth, and then to Europe where he treated the hurts of affection. From this work on, Wolfe gradually shifted his focus from the human inner world to the outside world and began to focus on depicting the entire American society (Liu and Gao, 2012). *You Can't Go Home Again* is Wolfe's last novel, and it still bluntly depicts the protagonist's life experience and perception as in the previous work. But the difference is that the work shows a broader social picture and incorporates more social factors, which are significantly enhanced the novel's social critical tendency (Liu and Gao, 2012). Although these four lengthy novels are very long and look separate, they are closely related, making them an essential part of his writing career. His short stories are mainly detached from these original manuscripts (Bentz, 1991), so the researchers need to analyze these four long works together to fully understand Thomas Wolfe's writing style, content, and ideas.

Background of the study

The time that Wolfe lived in the early 20th century was a particular period. It is also a period of social transformation (Ma, 2018). With the high development of monopoly capitalism, industrialization, commercialization, science, and the emergence of film, telephone, typewriters, and other new things, the traditional way of life, cultural and moral concepts, social structure, and way of thinking have been impacted in many aspects (Ye, 2020). The contradiction order between the old and the new rose fiercely in the south of America. Especially after World War I, many people lost their old faith, and the whole world was reduced to a "wasteland" of indifference, loneliness, chaos, and disorder (Wang and Pei, 2016). The collapse of traditional social values and moral ethics led to people's spiritual confusion, resulting in a "lost generation". Wolfe is one of the representative writers of the "lost generation" (Wang and Pei, 2016). The turmoil of the nation and personal life provided fertile soil for the development of literature, making this period a golden age of American literature. During this period, new writers appeared in groups with the spirit of innovation, forming many brilliant literary schools (Ye, 2018; Zhang, 2017; Wang, 2012). Literary critic Malcolm Cowley called the "lost generation" the second boom of American literature (Cowley, 1973). The 1920s novels were not only lyrical and personal but also tended to express the general disillusionment of the post-war generation. The 1930s novels favoured radical social criticism in response to the pain of the Great Depression (Britannica Web Portal, 2025). Wolfe had a unique style as a novelist in the 1920s and 1930s. His writing style is not only characterized by the "lost generation" but also full of the charm of the Southern literary style (Holman, 1960).

On the one hand, he is good at using realistic artistic techniques to describe the natural world in detail and practically, faithfully to his own experience; on the other hand, he focuses on conveying romantic thoughts and feelings. Therefore, his novels are sandwiched between expressing reality and himself (Wilson, 2016). In Wolfe's work, there are often geographical opposites between south and north, countryside and cities, ordinary rocks and "rocks with monuments", America and Europe (Holman, 1960). He often divided the characters into binaries of father versus mother, Jews versus non-Jews, South Carolina versus North Carolina, poor versus wealthy, and real artists versus posing as elegant people (Bentz, 2021; Holman, 1960). In Thomas Wolfe's view, society and life are composed of the opposite thing. This distinct binary opposition way of thinking gives his novels real descriptive narratives and intense lyricism (Madden, 2021). Binary oppositions are not only embodied in the content but also embodied in the structure of his novels, which reveal Wolfe's way of writing style and his confused attitudes and ambivalent thoughts towards life and fate (Qi, 2020; Jennette, 2019; Lai, 2018; Qin, 2018; Zheng, 2018a). In this conceptual paper, the study is to examine the binary oppositions in Thomas Wolfe's four lengthy novels from the perspectives of structuralism and deconstruction.

Problem statement

Researchers mainly focus on the theme, character, and image of his novels. From the point of the thematic study, most researchers hold that the novel mainly expresses loneliness, questing, growth, and solitude. For instance, Xue (2017) probes into the theme of solitude and attempts to analyse Eugene's inner world. Besides research based on the analyses of questing, past study analyses the theme in detail and deeply, and finally sublimates to the tragedy of the theme in his research on Narrative Structure and Tragic Theme of *Look Homeward, Angel*. Moreover, previous research acclaims that solitude is the source of questing in *A Study of Multiple Themes in Thomas Wolfe's Novels*. The study also explains the multiple themes of Wolfe's novels. Zhang (2020) presents the complex themes of multiple identities pursued in *The Web and the Rock*, such as southern regional identity, modern urban identity, and American ethnic identity, by studying how the smell-scape writing drew the material and cultural picture of the novel for that time. According to the previous research above, most scholars study a specific theme or multiple themes but ignore the relationship between themes, which provides a research gap for further study. Meanwhile, it is found that the themes of Wolfe's novels are interdependent and independent, such as loneliness and pursuit, which provide the basis for us to use the binary opposition to analyse the binaries in the theme of Thomas Wolfe's novels. In addition, it can be found that a significant number of researchers interpret the characters in his novels. The characters in Wolfe's work are vivid, full of emotions, and complicated, and the relevant achievements are also abundant. For example, Zheng (2018b) published his article named *Melancholy Angel: An Analysis of Ben Gant's Characters in Look Homeward, Angel*, which makes a deep study of characteristics of Ben from the aspects of kindness, kinship, and friendship and reflects the theme of exploration in confusion. Qin (2018) attempts to interpret the characters' different value orientations, points out Eugene acted as a contradictory unity burdened with innocence and guilt, and analyses the traumatic cultural memory of Americans at the beginning of the 20th century.

In 2018, Zheng analysed the double-faced angle –Helen, and found that she has good and evil faces in *Look Homeward, Angel*. Petriceks (2022) analyses the patient-doctor

relationship in *Look Homeward, Angel*, and points out that physicians need to provide comfort and support to patients. Bailey (2021) analyses characters who are homosexual, feminine men, and women who are masculine by queer analysis. Poor (2018) explores desires and motivations of familial relationships, self, and the formation of identity in *Look Homeward, Angel* from the perspective of Lacanian psychoanalysis. Through these studies, scholars analyse characters and the relationship among characters from various angles, providing the foundation for further research. At the same time, Wolfe's novels have many worthy discussing personalities. The complex relationship between individuals and self-contradictory characters provides vast space for us to use the binary opposition to analyse the characters of Wolfe's novels. Many researchers still pay attention to images from his novels. They believe that these images are full of symbolic meaning and attach great importance to interpreting their symbolic meanings. For instance, Liu (2023) focuses on the symbolism in Thomas Wolfe's novels and systematically analyses the metaphorical connotations of the three core images of "angel", "web" and "rock" and their effects on the role of metaphor in deepening the theme. Qi (2020) explores the complex wandering feeling concealed in images, such as "door", "stone", "leaf", and "angel" to demonstrate the conflict and harmony between family and society. Zhang (2020) explores the olfactory images to reveal the protagonist's sophisticated feelings toward the American south. Dagenhart (2016) exposes the meaning of "angel statue" and explains the meaning concealed in the images of mountains in his novel. Accordingly, research on images in Wolfe's novel has been relatively insufficient in recent years, but the images in the novels are rich, like "angel statue", "ghosts", "stone", and "leaf". These images like "stone" and "leaf", and "illusory angel" versus "angel statue" with profound meaning, interwoven into the binary oppositions between transience versus eternity and ideal versus reality, which provides a research gap for us to analyse the images in the novel from the perspective of binary opposition. Hence, the above discussion provides research gaps for analysing binary opposition on theme, character, characterization, and image in Thomas Wolfe's novel.

Purpose of research and research questions

This study is to examine binary oppositions in Thomas Wolfe's novels. As such, this research project attempts to find answers to these questions: (1) What are the types of binary oppositions found in Wolfe's novels? (2) How are these binary oppositions constructed or set up these novels? (3) What are the functions or purposes of these binary oppositions? The binary opposition can be clarified according to the theme, characters, characterization, and imagery.

Significance of the study

The concept paper is significant because it will provide critical methodology by combining structuralism and deconstruction to analyse Thomas Wolfe's novels, which will give us a comprehensive and systematic analysis of Thomas Wolfe's novels. The study will also look into the binary oppositions in his novels from the perspective of theme, characters, characterization, and imagery. The outcome of these studies can provide information advantages to understanding the writing styles of Thomas Wolfe's work and how he organizes the story. This study is also relevant to study the contradictions and perplexities of the "lost generation" in early 20th-century American

literature and understanding the writing styles of southern writers in America. Last but not least, the findings will contribute to the existing literature by adding valuable insights into Thomas Wolfe's novels, which will provide reference materials for the study of Thomas Wolfe's novels.

Binary opposition

Binary opposition is considered to be a pair of related terms or concepts with opposite meanings (Smith, 1996). The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms states that binary opposition is "the principle of contrast between two mutually exclusive terms, such as on/off, up/down, and left/right." (Baldick, 1990). The founder of modern linguistics, Saussure (2011), sets the binary philosophy in his linguistics research and created his linguistic theory (Culler, 2002). He regards binary opposition as the theoretical foundation of structuralist analysis. Nowadays, binary opposition has been extensively applied in analysing and interpreting poetry, myths, and other forms of texts (Aimukhambet et al., 2017). Studies of binary opposition in literary works achieve considerable progress (Batkalova et al., 2018). Lashari et al. (2019) used binary opposition to deploy internal tension structures between the centre and device favors and binaries in Tariq Rahman's Zoo, in which colonial hegemony is prioritised and favoured to the detriment of the marginalized. Christanda and Rosiandani (2019) showed how binary opposition constituted a crucial element of the unique identity of the Meiji period. Korzhova (2020) analysed the poem, You told me: "I love you" and found a transparent system of binary oppositions: "night-morning", "soul-body", "speaking-silence", "day-night" in his novel to clarify the components of the revealed structure. Whiteman (2018) put forward that dichotomization is a convenient tool that provides a relatively simple way of understanding a given space by analysing Itxaro Borda's 100% basque. Podsievak et al. (2020) took the binary opposition man-machine as a tool to build a science-fiction model of the world in Bradbury's texts in three parameters. Al-Sharqi (2017) examined how binary opposition is used as a structural feature in Yousef Al-Mohaimed's Wolves of the Crescent Moon to explore the interaction between modernism and culture in Saudi Arabia. Liang (2020) used binary opposition to explore the theme of the novel to find the difference between human nature and moral ethics, traditional morality, and realism. In this study, binary opposition is the presence of two opposing elements in a complete structure or system that are opposite, complementary, and even inter-convertible.

Greimas's theory

Based on the theory of Levi-Strauss and Propp and inspired by Saussure's concept, Greimas applies linguistics to analyse texts. He divided the narrative text into three main stages: the structures of manifestation, surface, and deep structures. He introduced the actantial model and the semiotic square as tools to analyse the text. As for the actantial model, Greimas offered three binary oppositions, consisting of six functions known as an actant. Actants are abstract roles that can be performed by someone or some actors, which acts as a schematic binary opposition (Seli et al., 2020), as shown in *Figure 1*. Greimas explained the significance of six actants traits (Seli et al., 2020; Pelkey, 2017) as follows: A sender is somebody or something that is the source of ideas and features like a story driver, which creates the desire for the subject to get the object. The recipient refers to a person or thing that receives the subject's message. Sometimes

the recipient is the sender himself. The subject is the executor of the action. The action has a particular “object”, so, the object is a person or something wanted by the sender across the subject. A helper is a person or thing that helps the subject achieve the object, while the opponent obstructs the subject from reaching the object. These actants can be used to analyse narrative literature’s relationship between characters, events, and abstract qualities.

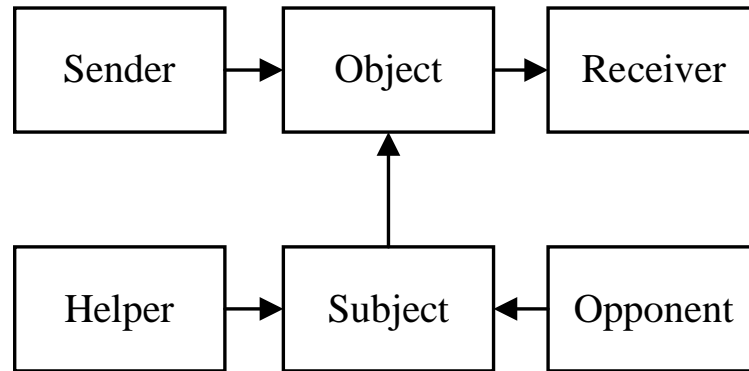


Figure 1. Actantial Scheme of Greimas (1987).

According to Greimas’s semiotic square, meaning arises from the opposition between semantic element units. Assuming that one is S, as a semantic axis, its opposite is -S, producing an absolute absence of meaning (Greimas, 1987). Thus -S is contradictory to the term S. If the semantic axis between S and -S is set up with the figure as follows (Figure 2).

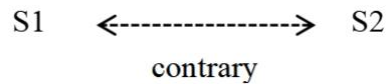


Figure 2. The contrary semes between S1 and S2.

These two semes must have their contradictory terms separately as follows (Figure 3).

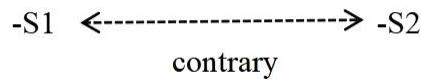


Figure 3. The contrary semes between -S1 and -S2.

Since its semic S turns to be a complex seme uniting S1 and S2 in a double relation of disjunction and conjunction (Greimas, 1987), the elementary structure of significance or semiotic square can be outlined as follows (Figure 4).

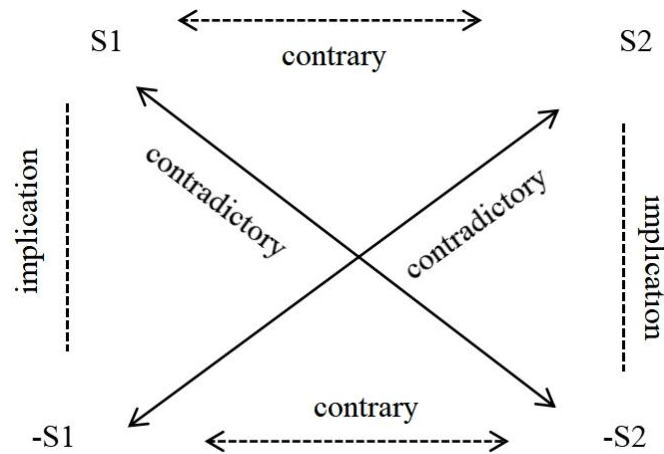


Figure 4. *The semiotic square.*

The semiotic square enlarges the previous structural notion of the binary opposition: S1 versus S2. S1 and S2 are binary opposition or contrariety, that is, strong opposition like white and black. And then, the square reveals far more than two available positions, such as S1 and -S1, S2, and -S2. They are both in a relation of contradiction: -S1 negates S1. -S2 negates S2. Where -S1 and -S2 is the simple negatives of S1 and S2 but include far more than either can express thus, non-white includes more than black (Greimas, 1987). So -S1 and S2 are in a relation of implication: -S1 implies S2. Similarly, -S2 implies S1. The semiotic square clearly articulates the meaning being apprehended in a text. Its primary significance is to help the readers grasp the narrative work's overall structure, the main contradictions and relations of the story, and then explore the deep thoughts in the text.

Derrida's concept of binary opposition

Derrida (1981) argues that "in a classical philosophical opposition, it is not the peaceful coexistence of a vis-à-vis, but rather a violent hierarchy. Either term governs the other or has the upper hand": signified over signifier; intelligible over sensible; speech over writing; activity over passivity. A typical example of binary opposition is the presence-absent dichotomy. In this hierarchical position, it is said that presence predominates absence because absence is traditionally perceived as what remains when presence is withdrawn. The sub-opposing binary element is called the supplement (Derrida, 1981). Deconstruction tries to avoid giving priority to the allegedly dominant element, finds the supplement's priority, and finally breaks down the opposition's construction. It is prevalent for readers to imagine in binary opposition, mark elemental binary oppositions in the text, integrate them into a structure, and interpret the meaning of the text. In this way, binary opposition dramatically helps them analyse the critical readings. Aprilia and Arianto (2021) discussed binary oppositions of good/bad, valuable/worthless, honest/dishonest, caring/ignorant, etc. in *The Goldfinch* written by Donna under the theory of deconstruction. Altobai (2020) analysed *A Valediction Forbidding Mourning* from a deconstructive perspective to uncover internal contradictions and inconsistencies to show the inconsistency underlying his apparent unity. Al-Muttalibi (2018) used the deconstruction theory to show the contradictions within Dickinson's poems and the instability and indeterminacy of their meanings.

Materials and Methods

This study uses qualitative analysis to analyse the binary oppositions contained in Thomas Wolfe's novels. Specifically, the study also uses structuralist, deconstructionist, and descriptive and interpretive methods to conduct a textual analysis of Thomas Wolfe's novels. The research data on binary oppositions were obtained through an in-depth study of Thomas Wolfe's novels. The approach used in this study was based on an actantial and semiotic study of A. J. Greimas and Derrida's deconstruction. The data source in this study was Thomas Wolfe's novels which have been published and are already in the form of a printed document. To achieve the purpose of this study, the research procedure was carried out through the following three stages (*Figure 5* and *Figure 6*).

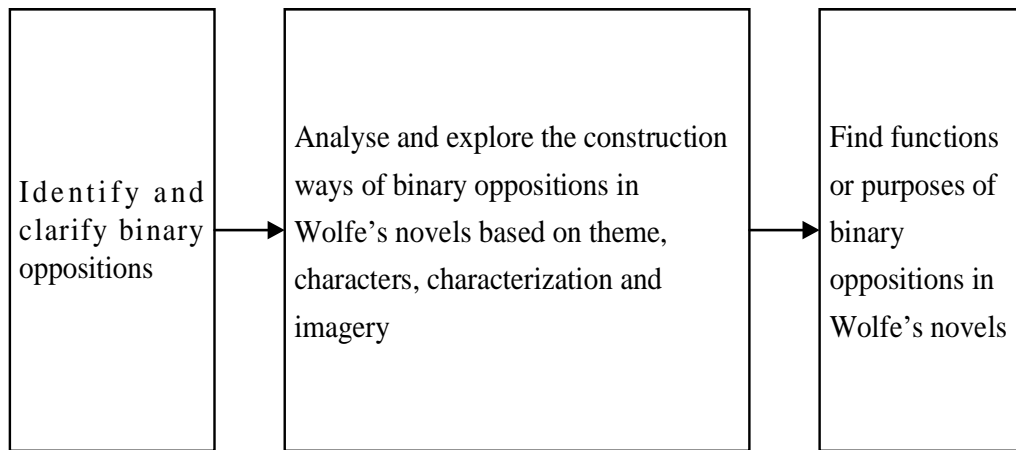


Figure 5. Data analysis procedures.

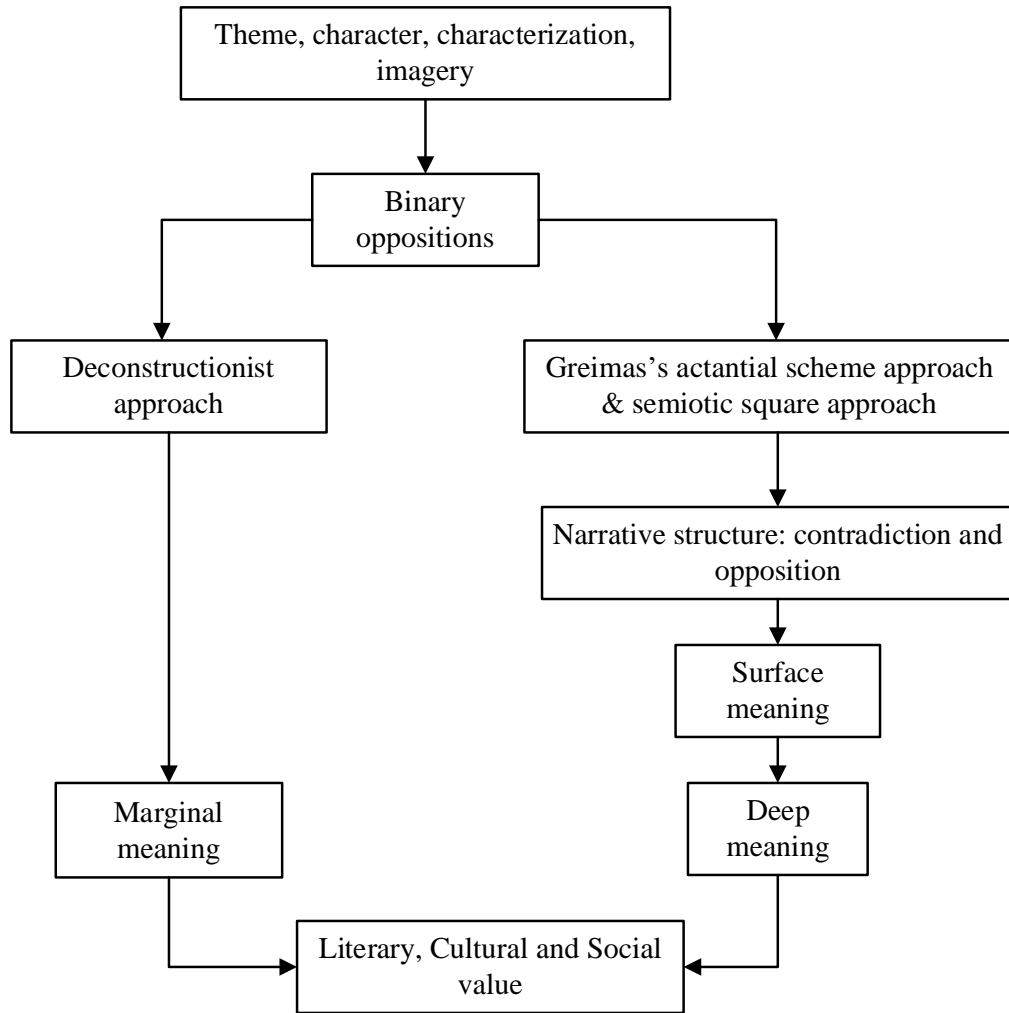


Figure 6. Data analysis procedures with approaches.

The first stage for the first objective of the study

To investigate the types of binary oppositions that are found in Wolfe's novels, based on the theme, characters, characterization, and imagery. (1) Carefully read Thomas Wolfe's novels and identify binary oppositions in his novels. (2) Clarify binary oppositions based on theme, characters, characterization, and imagery.

The second stage for the second objective of the study

To investigate how these binary oppositions are constructed or set up by Wolfe in his novels, based on the theme, characters, characterization, and imagery. (1) Use Greimas's actantial scheme approach and semiotic square approach to analyse the interrelationship of the binaries and the deep meaning of Wolfe's novels. (2) Identify the existing reporting relationship within each binary opposition. (3) Deconstruct each binary using a deconstructive approach. (4) Indicate the attributes of the easily neglected part. (5) Interpret the important part of the text. (6) In summary, the analysis results show how these binary oppositions are constructed or set up by Wolfe in his novels.

The third stage for the third objective of the study

To investigate the functions or purposes of these binary oppositions in the novels, based on the theme, characters, characterization, and imagery. (1) Using structuralist and deconstructionist approaches to investigate the functions of these binary oppositions in the theme, characters, characterization, and imagery of his novels. (2) According to descriptive and interpretive methods, the purpose of binary oppositions in theme, characters, characterization, and imagery can be examined.

Results and Discussion

The integrated analysis of Thomas Wolfe's novels through Greimas's structuralist framework and Derrida's deconstructionist approach reveals multiple layers of binary oppositions that structure and destabilize meaning within his works. These oppositions are systematically constructed through narrative contrasts, character conflicts, thematic juxtapositions, and recurring imagery, such as home versus exile, life versus death. Building upon previous scholarship that explored Wolfe's themes (Zhang, 2020; Xue, 2017), characters (Bailey, 2021; Poor, 2018; Qin, 2018; Zheng, 2018a), and imagery (Liu, 2023; Qi, 2020; Dagenhart, 2016), this study extends the critical conversation by examining how these elements interact dialectically through binary structures. While prior research often isolated individual themes such as loneliness, quest, or identity, the current analysis reveals that Wolfe's fiction constructs meaning through interdependent oppositions that reflect the dual nature of human experience. From a structuralist perspective, Wolfe's binary oppositions serve as organizing principles that illuminate the deep narrative and socio-cultural structures embedded in his fiction. The contrast between home and exile, for instance, articulates the tension between belonging and displacement that defines the protagonist's spiritual and physical journey.

Similarly, Wolfe's use of imagery, such as the angel statue, stone, and leaf, as analyzed by Liu (2023) and Qi (2020), reinforces thematic oppositions like ideal versus reality and transience versus permanence. Through Greimas's actantial model, such imagery can be read as signifying systems that map the relations between characters, emotions, and social forces. From a deconstructionist standpoint, however, these binaries are inherently unstable. They define meaning while simultaneously undermining it. The longing for home, for example, is continually destabilized by experiences of exile, suggesting that "home" itself becomes a metaphorical construct rather than a fixed spatial or emotional reality. The integration of structuralist and deconstructionist readings offers a nuanced interpretive model. Structuralist analysis identifies dominant oppositions that organize Wolfe's narrative architecture, while deconstruction interrogates and destabilizes those oppositions, revealing the fluidity of meaning. Thus, Wolfe's novels resist rigid binary classification. They invite readers to experience meaning as a process of negotiation rather than resolution, where coherence and contradiction coexist.

Conclusion

The study presented in this article provides a way to study binary oppositions in Thomas Wolfe's novel. With structuralist and deconstructionist analysis, the study will explore the binary oppositions contained in Thomas Wolfe's novels and explain how these binary oppositions are constructed, which helps us better understand why these binary oppositions existed in his novels based on the theme, characters, characterization,

and imagery. However, in this study, there still exist some limitations. A significant limitation is that this document is a review of other journals, and data has not yet been collected. Therefore, further research needs to be conducted on his novels. To continue the research, it is necessary to explore a more comprehensive scope of literature to obtain relevant knowledge. Although this is a conceptual paper, it is hoped that this effort will help to supplement the literature for scholars' reference and have a significant impact on the study of Thomas Wolfe's novels after the completion of the study.

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Conflict of interest

The authors confirm that there are no conflicts of interest, financial or otherwise, associated with this research study.

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